

Nietzsche on Plato

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871)

Transl. Ronald Speirs (1999)

2. So far we have considered the Apolline [or Apollonian] and its opposite, the Dionysiac [or Dionysian], as artistic powers which erupt from nature itself, *without the mediation of any human artist*, and in which nature's artistic drives attain their first, immediate satisfaction: on the one hand as the image-world of dream, the perfection of which is not linked to an individual's intellectual level or artistic formation [*Bildung*]; and on the other hand as intoxicated reality, which has just as little regard for the individual, even seeking to annihilate, redeem, and release him by imparting a mystical sense of oneness. In relation to these unmediated artistic states in nature every artist is an 'imitator', and indeed either an Apolline dream-artist or a Dionysiac artist of intoxication or finally—as, for example, in Greek tragedy—an artist of both dream and intoxication at once. This is how we must think of him as he sinks to the ground in Dionysiac drunkenness and mystical self-abandon, alone and apart from the enthusiastic choruses, at which point, under the Apolline influence of dream, his own condition, which is to say, his oneness with the innermost ground of the world, reveals itself to him *in a symbolic [gleichnishaft] dream-image*.

Having set out these general assumptions and contrasts, let us now consider the Greeks in order to understand the degree and level to which those *artistic drives of nature* were developed in them. This will enable us to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the relationship between the Greek artist and his models [*Urbilder*], or, to use Aristotle's expression, 'the imitation of nature'. Despite all the dream literature of the Greeks and numerous dream anecdotes, we can speak only speculatively, but with a fair degree of certainty, about the Greeks' *dreams*. Given the incredibly definite and assured ability of their eye to see things in a plastic way, together with their pure and honest delight in colour, one is bound to assume, to the shame of all those born after them, that their dreams, too, had that logical causality of line and outline, colour and grouping, and a sequence of scenes resembling their best bas-reliefs, so that the perfection of their dreams would certainly justify us, if comparison were possible, in describing the dreaming Greeks as Homers and Homer as a dream-

ing Greek—and in a more profound sense than if a modern dared were to compare his dreaming with that of Shakespeare.

By contrast, there is no need for speculation when it comes to revealing the vast gulf which separated the *Dionysiac Greeks* from the Dionysiac Barbarians. From all corners of the ancient world (leaving aside the modern one in this instance), from Rome to Babylon, we can demonstrate the existence of Dionysiac festivals of a type which, at best, stands in the same relation to the Greek festivals as the bearded satyr, whose name and attributes were borrowed from the goat, stands to Dionysos himself. Almost everywhere an excess of sexual indiscipline, which flooded in waves over all family life and its venerable statutes, lay at the heart of such festivals. Here the very wildest of nature's beasts were unleashed, up to and including that repulsive mixture of sensuality and cruelty which has always struck me as the true 'witches' brew'. Although news of these festivals reached them by every sea- and land-route, the Greeks appear, for a time, to have been completely protected and insulated from their feverish stirrings by the figure of Apollo, who reared up in all his pride, there being no more dangerous power for him to confront with the Medusa's head than this crude, grotesque manifestation of the Dionysiac. Apollo's attitude of majestic rejection is eternalized in Doric art. Such resistance became more problematic and even impossible when, eventually, similar shoots sprang from the deepest root of the Hellenic character; now the work of the Delphic God was limited to taking the weapons of destruction out of the hands of his mighty opponent in a timely act of reconciliation. This reconciliation is the most important moment in the history of Greek religion; wherever one looks, one can see the revolutionary consequences of this event. It was the reconciliation of two opponents, with a precise delineation of the borders which each now had to respect and with the periodic exchange of honorific gifts; fundamentally the chasm had not been bridged. Yet if we now look at how the power of the Dionysiac manifested itself under pressure from that peace-treaty, we can see that, in contrast to the Babylonian Sacaea, where human beings regressed to the condition of tigers and monkeys, the significance of the Greeks' Dionysiac orgies was that of festivals of universal release and redemption and days of transfiguration. 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. That repulsive witches' brew of sensuality and cruelty was powerless here; the only reminder of it (in the way that medicines recall deadly poisons) is to be found in the strange mixture and duality in the affects of the Dionysiac enthusiasts, that phenomenon whereby pain awakens pleasure while rejoicing wrings cries of agony from the breast. From highest joy there comes a cry of horror or a yearning lament at some irredeemable loss. In those Greek festivals there erupts what one might call a sentimental tendency in nature, as if it had cause to sigh over its dismemberment into individuals. The singing and expressive gestures of such enthusiasts in their two-fold mood was something new and unheard-of in the Homeric-Greek world; Dionysiac music in particular elicited terror and horror from them. Although it seems that music was already familiar to the Greeks as an Apolline art, they only knew it, strictly speaking, in the form of a wave-like rhythm with an image-making power which they developed to represent Apolline states. The music of Apollo was Doric architectonics in sound, but only in the kind of hinted-at tones characteristic of the *cithara*. It keeps at a distance, as something un-Apolline, the very element which defines the character of Dionysiac music (and thus of music generally): the power of its sound to shake us to our very foundations, the unified stream of melody and the quite incomparable world of harmony. In the Dionysiac dithyramb [a choral song originally part of the cult of Dionysos] man is stimulated to the highest intensification of his symbolic powers; something that he has never felt before urgently demands to be expressed: the destruction of the veil of maya, one-ness as the genius of humankind, indeed of nature itself. 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. Then there is a sudden, tempestuous growth in music's other symbolic powers, in rhythm, dynamics, and harmony. To comprehend this complete unchaining of all symbolic powers, a man must already have reached that height of self-abandonment which seeks symbolic expression in those powers: thus the dithyrambic servant of Dionysos can only be understood by his own kind! With what astonishment the Apolline Greeks must have regarded him! With an astonishment enlarged by the added horror of realizing that all this was not so foreign to them after all, indeed that their Apolline consciousness only hid this Dionysiac world from them like a veil.

