

V I N T A G E

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eBooks



The Birth of Tragedy  
and The Case of Wagner

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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THE BIRTH  
OF TRAGEDY  
and  
THE CASE  
OF WAGNER



by  
FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE



Translated, with Commentary,  
by  
WALTER KAUFMANN



VINTAGE BOOKS  
*A Division of Random House*  
NEW YORK

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Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 67-11589

eISBN: 978-0-307-43298-8

v3.1

*For*

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*My Apollinian Grandfather*

ARNOLD SELIGSOHN (1854–1939)

*and*

*My Dionysian Grandmother*

JULIE KAUFMANN (1857–1940)

## *A Note on This Edition*

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The two books in this volume belong together in theme. *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's first book, ends with a lengthy panegyric on the rebirth of tragedy in Wagner's operas. In his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," added as a preface to the "new edition" of 1886, Nietzsche regretted that he had "spoiled the grandiose Greek problem ... by introducing the modern problems," and he explained that he had meanwhile come to see Wagner in a very different light. Two years later, in 1888, Nietzsche brought out the last book whose publication he himself experienced: *The Case of Wagner*. *The Birth of Tragedy* is probably Nietzsche's least humorous book; *The Case of Wagner*, his wittiest. Those reading the former without the latter are sure to get a very misleading view of Nietzsche.

My English versions of these two books, with commentary, have not appeared before. But I owe a debt to Clifton Fadiman, whose early translation of *The Birth of Tragedy*, done when he was a graduate student, I have used as a basis for parts of my new version. Even where I did not start from scratch, I have compared every sentence with the original, and my revisions are so extensive that the new version is probably more different from his than most Nietzsche translations—including Fadiman's—are from those that preceded them. And in large parts I did work from scratch.

The commentary is presented in the form of introductions, footnotes, and translations of pertinent letters. All footnotes are mine, except three in *The Case of Wagner* which are clearly identified: these are the only footnotes Nietzsche himself included in any of his books.

WALTER KAUFMANN

*Princeton*  
*July 1966*

## *Acknowledgments*

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**B**ut for Jason Epstein, I should never have translated another Nietzsche book after 1954. He persevered; he left the choice of books and all particulars entirely up to me; and eventually he got me to undertake a second series of translations. There were times when I wished he hadn't; but now that the work is completed, I want to thank him as well as Berenice Hoffman, whose editorial queries have made this volume less imperfect than it would have been without her.

Most of the work on the two indices was done by Stephen Watson, but Sonia Volochov made valuable additions.

WALTER KAUFMANN

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This was Nietzsche's first book. It is far from being his best book, but the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" that Nietzsche placed at the beginning of the "new edition" of 1886 is among the finest things he ever wrote. Perhaps no other great writer has written a comparable preface to one of his own works. Certainly this self-criticism is far superior to most of the criticisms others have directed against *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Before considering briefly the most famous critique of the book, it may be well to suggest something of its importance. Apart from the fact that this essay has been widely admired and is generally taken for one of Nietzsche's major works, its significance may be said to be threefold.

First of all, *The Birth of Tragedy* is, for all its faults, one of the most suggestive and influential studies of tragedy ever written. Perhaps only Aristotle's *Poetics* excels it. Where else could one place a study of tragedy? Only Hegel's scattered remarks on the subject—many of them to be found only in posthumously published, and very badly edited lectures. It is arguable that all three philosophers were wrong about the fourteen extant plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles and the nineteen of Euripides. But there is no denying that Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche have vastly enriched the discussion of tragedy—probably more so than anyone else.

Secondly, *The Birth of Tragedy* does not deal only with tragedy—nor only with tragedy and with Wagner: it also deals with the relation of art to science, with the whole phenomenon of Greek civilization, and with the modern age. On all these subjects Nietzsche has much to say that is interesting, and a good deal that is exceptionally brilliant and penetrating.

Finally, some of the distressing faults of the essay are inseparable from its third claim to importance. Nietzsche was probably Germany's greatest prose stylist as well as one of the most profound and influential modern philosophers. But much of *The Birth of Tragedy* is badly overwritten and murky, as Nietzsche himself pointed out in section 3 of his "Attempt at Self-Criticism"; and occasionally a more extreme contrast to his later style—both literary and philosophical—would be difficult to imagine. To appreciate fully his later accomplishments one should know his beginnings. Indeed, it is one of Nietzsche's central points in the book that we cannot do justice to the achievement of the Greeks and the triumph of those powers of restraint that he calls Apollinian unless we first behold the unrestrained Dionysian energies that the Greeks managed to harness. Similarly, his own later style, so remarkable for its lucidity and aphoristic brevity, seems doubly impressive when we compare it with the prose he himself found so embarrassing by 1886—prose that at times, particularly in the last two sections, reads like a parody of Wagner.

It is partly, though not only, on account of this third point that the book should not be read by itself, without knowledge of Nietzsche's later writings. And no other essay forms a perfect pair with it as the exceedingly brief and malicious *Case of Wagner*, here offered in the same volume.

One corollary of what has just been said must be noted expressly. Confronted with the occasionally hyperromantic and turgid prose of *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is tempting for the



translator to tone down what offends his own taste and to make the style leaner and drier. But I have made a point of resisting this temptation. To the extent to which one gives in to it, one makes nonsense of parts of Nietzsche's brilliant "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," and one deprives those interested in Nietzsche's development of the opportunity to see for themselves to what extent Nietzsche changed. A faithful translator should strive to let Rilke sound like Rilke, Heidegger like Heidegger, *The Case of Wagner* like *Der Fall Wagner*—and *The Birth of Tragedy* like *Die Geburt der Tragödie*.

