
PHILOSOPHY

Reading the *Birth of Tragedy*

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“Without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

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THE FATE of *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*) in the Nietzschean exegesis is at least curious. This is not to say that this particular text would be less commented than other writings of Nietzsche. There is, indeed, a considerable amount of interpretative work done on this piece. What is surprising though is that the various critics of the book often seem only to reproduce the author’s self-criticism, neglecting the radical innovation or, rather, the (post-)philosophical event that takes place *with* and materializes itself *as* this particular book.¹ Misreading perhaps Nietzsche’s “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” (*AS*), commentators usually look at the *BT* as an early experiment of the German not-a-philosopher-yet, an experiment that, although it has some remarkable aspects, takes shape in a book that is less valuable than Nietzsche’s later works, where his “real, genuine, true” “philosophy” is developed. Such commentators focus rather on Nietzsche’s rejection of the style of his book, as well as on the self-denunciation of his hopes for a rebirth of tragedy from the spirit of German music and philosophy. In fact, if these two elements are elimi-

nated, Nietzsche's book is precisely what its author claims it to be in his *AS*, namely a book whose main concern is the question of science or knowledge (*Wissenschaft*). Nevertheless, not even the radical question of science ("science . . . as problematic, as questionable," as Nietzsche puts it) was paid the attention it deserves, since, with some notable exceptions,² most of the readings of the *BT* linger at the level of clarifications of the Apollinian and the Dionysian, whose fusion produces tragedy, which is then undermined by the spirit of knowledge, science or *theoria*.³

The basic criticism to be addressed to these interpretations is that, ignoring the importance of the *BT* in Nietzsche's development as a thinker, and focusing mainly on issues related to tragedy and art, they risk a more or less dramatic misunderstanding of the general constellation of philosophemes deployed by this writing. Yet, what is problematic in these interpretations is not that they would simply not grasp the most evident features of Nietzsche's particular philosophemes ("Apollinian," "Dionysian," "tragedy," and so forth); the problems start to arise rather when they reconstruct the relationship that exists between these philosophemes. It is crucial to stress here that the nature of this relationship is extremely uncanny, since it is quite explicitly oriented against philosophy, or at least against its traditional interpretation as *Wissenschaft* or even as *theoria*. This aspect should have made us aware that this text cannot be simply subsumed to what most commentators rush to call Nietzsche's "philosophy." It is precisely here that the initial underestimation of the importance of this work for what, in the history of Western thinking, presents itself as "Nietzsche" produces its most disastrous consequences. If one were to avoid casting on this book the curse of an inferior value, it would perhaps become obvious that one of the most interesting features of the way its philosophemes work is that they never simply coagulate in what we, and the tradition, call a "philosophy," Nietzsche's first "philosophical" gesture being *at the same time* one of the first documents of something that could be delimited and diagnosed later as "the end of philosophy."

In order to read the results of this complex gesture, I believe, against Peter Sloterdijk,⁴ that it is crucial to follow Nietzsche's text in its literality. Nevertheless, the proposition here is to begin not precisely with the beginning, as most of the literal readings of the *BT* do, but with chapters 19 and 23, where the fundamental aim of the book is revealed. In other words, following several suggestions found in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's and Jean-Luc Nancy's work,⁵ I propose to consider the rebirth of the tragic myth in Germany as the central motif /philosopheme or organizing principle of the *BT*, without forgetting that what we have before our eyes is a text that makes us question even the pertinence of a concept such as "philosopheme" (the nature of Nietzsche's "motifs" or concep-

tual “clots” is, in fact, one of the issues to be clarified by further analysis). Focusing on the motif of the rebirth of a tragic age, we can actually delimit quite clearly something that could be described as Nietzsche’s personal cultural war, his reconstruction of the ancient Greek “psycho-dynamic” (Sloterdijk) being, in fact, the building up or the invention of a strategic theoretical object that serves as a weapon in a struggle taking place in the realm of the symbolic: image against image, Nietzsche contra vulgarizations of Winckelmann (“Greek harmony,” ‘Greek beauty,’ ‘Greek cheerfulness”).⁶