3. In order to understand this, we need to dismantle the artful edifice of *Apolline culture* stone by stone, as it were, until we catch sight of the foundations on which it rests. The first things we observe here are the magnificent figures of the *Olympian* gods who stand on the gables of this building and whose deeds, represented in reliefs which can be seen gleaming from afar, adorn its friezes. If Apollo is also amongst their number, as just one god alongside others and without laying claim to the leading position, we should not allow this fact to confuse us. 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. What, then, was the enormous need that gave rise to such a luminous company of Olympic beings?

Anyone who approaches these Olympians with another religion in his heart and proceeds to look for signs of moral loftiness in them, or indeed holiness, or incorporeal spirituality, or a loving gaze filled with compassion, will soon be forced to turn his back on them in dismay and disappointment. Nothing here reminds us of asceticism [*Askese*], of spirituality and duty; everything here speaks only of over-brimming, indeed triumphant existence, where everything that exists has been deified, regardless of whether it is good or evil. Thus the spectator may stand in some perplexity before this fantastic superabundance of life, asking himself what magic potion these people can have drunk which makes them see Helen, 'hovering in sweet sensuality', smiling at them wherever they look, the ideal image of their own existence. Yet we must call out to this spectator who has already turned away: 'Do not go away, but listen first to what popular Greek wisdom has to say about this inexplicably serene existence you see spread out before you here.' An ancient legend recounts how King Midas hunted long in the forest for the wise *Silenus*, companion of Dionysos, but failed to catch him. When Silenus has finally fallen into his hands, the King asks what is the best and most excellent thing for human beings. Stiff and unmoving, the daemon remains silent until, forced by the King to speak, he finally breaks out in shrill laughter and says: 'Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you not to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon.'

How does the world of the Olympian gods relate to this piece of popular wisdom? The relationship is that of the ecstatic vision of a tortured martyr to his torments.

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 had to place in front of these things the resplendent, dream-born figures of the Olympians. That enormous distrust of the Titanic forces of nature, that *moira* [fate] 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 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. This process is probably to be imagined as taking place gradually, so that, under the influence of the Apolline instinct for beauty [*jenen apollinischen Schönheitstrieb*], the Olympian divine order of joy developed out of the original, Titanic divine order of terror in a series of slow transitions, in much the same way as roses burst forth from a thicket of thorns. How else could that people have borne existence given their extreme sensitivity, their stormy desires, their unique gift for *suffering*, if that same existence had not been shown to them in their gods, suffused with a higher glory? 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 mirror to itself. 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 from this existence, particularly to imminent departure, so that one might say of them, reversing the wisdom of Silenus, that 'the very worst thing for them was to die soon, the second worst ever to die at all'. If a lament is ever heard, it sings of short-lived Achilles, of the generations of men changing and succeeding one another like leaves on the trees, of the demise of the heroic age. It is not unworthy of the greatest hero to long to go on living, even as a day-labourer. So stormily does the 'Will', on

the level of the Apolline, demand this existence, so utterly at one with it does Homeric man feel himself to be, that even his lament turns into a song in praise of being. . . .