## 2

The first edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* was published in 1872, when Nietzsche was twenty-seven. It was immediately attacked by a young philologist, Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, in an unbridled polemical pamphlet entitled *Zukunftsphilologie!*<sup>1</sup> Wagner's music was then called "music of the future," and Wilamowitz tried to expose Nietzsche's "philology of the future"—a philology devoid of Greek quotations and footnotes.

Actually, there was much more to the attack than this. Nietzsche had been called to a chair at the University of Basel in Switzerland in 1869, and promoted to a full professorship of classical philology the following year—at the age of twenty-five. His doctoral degree had been conferred by the University of Leipzig without his having written a dissertation, on the basis of the call to Basel. That call, in turn, had been based on a superlative recommendation by Professor Ritschl, who had published articles by Nietzsche in the philological journal he edited and who had informed Basel that Nietzsche "is the first from whom I have ever accepted any contribution at all while he was still a student." The tenor of Ritschl's estimation of Nietzsche is perhaps best summed up in his sentence: "He will simply be able to do anything he wants to do."<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche's appointment to a chair at twenty-four was a sensation in professional circles, and it was to be expected that in his first book he would try to show the world of classical philology that his meteoric rise had been justified. Instead—he published *The Birth of Tragedy*, the kind of volume that could not be expected to appeal to the guild at any time, least of all to German professors in the new Empire, founded the year before.

Wilamowitz (1848–1931) was four years Nietzsche's junior, had just received his doctorate but not yet the title of professor—and the attack on Nietzsche was *his* first "book." He *did* try to establish the range and solidity of his scholarship by cataloguing Nietzsche's faults—and he saw nothing good at all in *The Birth*. His attack culminated in a charge of "ignorance and lack of love of truth" (p. 32).

Nietzsche's friend Erwin Rohde replied, still in 1872, in a pamphlet he called *Afterphilologie* to signify a perversion of philology. Luther had liked the prefix *After*, which refers literally to the human posterior; Kant, too, had used it in his book on religion (1793); and Schopenhauer had spoken of *Afterphilosophie* when he attacked the philosophy of the universities. Rohde tried to show how many of the mistakes Wilamowitz claimed to have found in *The Birth* involved errors on *his* part. But Rohde also called Wilamowitz repeatedly "our Dr. phil." (our Ph.D.)—Rohde himself had just received the title of professor, though he was not yet a full professor—and "the pasquinader";<sup>4</sup> and the level of his polemic was no higher than that of the attack he sought to meet. Two quotations may show this:

"I have emphasized this example because it may serve you as a sample at the outset of the

manner in which throughout this pasquinade ignorance, the art of eager slander, and speculative reliance on the blind prejudices of the general reader are woven together into an attractive whole” (p. 10).

“... really no more similar than an ape is to Heracles—indeed, even less; about as similar as our Dr. phil. von Wilamowitz is to the type of the ‘Socratic man’ whom our friend [Nietzsche] designates as the ‘noblest opponent’ of an artistic culture, although our Dr. phil. rather amusingly supposes that the designation fits him and the likes of him” (p. 12).

This last passage is important because it also illustrates Nietzsche’s high esteem of the “Socratic man.” *Afterphilologie*, to be sure, was written by Rohde, not Nietzsche; but the two men were very close friends at that time, and the point of Rohde’s pamphlet was to expose misinterpretations of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In 1873 Wilamowitz replied once more with a sequel to his *Zukunftsphilologie*.<sup>5</sup> The tenor of his reply may be gleaned from a remark near the end: “I should waste my time and energy on the inanities and wretchednesses of a couple of rotted brains?” (p. 23). Later, both Wilamowitz and Rohde made great reputations as classical philologists and never reprinted these early essays—presumably because they felt embarrassed by them.

Rohde, incidentally, had published a review of *The Birth of Tragedy* in the *Norddeutsche allgemeine Zeitung*, Sunday, May 26, 1872, before Wilamowitz’s pamphlet appeared. And in 1882 he published a very critical and hostile review of Wilamowitz’s *Antigonos von Karystos* (1881) in the *Litterarische Centralblatt*. Both of these reviews were reprinted in his *Kleinere Schriften* (2 vols., 1901).

Nietzsche never referred to Wilamowitz in any of his works and went his own way without letting resentment eat into his soul. There are a few references to Wilamowitz in Nietzsche’s letters of 1872 and 1873; but the most revealing passage is found in a letter to Rohde, March 19, 1874:

“To refute Dräseke’s<sup>6</sup> contribution to the question of Wagner, of belly-shaking memorabilia, Herr Bruno Meier<sup>7</sup> has written a lengthy and weighty treatise in which I am solemnly denounced as an ‘enemy of our culture,’ besides being represented as a wily deceiver among those who are deceived. He sent me his treatise personally, even furnishing his home address. I will send him the two essays of Wilamows. That’s surely Christian beneficence toward one’s enemies. For the delight of this dear Meier over Wilamows will surpass all words.”

To explain Nietzsche’s nickname for Wilamowitz: *Mops* is the German word for a pug, but the term was actually used to refer to a person with a disgruntled facial expression before it was transferred to the dog; it designates the quintessence of the comic, stupid, coarse, unfriendly, and inelegant. *Mopsig* means “boring”; *sich mopsen*, “to be bored.” *Mops* seems to be related etymologically to the English “mope.”