The second aspect that should not be ignored when discussing the *BT* is a strange oscillation that marks this text from the very beginning to the very end. Nietzsche mobilizes all his efforts in order to delimit and undermine (by producing its truth) what the Western tradition developed as one of its constitutive practices: “philosophy,” “science,” “*theoria*” or “*Wissenschaft*” (the four are actually not very well differentiated in his text). Now, it is quite obvious that such a critical gesture toward the West as such cannot take place on the same grounds on which the Western cultural tradition, in the widest sense of this term, established itself. So, Nietzsche is practically obliged to invent or to acquire an extra-philosophical, pre-philosophical or post-philosophical realm from which he can articulate his criticism. In fact, the quintessential interpretative problem raised by the *BT* is to grasp Nietzsche’s move towards this *other world* of philosophy. We find here an ambition to go beyond philosophy, in what is pre-philosophical (the Greek myths and tragedy), a journey that is done in the style of an *imitatio vita*, as if Nietzsche tried to produce, through some sort of “Dionysian realism,” the image of life as the truth of philosophy or of *theoria/Wissenschaft* (insofar as these are almost synonyms with “philosophy”). The impact of this gesture is to be calculated, and Nietzsche is perfectly aware of this in *Ecce Homo*, at the level of a meditation on the world-historical coherence or cohesion of the West (“I am a world-historical monster”). Nietzsche’s lesson here is that this coherence is impossible, that there is an ontological wound in life or in existence itself, a wound that even if it is “filled” with *theoria*’s worship of an infinite optimism regarding knowledge, remains wide open. “Apollo” and “Dionysus,” or the interplay between them, is a better answer to this wound, Nietzsche seems to say, than the efforts of knowledge. Nevertheless, in order to assert the enigma they stand for one needs to create a second language inside the “natural” language of the Western tradition. Nietzsche is fundamentally the poet of this second language, but he has no other tools yet than those developed by Kant and Schopenhauer, as well as those elaborated by the classical philosophical tradition (Plato and Aristotle, for instance), which is precisely the tradition against which he tries to conquer the essence of “Greece” or some

ultra-Greece that precedes, logically and in time, the “philosophical or theoretical decadence” characterizing the age of *Wissenschaft*. To Nietzsche Greece is not only the most illustrative example of a so-called successful people; he is well aware of the fact that the whole European civilization is rooted in these Greek beginnings. He tries to assess the experience of the Greeks in order to analyze the essence of “the Greek miracle” or the conditions required by a truly philosophical existence, an existence within which people have learnt how to live with their innermost finitude. It is not hard to see how and why the result of struggling with such a task is a perpetual oscillation between the tradition of Western thinking (which has lost the Greek Dionysian wisdom, while being the only toolbox thinking can use) and the desire of overcoming it. (This is, in fact, the secret of a later motif in Nietzsche: the re-evaluation of all values.) It is this oscillation, then, that should constitute our point of departure and arrival in reading the *BT*.