8. The *chorus* of Greek tragedy, the symbol of the entire mass of those affected by Dionysiac excitement, is fully explained by our understanding of the matter. Because we are accustomed to the position of the chorus, particularly the operatic chorus, on the modern stage, we were completely unable to understand how the tragic chorus of the Greeks was supposedly older, more original, indeed more important than the 'action' proper—although this is clearly what the historical evidence says; equally, we could not see how the high importance and originality traditionally attributed to the chorus was to be reconciled with the fact that it was said to be composed of lowly, serving creatures, indeed, initially, only of goat-like satyrs; the placing of the orchestra before the stage remained a constant puzzle to us; now, however, we have come to realize that the stage and the action were originally and fundamentally thought of as nothing other than a vision, that the only 'reality' is precisely that of the chorus, which creates the vision from within itself and speaks of this vision with all the symbolism of dance, tone, and word. This chorus sees in its vision its lord and master Dionysos, and is therefore eternally the serving chorus; it sees how the god suffers and is glorified, and thus does not itself act. Despite its entirely subservient position in relation to the god, however, the chorus is nevertheless the highest, which is to say Dionysiac, expression of nature, and therefore speaks in its enthusiasm, as does nature herself, oracular and wise words; the chorus which shares in suffering is also the wise chorus which proclaims the truth from the heart of the world. This gives rise to that fantastical and seemingly distasteful figure of the wise and enthusiastic satyr who is at the same time 'the foolish man' in contrast to his god; a copy of nature and its strongest impulses, indeed a symbol of them, and at the same time the proclaimer of her wisdom and art; musician, poet, dancer, seer of spirits, all in one person.

According to this insight and according to the traditional evidence, Dionysos, the true hero of the stage and centre 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'. Later the attempt is made to show the god as real and to present the visionary figure, together with the transfiguring frame-

work, as visible to every eye; at this point 'drama' in the narrower sense begins. 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, they see, not some grotesquely masked human being, but rather a visionary figure, born, as it were, of their own ecstasy.

15. . . . [L]et us now look at Socrates: he then appears to us as the first man who was capable, not just of living by the instinct of science, but also, and this is much more, of dying by it. This is why the image of the *dying Socrates*, of a man liberated from fear of death by reasons and knowledge, is the heraldic shield over the portals of science, reminding everyone of its purpose, which is to make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified; and if reasons are insufficient to achieve that end, then it must ultimately be served by *myth*—which I have just defined as the necessary consequence, indeed intention, of science.

Consider for a moment how, after Socrates, the mystagogue of science, one school of philosophy follows another, like wave upon wave; how an unimaginable, universal greed for knowledge, stretching across most of the cultured world, and presenting itself as the true task for anyone of higher abilities, led science on to the high seas, from which it could never again be driven completely; and how for the first time, thanks to this universality, a common network of thought was stretched over the whole globe, with prospects of encompassing even the laws of the entire solar system; when one considers all this, along with the astonishingly high pyramid of knowledge we have at present, one cannot do other than regard Socrates as the vortex and turning-point of so-called world history. For if one were to imagine that the quite incalculable sum of energy which has been expended on behalf of this tendency in the world had *not* been placed at the service of understanding, but applied instead to the practical, i.e. egotistical goals of individuals and nations, then man's instinctive lust for life would probably have been so weakened amidst general wars of extinction and unceasing migrations that, with suicide having become habitual, the individual would be bound to feel the last remnant of a sense of duty when, like some inhabitant of the Fijian islands, he throttles his parents as their son, and his friend as a friend—a practical pessimism which could generate a horrifying ethic of genocide out of pity; a pessimism, incidentally, which exists,

and has existed, throughout the entire world, wherever art has not appeared in one form or other, especially as religion or science, to heal and to ward off the breath of that pestilence.

In the face of this practical pessimism, Socrates is the archetype of the theoretical optimist whose belief that the nature of things can be discovered leads him to attribute to knowledge and understanding the power of a panacea, and who understands error to be inherently evil. To penetrate to the ground of things and to separate true knowledge from illusion and error was considered by Socratic man to be the noblest, indeed the only truly human vocation, just as, from Socrates onwards, the mechanism of concepts, judgments and conclusions was prized, above all other abilities, as the highest activity and most admirable gift of nature. Even the most sublime moral deeds, the stirrings of pity, sacrifice, heroism, and that elusive placidity of the soul which the Apolline Greek called *sophrosyne* [temperance], were derived by Socrates and his like-minded successors (down to the present) from the dialectic of knowledge, and were therefore declared to be teachable. Anyone who has experienced the intense pleasure of a Socratic insight, and felt it spread out in ever-widening circles as it attempted to encompass the entire world of appearances, will forever feel that there can be no sharper goad to life than the desire to complete the conquest and weave the net impenetrably close. To anyone in this state of mind, Plato's Socrates seems to be the teacher of a quite new form of 'Greek serenity' and bliss in existence, one which seeks to discharge itself in actions and mostly achieves this discharge by having a maieutic [generating new ideas, in the way a midwife helps give birth to a baby] and educative effect on noble youths, in the hope of eventually fathering a genius.

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*, which, simply to be endured, needs art for protection and as medicine.