Nietzsche took Wilamowitz’s attack very lightly; yet it has been claimed that Wilamowitz finished Nietzsche as a philologist, and even that Nietzsche retired in 1879, after only ten years as a professor, because the students stayed away as a result of Wilamowitz’s polemic. In fact, the size of enrollments had nothing to do with Nietzsche’s decision.

It may be of some interest to indicate what he taught and to note how few students he had all along. During his first year he gave the following courses (the number of students is indicated in each case in parentheses): Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi* (6), Greek Lyric Poets (7), Latin Grammar (8). The next year: Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (11), Metrics (5), Hesiod’s *Erga* (11).

The third year: Introduction to the Study of Philology (9), Introduction to the Study of Plato Dialogues (6), Introduction to Latin Epigraphy (9). In the summer of 1872, after the publication of *The Birth*, Nietzsche lectured on Pre-Platonic Philosophers (10) and Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* (7); but that winter he had only two students in his Greek and Roman Rhetoric, and neither was a philologist. This drop in the number of students was surely due to Wilamowitz's first polemic. By the next summer, however, his lectures on the Pre-Platonic Philosophers drew eleven students; in 1876 the same course drew ten, and his lectures On Plato's Life and Doctrines nineteen. In 1878, finally, just before his retirement, he had more students than ever, though certainly not many: Hesiod's *Works and Days* (13), Plato's *Apology of Socrates* (6), Greek Lyrical Poets (13), Introduction to the Study of Plato (8). These data may give some idea of Nietzsche's career as a professor of classical philology, which was not exhausted by *The Birth of Tragedy*.

About the book opinions still differ, as they do about all of Nietzsche's works. F. M. Cornford, one of the leading British classicists of the first half of the twentieth century known to generations of students for his translations of many Platonic dialogues and his remarkable commentaries, said in *From Religion to Philosophy* (1912) that *The Birth* was "a work of profound imaginative insight, which left the scholarship of a generation toiling in its rear."

For all that, Wilamowitz had a point, though he was completely blind to Nietzsche's merits. Some of the "philology" of the future aped the manifest defects of Nietzsche's book without partaking of his genius—and, by a remarkable irony of fate, Nietzsche himself was to suffer a great deal, posthumously, from pseudo-scholars who substituted effusive prose for precision and correctness.

On the whole, however, the general estimate of posterity has been much closer to Cornford's view, and he himself and Jane Harrison have done a good deal to sustain Nietzsche's central intuitions.

In 1965 Professor Gerald F. Else followed up his monumental analysis of *Aristotle's Poetics* (1957) with a short study of *The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy*<sup>8</sup> in which he argued that Aristotle, Nietzsche, Gilbert Murray, and the Cambridge school have all been important but wrong about the origin of tragedy. He shows his usual mastery of the whole literature, and in his notes at the end of the volume he gives abundant references to recent literature on the subject. Those wondering about the current status of some of the problems raised by Nietzsche may be referred to Else's work. But it is noteworthy that, in spite of his radical disagreement with Nietzsche, Else should say, "*The Birth of Tragedy* is a great book, by whatever standard one cares to measure it" (p. 10). And he adds: "*The Birth of Tragedy* has cast a spell on almost everybody who has dealt with the subject since 1871."

### 3

What is of lasting importance is not the contrast of the Apollinian<sup>9</sup> and Dionysian as such, but that smacks of Schopenhauer's contrast of the world as representation and the world as will, and playing off two concepts against each other like that is rarely very fruitful, though it has been a popular pastime among German scholars.

When *The Birth* appeared, the prevalent conception of the Greeks was still that pioneered by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) and adopted by Goethe (1749–1832): ed

*Einfalt, stille Grösse*, “noble simplicity, calm grandeur.” Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), uttering the line, “Dover Beach,” had only recently led the view to the absurd with his famous formulation: “sweetness and light.”<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche used Apollo as a symbol for this aspect of Greek culture which found superb expression in classical Greek temples and sculptures: the genius of restraint, measure, and harmony. Far from depreciating what he called “the Apollinian,” he argued that one could not appreciate sufficiently until one became aware of another side of Greek culture that was barbarous by comparison and found expression in the Dionysian festivals. Surely, *The Bacchae* of Euripides shows us passions that are worlds removed from the Greece of Winckelmann, Goethe, and Arnold; and Nietzsche claimed that the same boundless and cruel longing to exceed all norms is also occasionally encountered in the *Iliad*<sup>11</sup> and in subsequent Greek poetry—and “the birth of tragedy” cannot be understood apart from it.

A careful reading of *The Birth* shows that Nietzsche, far from glorifying “the Dionysian,” argues that the achievements of the Greeks generally, and their tragedies in particular, cannot be understood adequately so long as we do not realize what potentially destructive forces had to be harnessed to make them possible. On this central point Nietzsche was surely right. If one wants a single well-written book which abounds in quotations and references that document this “dark” side of ancient Greece, there is probably none better than E. R. Dodds’ superb study of *The Greeks and the Irrational*,<sup>12</sup> which also abounds in references to other recent literature on this subject.