THE BEST proof that the *BT* is the site of an oscillation is perhaps the fact that years after publishing this text Nietzsche thought it necessary to add a prefatory piece (“Attempt at a Self-Criticism”), which stays as a guard at the gates of his “experimental philology.” The sheer existence of this second text shows quite clearly that in the eyes of its author the *BT* is touched by a certain insufficiency. The question now is to determine the exact nature of this insufficiency. In this way, we can hope to get closer to the relationship between the two texts (the *AS* and the *BT*) and also to evaluate the cumulative effects resulting from this patched textual corpus. In other words, what is at stake here is to understand the meaning of Nietzsche’s gesture, i.e. augmenting the *BT*, which, as is known, was so controversial at the time of its publishing that most of Nietzsche’s philologist colleagues rejected it. Curiously enough, Nietzsche’s *AS* is by no means a response to his detractors. Rather than this, it is a piece that tries to build up the conditions of legibility of the initial text. We should not forget that when he writes the *AS*, Nietzsche is an already accomplished thinker—his most important books, including *Zarathustra*, have been written, and he can look back at his own beginnings from the height of an oeuvre that has already overcome his initial “experimentalism” (if this is the right word to describe Nietzsche’s efforts to abandon classical thinking and to liberate himself from the age-old metaphysical certainties of philosophy in order to invent a completely new “theoretical” existence). In short, the *AS* is not only an important document of Nietzsche’s development as a thinker, but also a material proof that, over the years, his most intimate objects of thinking remained basically the same. This makes the careful reading of this text all the more necessary.

There are actually two crucial moments in the *AS* considerably complicating the legibility of this “almost inaccessible”⁷ book. The first is the moment when Nietzsche determines the fundamental question of his efforts as being that of science,⁸ while the second consist of his irony towards his hopes for a rebirth of the German spirit.⁹ It is quite obvious that the first moment is somehow a re-marking or re-assertion of one of the strongest motifs of his book, and if the *BT* would finish after chapter 15, as Walter Kaufmann suggested it should,¹⁰ then Nietzsche’s claim would be almost credible, since the whole discussion about the figure of Socrates as an incarnation of the theoretical man is given a very important place in the general economy of the book. As it is known, the title of the very first project of the *BT* was “Socrates and Greek Tragedy,”¹¹ so there is at least one stage of this work when the question of science might have been its central question. But Nietzsche’s statement is definitely false if we take a look at the final result. The question of science does not appear so radically in the ten chapters of the second part, and for this reason we can suspect that Nietzsche, reducing the second part of the *BT*, i.e. the whole discussion about music and tragic myth, to the more general question of science (even to his quite special question of science), while revealing an essential trait of his work, also concealed something. Of course, he makes us aware that his project was to look at science against the background of art, and at art from the perspective of life,¹² but the latter functions here rather as an abstract and vague name of something that in the *BT* is very concrete: the life or existence of a people (Greek, as much as German, or, rather, Greek *because* of the German). Not that life would not be one of the quintessential motifs of Nietzsche, but, in truth, the way in which “life” is involved in the *potentiality* of a people’s existence, which seems to be the quite complicated central question of the *BT*, cannot be honestly and satisfactorily summarized by referring to the schematic relationship Nietzsche proposes to us in the formula “science through art, art through life.” This gesture allows us to conclude two things: 1) that the question of science is the locus of a ruse and it should be analyzed very carefully; 2) that the question of science (whatever it may mean) is not only more than the question of science or *theoria* (“science as problematic”), but it has to do with Nietzsche’s cultural war and preparation for the mapping out of an extra-philosophical code that would make possible the delimitation of science as *his* “question of science.” This is to say that redrawing the path of science or knowledge in the *BT* is an imperious requirement of any attempt to delineate the theoretical area brought to light by Nietzsche.

The second moment in the *AS* that should be given special care is the disqualification of Nietzsche’s hopes for a rebirth of the German spirit. This sec-