*The Birth of Tragedy* reaches its first great climax in section 7, which is of interest also in connection with French existentialism. Then the book moves on to suggestions about the death of tragedy. For over forty years the ridiculous claims of Richard Oehler, in *Friedrich Nietzsche und die Vorsokratiker* (1904),<sup>13</sup> were repeated by one interpreter after another—even after Oehler had thoroughly discredited himself with one of the most unscrupulous books ever to have come from a writer with some scholarly pretensions, *Friedrich Nietzsche und die Deutsche Zukunft* (1935),<sup>14</sup> an attempt to identify Nietzsche with the aspirations of the Nazis, who had come to power in 1933. In the interim, Oehler had compiled two huge indices for the two most complete editions of Nietzsche’s works, the latter index (for the so-called Musarion edition) comprising two and a half volumes. This did not prevent him—on the contrary, it enabled him to stud his book of 1935 with utterly misleading quotations that seem to say the opposite of what Nietzsche actually says on the pages from which they are taken. At best the earlier volume shows that Oehler’s stunning lack of intellectual integrity was fused with a limited intelligence and an appalling inability to understand Nietzsche. But this man was one of the pillars of the Nietzsche Archive, established by the philosopher’s sister, and one of the editors of the works.<sup>15</sup>

Neither Oehler nor his early book would deserve mention here if that book had not been used and echoed uncritically by A. H. J. Knight in the only English full-length study of Nietzsche’s relation to the Greeks,<sup>16</sup> and if Knight had not been relied on uncritically by Ernest Newman, Crane Brinton, and Erich Podach.<sup>17</sup> To catalogue Oehler’s mistakes here would be pointless; but two of them have been repeated so often that it seems necessary to repudiate them specifically.

First, the young Oehler claimed that the early Nietzsche “was completely under the influence of Schopenhauer,” and a pessimist (p. 28). In fact, however, Nietzsche’s very first

book, *The Birth*, constitutes a declaration of independence from Schopenhauer: which Nietzsche admires him for honestly facing up to the terrors of existence, Nietzsche himself celebrates Greek tragedy as a superior alternative to Schopenhauer's "Buddhistic negation of the will." From tragedy Nietzsche learns that one can affirm life as sublime, beautiful, and joyous in spite of all suffering and cruelty.

Second, Oehler understood *The Birth* as a manifesto against Socrates and Socratism. In fact Nietzsche is no more against (or for) Socrates than he is against (or for) Apollo or Dionysus. His whole way of thinking is far removed from such crudities. And Nietzsche was as right as most of his interpreters, following Oehler, have been wrong when he said in 1888, in *Ecce Homo*, in the first section of his own analysis of *The Birth*: "It smells offensively Hegelian, and the cadaverous perfume of Schopenhauer sticks only to a few formulas."

Socrates is introduced in *The Birth* with the reverence befitting a god, the equal of Apollo and Dionysus. Of course, Nietzsche's critical powers do not spare even gods, and he finds Socrates deeply problematic. He always approached Socrates in this manner, stressing not his admiration, now his objections, and sometimes, as here, both at once.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the two sections (14 and 15) in which the discussion of the death of tragedy reaches its climax—the second great highpoint of the book—suggest that but for Socrates Greek culture might have perished altogether; also that "the influence of Socrates necessitates ever again the regeneration of art"; and finally even that we need an "artistic Socrates."

Apollo and Dionysus reached a synthesis in tragedy; this synthesis was negated by Socrates and now another synthesis is wanted, an artistic Socrates. Could Plato be meant? On the contrary. Those who feel that Nietzsche is unfair to Socrates and that Socratism is not opposed to tragedy should reconsider Plato's resolve, in the *Republic*, to tolerate no tragic poets in his ideal city, as well as the older Plato's remarks on tragedy in *The Laws*. The "artistic Socrates" is Nietzsche himself. He looks forward to a philosophy that admits the tragic aspect of life, as the Greek poets did, but does not sacrifice the critical intellect; a philosophy that denies Socrates' optimistic faith that knowledge and virtue and happiness are, as it were, Siamese triplets; a philosophy as sharply critical as Socrates' but able and willing to avail itself of the visions and resources of art.

For all that, one need not accept Nietzsche's view of the death of tragedy, though it has been served up to us again and again in the twentieth century. This is not the place to offer sustained criticisms of his theses; but to stimulate reflection I suggest that Nietzsche is blatantly unfair not to Socrates but to Euripides—and that the death of tragedy was far better explained by Goethe, when he said to Eckermann, May 1, 1825:

"Man is simple. And however rich, manifold, and unfathomable he may be, yet the circle of his states is soon run through. If the circumstances had been like those among us poets in Germany where Lessing wrote two or three, I myself three or four, and Schiller five or six passable plays, there would have been room for a fourth, fifth, and sixth tragic poet. But among the Greeks with their abundant production, where each of the three great ones has written over one hundred, or close to one hundred, plays, and the tragic subjects of Homer and the heroic tradition had in some cases been treated three or four times—in view of such an abundance, I say, one may suppose that subject matter and contents had gradually been exhausted and poets writing after the three great ones did not really know what next. And when you stop to think about it, why should they? Wasn't it really enough for a while

... After all, these few grandiose views that have come down to us are of such dimension and significance that we poor Europeans have been occupying ourselves with them for centuries and will yet have food and work enough for a few more centuries.”

Unfortunately, *The Birth of Tragedy* does not end with Section 15, as an early draft did and as the book clearly ought to. Another ten sections follow that weaken the whole book immeasurably.

Sections 1 through 6 are introductory and inferior stylistically. The heart of the book is found in Sections 7 through 15, which deal with the birth and death of tragedy. This is by far the best part of the book and can probably be understood fairly well by itself. Sections 16–20 are less worthy of Nietzsche than anything else of comparable length he ever published—and he himself soon felt this. The book as a whole, though it has a touch of genius, is marred by the faults Nietzsche enumerates in his “Attempt at a Self-Criticism.” This “Attempt,” however, shows us not only a brilliant writer who has grown far beyond the level of his first performance, but a great human being.

W. K.

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<sup>1</sup> Berlin, Gebrüder Bornträger, 1872.

<sup>2</sup> For Ritschl’s letter, see *The Portable Nietzsche* (ed. and tr. by Walter Kaufmann), pp. 7–8.

<sup>3</sup> Leipzig, E. W. Fritsch, 1872.

<sup>4</sup> Libeler.

<sup>5</sup> *Zukunftsphilologie: Zweites Stück* (Berlin, Gebrüder Bornträger, 1873).

<sup>6</sup> Johannes Dräseke, “Beiträge zur Wagner-Frage” (contributions to the problem of Wagner), in *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*, IV (1873).

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Meyer (Nietzsche wrote “Meier”), “Beiträge zur Wagner-Frage: In eigener Sache” (in my cause), in *Deutsche Warte*, V, 641–73. Dräseke replied in *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*, V (1874), 403–05, 418–20, and 438–442, condemning Meyer’s attack on Nietzsche.

<sup>8</sup> Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1965.

<sup>9</sup> *Apollinisch* has often been rendered by “Apollonian”; but I follow Brinton, Morgan, and the translator of Spengler’s *Decline of the West* in preferring “Apollinian”: after all, Nietzsche did not say *Apollonisch*.

<sup>10</sup> This is the title of the first chapter of Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). The text itself was originally presented at Arnold’s last Oxford lecture, June 15, 1867, under the title “Culture and Its Enemies.”

<sup>11</sup> Compare also Nietzsche’s early fragment “Homer’s Contest” (pp. 32–39 in *Portable Nietzsche*).

<sup>12</sup> Berkeley, University of California Press, 1951; Boston, Beacon Press paperback, 1951.

<sup>13</sup> Leipzig, Dürr, 1904.

<sup>14</sup> Leipzig, Armanen, 1935.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Beyond Good and Evil*, Kaufmann translation, section 251, note 27; also Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche*, check the references to Richard Oehler in the Index.

<sup>16</sup> Knight’s *Some Aspects of the Life and Work of Nietzsche and particularly of His Connection with Greek Literature and Thought* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1933) is generally unreliable, and some of the many errors in the book are pointed out in Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche*. In other words, the two monographs devoted to Nietzsche and the Greeks (Oehler and Knight’s) are both quite unhelpful.

<sup>17</sup> Erich Podach, *Nietzsches Werke des Zusammenbruchs* (Heidelberg, Wolfgang Rothe Verlag, 1961), p. 407. Cf. Kaufmann

“Nietzsche in the Light of His Suppressed Manuscripts,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (1964), p. 216, note 13.

<sup>18</sup> All the relevant passages are considered in Chapter 13 of Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche*.

The  
BIRTH OF TRAGEDY  
Or:  
Hellenism And Pessimism



by

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE



*New Edition*  
*With an Attempt at a Self-Criticism*<sup>1</sup>

*Attempt at a Self-Criticism*

Whatever may be at the bottom of this questionable book, it must have been a exceptionally significant and fascinating question, and deeply personal at that: the time which it was written, in *spite* of which it was written, bears witness to that—the exciting time of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. As the thunder of the battle of Wörth was rolling over Europe, the musier and riddle-friend who was to be the father of this book sat somewhere in an Alpine nook, very bemused and beriddled, hence very concerned and yet unconcerned, and wrote down his thoughts about the *Greeks*—the core of the strange and almost inaccessible book to which this belated preface (or postscript) shall now be added. A few weeks later—and he himself was to be found under the walls of Metz, still wedded to the question marks that he had placed after the alleged “cheerfulness” of the Greeks and of Greek art. Eventually, in that month of profoundest suspense when the peace treaty was being debated at Versailles, he, too, attained peace with himself and, slowly convalescing from an illness contracted at the front, completed the final draft of *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*.— Out of music? Music and tragedy? Greeks and the music of tragedy? Greeks and the art form of pessimism? The best turned out, most beautiful, most envied type of humanity to date, those most apt to seduce us to life, the Greeks—how now? They of all people should have *needed* tragedy? Even more—art? For what—Greek art?

You will guess where the big question mark concerning the value of existence had thus been raised. Is pessimism *necessarily* a sign of decline, decay, degeneration, weary and weak instincts—as it once was in India and now is, to all appearances, among us, “modern” men and Europeans? Is there a pessimism of *strength*? An intellectual predilection for the harsh, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence, prompted by well-being, by overflowing health, by the *fullness* of existence? Is it perhaps possible to suffer precisely from



overfullness? The sharp-eyed courage that tempts and attempts, that *craves* the frightful as the enemy, the worthy enemy, against whom one can test one's strength? From whom one can learn what it means "to be frightened"? What is the significance of the *tragic* myth among the Greeks of the best, the strongest, the most courageous period? And the tremendous phenomenon of the Dionysian—and, born from it, tragedy—what might they signify?— And again: that of which tragedy died, the Socratism of morality, the dialectics, frugality, and cheerfulness of the theoretical man—how now? might not this very Socratism be a sign of decline, of weariness, of infection, of the anarchical dissolution of the instincts? And the "Greek cheerfulness" of the later Greeks—merely the afterglow of the sunset? The Epicureans' resolve *against* pessimism—a mere precaution of the afflicted? And science itself—our science—indeed, what is the significance of all science, viewed as a symptom of life? For what—worse yet, *whence*—all science? How now? Is the resolve to be so scientific about everything perhaps a kind of fear of, an escape from, pessimism? A subtle last resort against *truth*? And, morally speaking, a sort of cowardice and falseness? Amorally speaking, a refusal. O Socrates, Socrates, was that perhaps *your* secret? O enigmatic ironist, was that perhaps *your*—irony?