ond gesture is all the more surprising if we think about the fact that the so-called “German question” or, more precisely, the meditation upon the possibility of a Dionysian German culture occupies the whole second half of the book, being, in fact, along with the question of the tragic myth, the dominant motif when trying to read the *BT*. By rejecting the hopes for a rebirth of the tragic myth in Germany, Nietzsche’s comparative cultural critique of Greeks and moderns escapes the readings that want to identify here the nationalistic tendencies of the German philosopher. The arguments asserting that Nietzsche rejects his nationalism because he realized its flaws¹³ are simply missing the very type of this nationalism. Thus, the question arises: what kind of “politics” works behind Nietzsche’s “nationalism,” if this “nationalism” can actually denounce its nationalism, and still remain at the heart of the philosopher’s first book? In other words, the question is why Nietzsche did not revise his “general politics”? Why did he withdraw only some more or less circumstantial “German hopes”? The most reasonable hypothesis here seems to be that Nietzsche believed that even if his hopes about the capability of German culture to give birth anew to the tragic myth have failed (because of factual circumstances: German music was actually not what Nietzsche believed it could be, and so forth), the principle itself was correct: the tragic myth or, rather, music¹⁴ has the effective power of giving rise to a properly “philosophical existence,” similar to that of the Greeks in the tragic era. Is it, in fact, to this claim that the quotation from Zarathustra responds with laughter? Is this metaphysics of music (inherited from Schopenhauer) that makes the *BT* an “impossible”¹⁵ book? Whatever the answer to these questions would be, it is quite obvious that Nietzsche’s Dionysian fusion is not so much a political or social one, because the Dionysian connection takes place at a level situated before “state” and “society.” His “project” is rather onto-political, being not only a politics of man, but also a politics of the relationship between man and nature or man and existence, of man exposed to the night of existence, i.e. to a “philosophical existence.” Is it this project that makes Nietzsche self-ironically call himself a “romantic”? Regarding this point, Nietzsche’s *AS* is more or less ambiguous, especially when he concludes the case against his German hopes by saying: “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*?”¹⁶

In the lines that come after the end of chapter 6 from the *AS*, Nietzsche diagnoses his own Romanticism in the hatred of “the Now” exhibited by the “art-deifier” that he is. Yet, the register has somewhat changed. The discussion is not about music anymore, but about the critical gesture towards the present. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the two would be completely independ-

ent, since the positive proposition of this criticism is precisely a rebirth of tragedy from the spirit of Dionysian music. But we should not forget that one of the fundamental traits of the Dionysian is the onto-political bond that it makes possible, a bond whose main virtue is re-establishing the connection between man and man, and between man and nature, by participation in a “higher community.”¹⁷ This pre-political and pre-social Dionysian fusion is a fusion in myth or under the spell of the myth, grounding each feature of the social life, including the state.¹⁸ The whole *BT* points towards this pre-political core of politics, as if Nietzsche would try to save this “higher community,” this nobler fusion, from the *Realpolitik* of the day, against which, in fact, his book was written.¹⁹

Now, after considering these two crucial moments of the *AS*, we can see better what lurks behind the “German question” and the “question of science,” and it is quite obvious why the latter should be discussed on artistic grounds. Art or, more precisely, *music* is actually the true politics of a philosopher who tries to establish a philosophical existence, an existence exposed to its perils, to its own abyss, worshipping its ever destabilizing questions, just as the Greeks did with their question-gods. This is exactly what, by living under the sign of *certitudo* and optimism, the Socratic man is no longer capable of. Nevertheless, one should not misunderstand Nietzsche’s point here: what is problematic in the certainty and optimism of the moderns is not that they are what they are, but the fact that they are only the symptoms of concealing the radical finitude or wound of existence. Whereas the Greeks openly confronted this finitude, glorifying it in their myths and tragedies, and creating a world out of it, the moderns are incapable of grounding a world other than that of a dissolution under the heavy weight of their own unrecognized contradictions. The onto-politics of Nietzsche is ultimately a strange mixture between a politics of finitude and a politics of authenticity, a politics that is authentically finite. At least, this is what can be read from his account of Greece. But there is also the other side of this coin: the communitarian fusion in myth, which is the foundation of a more *proper* existence.²⁰ How does this propriety fit into the schema of a politics of finitude eroding whatever is proper and self-identical? Is this paradox only a side effect of the oscillation between the philosophical and the non-philosophical mentioned above? The answer lies perhaps in the question of music. How is it possible that music, even a Dionysian one, has this onto-political power?

WHAT IS music for Nietzsche? In this question Nietzsche starts as a disciple of Schopenhauer.

This extraordinary contrast, which stretches like a yawning gulf between plastic art as the Apollinian, and music as the Dionysian art, has revealed itself to

*only one of the great thinkers, to such an extent that, even without this clue to the symbolism of the Hellenic divinities, he conceded to music a character and an origin different from all the other arts, because, unlike them, it is not a copy of the phenomenon, but an immediate copy of the will itself, and therefore complements everything physical in the world and every phenomenon by representing what is metaphysical, the thing in itself.*²¹

This is the first moment in the *BT*, when Nietzsche tries to grasp the question of music, after he concluded in chapter 15 that the elimination of music from tragedy by the spirit of the Socratic man resulted in the eventual extinction of the tragic era. Nietzsche's main point here is that music has a "different origin and character" than other arts. It is noteworthy that this difference is nonetheless not a neutral one, but it establishes a hierarchic relationship between music and the plastic arts on the basis of their relationship with nature or phenomena. Plastic arts, Nietzsche claims via Schopenhauer, imitate only the physical realities of the world, while music is an immediate copy of the will and represents the metaphysical. The results of this equation are strange: music is in fact pure will, insofar as there is no preexisting model that music should imitate. At the same time, music complements *every* physical reality providing it with its inner principle. Everything resembles here the Aristotelian theory of mimesis. On the one hand, we have the ordinary, Platonic imitation of nature, as some sort of superficial mimesis, while on the other hand we have a more fundamental mimesis, which cannot be translated by the word "imitation," and whose true Aristotelian name is *techne*, which is actually a complement or supplement of *physis*, the necessary requirement for any kind of manifestation of "nature."²² This double scheme of mimesis seems to command the artistic hierarchy established by Nietzsche–Schopenhauer, inscribing them in the modern tradition or tendency of rejecting imitation ("an artist is original if he does not imitate other artists") and, on a larger scale, in the philosophical expulsion of mimesis from the polis.

What is at stake in Nietzsche's attempts at grasping the essence of music is, in fact, the whole Western tradition of theorizing art, as the reference to Wagner and to the concept of beauty demonstrates.²³ Nevertheless, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer do not escape this tradition, since in defining art they use the same age-old criterion of mimesis, even if in a more advanced, Aristotelian version of it. To this they also add the theory of the subject, whose real name when applied to art is Genius and, in general, Will. Music is pure Will, because in the case of music the creator has no model to be imitated before his eyes. Therefore, it is supposed that in composing music, the artist has to rely only on the pure resources of his own subjectivity or Will, which—and this is the Kantian-Aristotelian lesson read through Schopenhauer—is the complement of the world, insofar as it

is implied as the condition of possibility and the eternal “parallax error” of any kind of knowledge. Perhaps there is no further need to stress here how this theory resonates with the Aristotelian conception of mimesis. This shows quite clearly that the Dionysian Nietzsche is much more indebted to the “theoretical man” he tries to discredit than he would ever be willing to accept. And this is not an insignificant detail.

Is only this more complicated mimetic nature of music that makes it the perfect vehicle of an onto-political restoration of the tragic myth? According to the passage from Schopenhauer quoted by Nietzsche, there is an analogy between music and nature (the phenomenal world), the two being “different expressions of the same thing.”²⁴ Music is an “expression of the world,” a concrete “universal language” capable of representing “all possible efforts, excitements, and manifestations” of the will, “but always in the universal, in the mere form, without the material, always according to the thing-in-itself, not the phenomenon, the inmost soul, as it were, of the phenomenon without the body.”²⁵ Thus, for Schopenhauer music is nothing but spirit, with the rejection of the inferior materiality of plastic arts, which represent the various materializations of the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, music is also the site of something ungraspable. “. . . whoever gives himself up entirely to the impression of a symphony, seems to see all the possible events of life and the world take place in himself; yet if he reflects, he can find no likeness between the music and the things passed before his mind.”²⁶