## 2

What I then got hold of, something frightful and dangerous, a problem with horns but not necessarily a bull, in any case a *new* problem—today I should say that it was *the problem of science itself*, science considered for the first time as problematic, as questionable. But the book in which my youthful courage and suspicion found an outlet—what an *impossible* book—had to result from a task so uncongenial to youth! Constructed from a lot of immature and overgreen personal experiences, all of them close to the limits of communication, presented in the context of *art*—for the problem of science cannot be recognized in the context of science—a book perhaps for artists who also have an analytic and retrospective penchant (in other words, an exceptional type of artist for whom one might have to look far and wide and who really would not care to look); a book full of psychological innovations and artists' secrets with an artists' metaphysics in the background; a youthful work full of the intrepid mood of youth, the moodiness of youth, independent, defiantly self-reliant even where it seems to bow before an authority and personal reverence; in sum, a first book, also in every bad sense of that label. In spite of the problem which seems congenial to old age, the book is marked by every defect of youth, with its "length in excess" and its "storm and stress." On the other hand, considering its success (especially with the great artist to whom it addressed itself as a dialogue, Richard Wagner), it is a *proven* book, I mean one that in any case satisfied "the best minds of the time."<sup>2</sup> In view of that, it really ought to be treated with some consideration and taciturnity. Still, I do not want to suppress entirely how disagreeable it now seems to me, how strange it appears now, after sixteen years—before a much older, hundred times more demanding, but by no means colder eye which has not become a stranger to the task which this audacious book dared to tackle for the first time: *to look at science in the perspective of the artist, but at art in that of life.*

## 3

To say it once more: today I find it an impossible book; I consider it badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness, very convinced and therefore disdainful of proof, mistrustful even of the *propriety* of proof, a book for initiates, “music” for those dedicated to music, those who are closely related to beginnings on the basis of common and rare aesthetic experiences, “music” meant as a sign of recognition for close relatives *in artibus*<sup>3</sup>—an arrogant and rhapsodic book that sought to exclude right from the beginning the *profanum vulgus*<sup>4</sup> of “the educated” even more than “the mass” or “folk.” Still, the effect of the book proved and proves that it had a knack for seeking out fellow-rhapsodizers and for luring them on to new secret paths and dancing places. What I found expression here was anyway—this was admitted with as much curiosity as antipathy—a *strange* voice, the disciple of a still “unknown God,” one who concealed himself for the time being under the scholar’s hood, under the gravity and dialectical ill humor of the German, even under the bad manners of the Wagnerian. Here was a spirit with strange, still nameless needs, a memory bursting with questions, experiences, concealed things after which the name of Dionysus was added as one more question mark. What spoke here—as was admitted, not without suspicion—was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered with difficulty, a feat of the will, as in a strange tongue, almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself. It should have *sung*, this “new soul”—and not spoken!<sup>5</sup> What I had to say then—too bad that I did not dare say it as a poet: perhaps I had the ability. Or at least as a philologist: after all, even today practically everything in this field remains to be discovered and dug up by philologists! Above all, the problem that there *is* a problem here—and that the Greeks, as long as we lack an answer to the question “what is Dionysian?”—remain as totally uncomprehended and unimaginable as ever.<sup>6</sup>

4

Indeed, what is Dionysian?— This book contains an answer: one “who knows” is talking to the initiate and disciple of his god. *Now* I should perhaps speak more cautiously and less eloquently about such a difficult psychological question as that concerning the origin of tragedy among the Greeks. The question of the Greek’s relation to pain, his degree of sensitivity, is basic: did this relation remain constant? Or did it change radically? The question is whether his ever stronger *craving for beauty*, for festivals, pleasures, new cults were rooted in some deficiency, privation, melancholy, pain? Supposing that this were true—and Pericles (or Thucydides) suggests as much in the great funeral oration—how should we then have to explain the origin of the opposite craving, which developed earlier in time, the *craving for the ugly*; the good, severe will of the older Greeks to pessimism, to the tragic myth to the image of everything underlying existence that is frightful, evil, a riddle, destructively fatal? What, then, would be the origin of tragedy? Perhaps *joy*, strength, overflowing health, overgreat fullness? And what, then, is the significance, physiologically speaking, of the madness out of which tragic and comic art developed—the Dionysian madness? How now? Is madness perhaps not necessarily the symptom of degeneration, decline, and the final stage of a culture? Are there perhaps—a question for psychiatrists—neuroses of *health*? of the youth and youthfulness of a people? Where does that synthesis of god and billy goat in the satyr point? What experience of himself, what urge compelled the Greek to conceive the Dionysian?

enthusiast and primeval man as a satyr? And regarding the origin of the tragic chorus: do those centuries when the Greek body flourished and the Greek soul foamed over with health perhaps know endemic ecstasies? Visions and hallucinations shared by entire communities or assemblies at a cult? How now? Should the Greeks, precisely in the abundance of their youth have had the will to the tragic and have been pessimists? Should it have been madness, to use one of Plato's phrases, that brought the greatest blessings upon Greece? On the other hand conversely, could it be that the Greeks became more and more optimistic, superficial, and histrionic precisely in the period of dissolution and weakness—more and more ardent for logic and logicizing the world and thus more “cheerful” and “scientific”? How now? Could it be possible that, in spite of all “modern ideas” and the prejudices of a democratic taste, the triumph of *optimism*, the gradual prevalence of *rationality*, practical and theoretic *utilitarianism*, no less than democracy itself which developed at the same time, might all have been symptoms of a decline of strength, of impending old age, and of physiologic weariness? These, and not pessimism? Was Epicurus an optimist—precisely because he was *afflicted*?