At this point in the text, Nietzsche reiterates the above definition of music, in accordance with which music provides the “mere form of things,” only to say two lines later that “music . . . gives the inmost kernel which precedes all forms, or the heart of the things.”²⁷ And then another contradiction: “But that in general a relation is possible between a composition and a visible representation rests, as we have said, upon the fact that both are simply different expressions of the same inner being of the world.”²⁸

As if the “phenomenological” superiority that has been granted to music would be withdrawn, while at the same time all mixtures of imitation and music are condemned. This question could be solved without a contradiction only if the “visible representation” mentioned in the fragment just quoted is actually not an “artistic” visual representation, but the direct perception of the visible in the real world, the phenomenon itself. Yet, Schopenhauer says that music is beyond phenomenon and materiality, but at the same time is analogous to nature. What should nature be to match this equation? Is it not necessary to agree with understanding nature as a spiritual principle in order to maintain, in a discourse that wants to be at all rigorous, its analogy with music, the analogy of the *universalia ante rem* and the *universalia in re*? Is it possible that we find here

the key to the secret of Nietzsche's conception of the Apollinian and the Dionysian as "art-states of nature"?²⁹

After this long quotation from Schopenhauer, Nietzsche says:

*According to the doctrine of Schopenhauer, therefore, we understand music as the immediate language of the will, and we feel our fancy stimulated to give form to this invisible and yet so actively stirred spirit-world which speaks to us, and we feel prompted to embody it in an analogous example. On the other hand, image and concept, under the influence of a truly corresponding music, acquire a higher significance. Dionysian art therefore is wont to exercise two kinds of influences on the Apollinian art faculty: music incites to the **symbolic intuition** of Dionysian universality, and music allows the symbolic image to emerge in its **highest significance**. From these facts, intelligible in themselves and not inaccessible to a more penetrating examination, I infer the capacity of music to give birth to **myth** (the most significant example), and particularly the **tragic myth**: the myth which expresses Dionysian knowledge in symbols.³⁰*

Nietzsche retranslates in his own conceptual framework Schopenhauer's insight on music. He re-asserts the complementary relationship that exists between the Apollinian and the Dionysian, and then from this capacity of music to "polish" the symbolic images he deduces the myth-creating potential of music. But what is myth for Nietzsche? Is the parenthesis "(the most significant example)" a definition of myth? What is this example, then, and what is to be done with it? We at least know that the tragic myth is an expression of the Dionysian universality in symbols. But why would one need the expression in symbols of what can already be accessed through music? Why this secondary presentation or, rather, re-presentation? What kind of question presents itself here? In order to progress with this matter we now need to examine the question of myth in the *BT*.

THE IMPORTANCE of myth develops as an answer—the only one,³¹ says Nietzsche—to the question of the tragic. As we have just seen, Nietzsche challenges here the classical definition of art ("art conceived according to the single category of appearance and beauty"³²), explaining that it cannot constitute the basis for an understanding of the tragic. It is only music, the non-mimetic or, at least, the non-imitational art par excellence that provides us with the key to the "joy involved in the annihilation of the individual."³³ At this point, the text establishes a chain of phenomenizations or "translations": what appears in the "particular examples of the . . . annihilation [of the individual]" is "the eternal phenomenon of the Dionysian art," which is an expression of the "will in its omnipotence," "the eternal life beyond all phenomena, and despite all annihilation."

The role of the Apollinian in this picture is to serve as some kind of a screen, a veil or a lie that tames the suffering inherent in life. The Dionysian is a step beyond this lie, an affirmation of the joy of life existing behind the phenomena,³⁴ in the fusion of “the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are united.”³⁵

Here we need to jump over some chapters of the *BT* in order to get directly to the moment when Nietzsche eventually clarifies the importance of myth. Yet, it is not indifferent that in this whole discussion about myth (chapters 17–25) Nietzsche inserted a cultural criticism of modernity and of the theoretical man, deducing them from or relating them to a musical form, the opera. But whatever the philosophical virtuosity of such an insight would be, for the time being it is more important to see the result of this quite complicated genesis of the question of myth.

In chapter 22 we find out that “myth leads the world of phenomena to its limits where it denies itself and seeks to flee back again into the womb of the true and only reality, where it then seems to commence its metaphysical swansong . . .”³⁶ Myth is, then, some sort of “vehicle” (*techne*, indeed) that brings us back to the vicinity of the origin or to the “mother of beings” (onto-politics), as Nietzsche puts it. Yet, it is in chapter 23 that the significance of myth for Nietzsche fully reveals itself to the reader:

But without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement. Myth alone saves all the powers of the imagination and of the Apollinian dream from their aimless wanderings. The images of the myth have to be the unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care the young soul grows to maturity and whose signs help the man to interpret his life and struggles. Even the state knows no more powerful unwritten laws than the mythical foundation that guarantees its connection with religion and its growth from mythical notions.

This fragment is basically the place where the driving force behind the *BT* is expressed with the greatest clarity. Here all the wandering motifs of the book are linked together in a crescendo that reminds us of the rules of symphonic composition. Finally, the whole architecture of motifs developed by the *BT* finds its chief aim: Nietzsche is in search of the fundamental mechanism or rule that allowed to the Greeks to invent themselves as the people of the creative power as such. As we saw, the essence of this creative power is the Will that expresses itself in an exemplary fashion in music, bringing us back to the thing-in-itself, according to the Schopenhauerian interpretation of Kant. It is at least surprising that someone can simultaneously denounce the optimism regarding knowl-

edge exhibited by *theoria* and accept, against this agnostic skepticism, that some kind of final truth (“the thing-in-itself”) could be revealed by another *techne*, namely by the non-imitative art par excellence: music. The conclusion that imposes itself at this point is that, beyond the reciprocal veiling and unveiling of the Dionysian and the Apollinian, and the crisis or complication of the classic notion of truth resulted from them, Nietzsche still believed, at least in the *BT*, that the truth of existence, which is finitude, can be dealt with in a quite classical manner, namely by setting in motion a *techne* that would not only reveal this truth, but would also transform it in the foundation of existence. In other words, the Nietzschean answer to the wound of existence he nevertheless “discovered” is the quite classical gesture of filling up the emptiness with the gods displayed by myths. The myth, for Nietzsche, has a power of unification that is pre-political, pre-religious and pre-social, being the condition of possibility that holds together all these aspects of the being-together of a people/culture. At the same time, we know that myth is rooted in the “healthy natural power of creativity” of a people and this allows us to deduce that the pre-political, pre-religious and pre-social Dionysian connection is basically a natural connection: not merely an organic one, but also a fusion with nature and in nature, if one may say so. Nevertheless, no vulgar Rousseauism can be found in Nietzsche’s Dionysian “naturalism.” Without being able to analyze here in detail his notion of “nature,” we should be content with pointing out that, as we concluded in the analysis of Nietzsche’s understanding of music, nature is rather a spiritual principle, insofar as it is the expression of the eternal creation and destruction involved by “life” itself. Myth is the most eloquent expression of this truth of life. And it is an expression of this truth not because the *content* of the myth would be some sort of concentrated (Dionysian) wisdom providing us with moral stories, but precisely because, in its very shape, myth is no more than a *fabula*, a fiction, but a fiction that is believed and worshipped as truth while one is fully aware of its fictional character: this is why Nietzsche says that in enjoying the tragic musical drama one needs to be able to believe in the miracles happening on stage. It is not hard at all to perceive the “reversed Platonism” practiced by Nietzsche here. Instead of rejecting the mythopoesis, as Plato did in his *Republic*, Nietzsche makes the “story-making” involved by myth the foundation of his “Dionysian socialism” (Sloterdijk).