It is apparent that it was a whole cluster of grave-questions with which this book burdened itself. Let us add the gravest question of all. What, seen in the perspective of *life*, is the significance of morality?

## 5

Already in the preface addressed to Richard Wagner, art, and *not* morality, is presented as the truly *metaphysical* activity of man. In the book itself the suggestive sentence is repeated several times, that the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon. Indeed, the whole book knows only an artistic meaning and crypto-meaning behind all even—a “god,” if you please, but certainly only an entirely reckless and amoral artist-god who wants to experience, whether he is building or destroying, in the good and in the bad, his own joy and glory—one who, creating worlds, frees himself from the *distress* of fullness and *overfullness* and from the *affliction* of the contradictions compressed in his soul.<sup>7</sup> The world—at every moment the *attained* salvation of God, as the eternally changing, eternally new vision of the most deeply afflicted, discordant, and contradictory being who can find salvation only in *appearance*: you can call this whole artists' metaphysics arbitrary, idle, fantastic; what matters is that it betrays a spirit who will one day fight at any risk whatever the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence. Here, perhaps for the first time, pessimism “beyond good and evil”<sup>8</sup> is suggested. Here that “perversity of mind” gains speed and formulation against which Schopenhauer never wearied of hurling in advance his moderate curses and thunderbolts: a philosophy that dares to move, to demote, morality into the realm of appearance—and not merely among “appearances” or phenomena (in the sense assigned to these words by Idealistic philosophers), but among “deceptions,” as semblance, delusion, error, interpretation, contrivance, art.

Perhaps the depth of this *antimoral* propensity is best inferred from the careful and hostile silence with which Christianity is treated throughout the whole book—Christianity as the most prodigal elaboration of the moral theme to which humanity has ever been subjected. In truth, nothing could be more opposed to the purely aesthetic interpretation and justification of the world which are taught in this book than the Christian teaching, which is, and wants

be, *only* moral and which relegates art, *every* art, to the realm of *lies*; with its absolute standards, beginning with the truthfulness of God, it negates, judges, and damns art. Behind this mode of thought and valuation, which must be hostile to art if it is at all genuine, I never failed to sense a *hostility to life*—a furious, vengeful antipathy to life itself: for all of life based on semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives are error. Christianity was from the beginning, essentially and fundamentally, life's nausea and disgust. With life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in "another" or "better" life. Hatred of "the world," condemnations of the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality, a beyond invented the better to slander this life, at bottom a craving for the nothing, for the end, for respite, for "the sabbath of sabbaths"—all this always struck me, not less than the unconditional will of Christianity to recognize *only* moral values, as the most dangerous and uncanny form of all possible forms of a "will to decline"<sup>9</sup>—at the very least a sign of abysmal sickness, weariness, discouragement, exhaustion, and the impoverishment of life. For, confronted with morality (especially Christian, or unconditional, morality), life *must* continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life is something essentially amoral—and eventually, crushed by the weight of contempt and the eternal No, life *must* then be felt to be unworthy of desire and altogether worthless. Morality itself—how now? might not morality be "a will to negate life," a secret instinct of annihilation, a principle of decay, diminution, and slander—the beginning of the end? Hence, the danger of dangers?

It was *against* morality that my instinct turned with this questionable book, long ago; it was an instinct that aligned itself with life and that discovered for itself a fundamentally opposite doctrine and valuation of life—purely artistic and *anti-Christian*. What to call it? As a philologist and man of words I baptized it, not without taking some liberty—for who could claim to know the rightful name of the Antichrist?—in the name of a Greek god: I called it Dionysian.

## 6

It is clear what task I first dared to touch with this book? How I regret now that in those days I still lacked the courage (or immodesty?) to permit myself in every way an individual language of my own for such individual views and hazards—and that instead I tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulas strange and new valuations which were basically at odds with Kant's and Schopenhauer's spirit and taste. What, after all, did Schopenhauer think of tragedy?

"That which bestows on everything tragic its peculiar elevating force"—he says in *The World as Will and Representation*,<sup>10</sup> volume II, p. 495—"is the discovery that the world, the life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is *not worthy* of our affection: this constitutes the tragic spirit—it leads to *resignation*."

How differently Dionysus spoke to me! How far removed I was from all that resignationism!—<sup>11</sup> But there is something far worse in this book, something I now regret still more than that I obscured and spoiled Dionysian premonitions with Schopenhauerian formulations: namely, that I *spoiled* the grandiose *Greek problem*, as it had arisen before my eyes, by introducing the most modern problems! That I appended hopes where there was no ground for hope, where everything pointed all too plainly to an end! That on the basis of the latest German music I began to rave about "the German spirit" as if that were in the process

even then of discovering and finding itself again—at a time when the German spirit, which not long before had still had the will to dominate Europe and the strength to lead Europe, was just making its testament and *abdicating* forever, making its transition, under the pompous pretense of founding a *Reich*, to a leveling mediocrity, democracy, and “modern ideas”!

Indeed, meanwhile I have learned to consider this “German spirit” with a sufficient lack of hope or mercy; also, contemporary *German music*, which is romanticism through and through and most un-Greek of all possible art forms—moreover, a first-rate poison for the nerves doubly dangerous among a people who love drink and who honor lack of clarity as a virtue for it has the double quality of a narcotic that both intoxicates and spreads a *fog*.

To be sure, apart from all the hasty hopes and faulty applications to the present with which I spoiled my first book, there still remains the great Dionysian question mark I raised—regarding music as well: what would a music have to be like that would no longer be of romantic origin, like German music—but *Dionysian*?

7

But, my dear sir, what in the world is romantic if *your* book isn't? Can deep hatred against “the Now,” against “reality” and “modern ideas” be pushed further than you pushed it in your artists' metaphysics? believing sooner in the Nothing, sooner in the devil than in “the Now”? Is it not a deep bass of wrath and the lust for destruction that we hear humming underneath all of your contrapuntal vocal art and seduction of the ear, a furious resolve against everything that is “now,” a will that is not too far removed from practical nihilism and seems to say: “sooner let nothing be true than that *you* should be right, than that *your* truth should be proved right!”

Listen yourself, my dear pessimist and art-deifier, but with open ears, to a single passage chosen from your book—to the not ineloquent dragon-slayer passage which may have an insidious pied-piper sound for young ears and hearts. How now? Isn't this the typical creed of the romantic of 1830, masked by the pessimism of 1850? Even the usual romantic finale sounded—break, breakdown, return and collapse before an old faith, before *the* old God. How now? Is your pessimists' book not itself a piece of anti-Hellenism and romanticism? Is not itself something “equally intoxicating and befogging,” in any case a narcotic, even a piece of music, *German* music? But listen:

“Let us imagine a coming generation with such intrepidity of vision, with such a heroic penchant for the tremendous; let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-slayers, the proud audacity with which they turn their back on all the weakling's doctrines of optimism in order to ‘live resolutely’ in wholeness and fullness: *would it not be necessary* for the tragic man of such a culture, in view of his self-education for seriousness and terror, to desire a new art, the *art of metaphysical comfort*, to desire tragedy as his own proper Helen, and to exclaim with Faust:

*Should not my longing overleap the distance  
And draw the fairest form into existence?”*<sup>13</sup>

“Would it not be *necessary*?”—No, thrice no! O you young romantics: it would *not* be

necessary! But it is highly probable that it will *end* that way, that *you* end that way—namely, “comforted,” as it is written, in spite of all self-education for seriousness and terror, “comforted metaphysically”—in sum, as romantics end, as *Christians*.

No! You ought to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists. Then perhaps, as laughers, you may some day dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil—metaphysics in front. Or, I say it in the language of that Dionysian monster who bears the name of Zarathustra:

“Raise up your hearts, my brothers, high, higher! And don’t forget your legs! Raise up your legs, too, good dancers; and still better: stand on your heads!

“This crown of the laugher, the rose-wreath crown: I crown myself with this crown; myself pronounced holy my laughter. I did not find anyone else today strong enough for that.”

“Zarathustra, the dancer; Zarathustra, the light one who beckons with his wings, preparing for a flight, beckoning to all birds, ready and heady, blissfully lightheaded;

“Zarathustra, the soothsayer; Zarathustra, the sooth-laugher; not impatient; not unconditional; one who loves leaps and side-leaps: I crown myself with this crown.

“This crown of the laugher, the rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy: you higher men, *learn*—to laugh!”

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part IV.<sup>14</sup>

*Sils-Maria*, Oberengadi

August 1886-

**THE**

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**BIRTH OF TRAGEDY**



Out of the Spirit of Music

## *Preface to Richard Wagner*

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To keep at a distance all the possible scruples, excitements, and misunderstandings that the thoughts united in this essay will occasion, in view of the peculiar character of our aesthetic public, and to be able to write these introductory remarks, too, with the same contemplative delight whose reflection—the distillation of good and elevating hours—is evident on every page, I picture the moment when you, my highly respected friend, will receive this essay. Perhaps after an evening walk in the winter snow, you will behold Prometheus unbound on the title page, read my name, and be convinced at once that, whatever this essay should contain, the author certainly has something serious and urgent to say; also that, as he hatched these ideas, he was communicating with you as if you were present, and hence could write down only what was in keeping with that presence. You will recall that it was during the same period when your splendid *Festschrift* on Beethoven came into being, amid the terror and sublimities of the war that had just broken out, that I collected myself for these reflections. Yet anyone would be mistaken if he associated my reflections with the contrast between patriotic excitement and aesthetic enthusiasm, of courageous seriousness and cheerful game: if he really read this essay, it would dawn on him, to his surprise, what seriously German problem is faced here and placed right in the center of German hopes, as a vortex and turning point.<sup>15</sup> But perhaps such readers will find it offensive that an aesthetic problem should be taken so seriously—assuming they are unable to consider art more than a pleasant sideline, a readily dispensable tinkling of bells that accompanies the “seriousness of life,” just as if nobody knew what was involved in such a contrast with the “seriousness of life.” Let such “serious” readers learn something from the fact that I am convinced that art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life, in the sense of the man to whom, as my sublime predecessor on this path, I wish to dedicate this essay.

*Basel, end of the year 187*



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