IT WOULD be nevertheless erroneous to equate Nietzsche’s “myth” with a simple fiction. The basic feature of mythical fiction is that it is able to constitute “the most illustrative example” for a people. As such, myth is at the same time a constitutive fiction; it shapes the people who believe in it as some sort of onto-political mould. It is this moulding power that confers to myths their

singularity as *techne* of the Dionysian fusion. These aspects of Nietzsche's treatment of myths are precisely what could be described as "onto-typography" (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe). Nevertheless, there is another crucial feature of the importance Nietzsche conferred to myths. As I have suggested at the beginning of this paper, Nietzsche is in search of an extra-philosophical realm that would allow him to acquire a completely different system of coordinates for a delimitation of the philosophical in general. The mythical—as the age-old enemy of the philosophical (which nevertheless uses it as *techne* of its self-presentation)³⁷—is, in its fictional character so severely criticised by philosophy, an "alter ego" of the latter that allows for deciphering the ambitions of *theoria*. The mythical is the site of a discourse that overcomes philosophy's and, in general, theory's impotency in moulding a culture. In other words, myth is the site of the Nietzschean version of "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it." In this respect, Nietzsche is not only a true Romantic, but also a genuine modernist, who dreams about an artistic-philosophical intervention into the real. But this is still a philosophical dream through and through. It is the dream of the *Republic*, as well as of the *Communist Manifesto* or of the *Rektoratsrede*. It is the dream that fulfills itself in Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, demonstrating that, in spite of all self-criticism, the *Birth of Tragedy* works in his entire oeuvre.



Notes

1. The only commentator who exhibited a great awareness of this fact is Peter Sloterdijk in his *Thinker On Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
2. The mentioned Peter Sloterdijk would be one of them.
3. See, for instance, M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on the Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Paul Gordon, *Tragedy after Nietzsche: Rapturous Superabundance* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
4. Sloterdijk, 3–4.
5. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Arts and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) and *The Subject of Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 122.

7. Ibid., 17.
8. Ibid. 18.
9. Ibid., 24.
10. Ibid., 13.
11. Ibid., 98 n. 11.
12. Ibid., 18–19.
13. This is Roderick Stackeberg’s position in his “Critique as Apologetics: Nolte’s Interpretation of Nietzsche,” in *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy*, eds. Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 310.
14. The strange correspondence or equivalence between the two is another enigma of Nietzsche’s text.
15. *BT*, 18.
16. Ibid., 25.
17. Ibid., 37.
18. Ibid., 135.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. In this respect, Sloterdijk is perfectly right to observe that the first chapters of the *Birth of Tragedy* are a genuine “Socialist Manifesto.” See Sloterdijk, 28.
21. *BT*, 100.
22. I owe this interpretation of mimesis to Lacoue-Labarthe’s already quoted work.
23. *BT*, 100.
24. Ibid., 101.
25. Ibid., 101–102.
26. Ibid., 102.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 103.
29. Ibid., 38.
30. Ibid., 103.
31. Ibid., 104.
32. Ibid., 103–104.
33. Ibid., 104.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 105.
36. Ibid., 131.
37. The most eloquent example of this metaphysical position of myths remains Plato’s *Republic*.

AbstractReading the *Birth of Tragedy*

Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* is most often discussed only as a source of his conceptions about the Apollinic and the Dionysian. Through an analysis of the questions of science, music and myth in this piece of writing, this paper demonstrates that, in spite of what Nietzsche says in his "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," he belongs to an age-old chain of Western political thinking that includes Plato, Marx and Heidegger. Moreover, it will also come to light that Nietzsche will never give up the ambitions stated in this work. *The Birth of Tragedy* announces a post-philosophical programme that will be accomplished in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. At a more general level, this discussion brings into question the relationship between theory and politics or, rather, the attempt at creating a philosophical model for political existence as such.

Keywords

myth, science, knowledge, Apollinian, Dionysian, *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche