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## Unstable Foundations: The Role of the Dionysian in Nietzsche's Construction of Belief

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Unstable Foundations:  
The Role of the Dionysian in Nietzsche's Construction of Belief

Senior Project submitted to  
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and  
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of Bard College  
by Leah Faye Norris

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## Preface:

Whatever I may think of the observations, interpretations and arguments contained within this project, I have one firm belief threaded into the much-belabored analysis that here stretches its newly born arms. That point of certainty is this: there is an inherent, vital intimacy that pumps blood into academia and provides it with a driving purpose. The structural components of inquiry that clothe our thoughts exist for the sake of communication, but cannot be mistaken as an endpoint. Propelled by a spirit of dearly-held immediacy, be it the spirit of curiosity, the holy spirit or the Dionysian spirit, questions creep, not toward answers, but toward significance. As this yet youthful project matures and its eyes grow accustomed to the brilliance that surrounds it, I hope to develop my stake in education and integrate its beating heart such that the body of my work may tremble with the vitality of my relationship with Nietzsche and Euripides, my relationship with Bard, and my relationship with the expansive universe of inquiry I anticipate greeting with warmth.

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## **Introduction: The Still Unknown God**

Nietzsche's philosophy begins in response to a crisis. As Nietzsche sees it, the culturally adopted attitude of logical optimism, which claims to be capable of explaining the world through rationality, has taken hold of modernity and alienated us from truth. Nietzsche calls this truth the Dionysian; the contradictory, fluid energy behind all phenomena hidden beneath an artificially concrete surface of historical events and images. In opposition to the surface, at a deeper layer, there is chaos. An individual who glimpses the chaos at the heart of existence is plunged into a state of horror; a dread that episodes of suffering are unintelligible and that humanity is left flailing amidst general meaninglessness. Humankind feels an acute demand to manufacture coping mechanisms that legitimate endurance of pain lest we be tempted to give up on life altogether. In answer to this demand, according to Nietzsche, the regime of rationality originally sprang up. He conceives of this regime as a “profound *illusion* that first saw the light of the world” in Ancient Greece, propelled by the “unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it” (96 *Birth of Tragedy*). This particular coping mechanism has led to gradual decay, being in denial of its failure to describe reality. Logic cannot comprehend or incorporate the absurdity of life, thus it disregards the truth and counterproductively obscures it. Nietzsche claims that the Dionysian truth brought forth a sense of nihilism in the Greeks and has been buried but not resolved in modernity. He tasks himself with overcoming the rationalistic tradition, rediscovering the underlying dilemma, and constructing a superior method of grappling with it.

Belief in a transcendent being has the potential to justify existence, but Nietzsche asserts that the current deities (particularly the Christian God) do not successfully fulfill this role. They fall prey to

some of the same errors as logical optimism in providing an explanation for the absurdity of life by promoting an illusion of other-worldly rewards and worshipping individuated, concrete figures and images (such as Jesus). Nietzsche claims that these are evasive methods, not constructive ones, because of their extreme disassociation with the Dionysian truth. Man plants himself safely on the surface with this kind of belief, protecting him from the depths, but he does not realize that such worship is always a falsification of the true profundity that lurks beneath. Nietzsche characterizes this blindness as pathological and destructive to his purpose—to stimulate love for this life in this world.

Despite his vehement criticisms of existing religions and metaphysical comforts, the present analysis will argue that Nietzsche puts his faith in a kind of religiosity to engender the will to live. Any unquestioning belief devoted to a concrete individual, or even system of faith, always has the effect of grounding the believer in the surface because it assumes the reliability of the intelligible representation over the universal underbelly. This should not be taken as a criticism, as it is done in the profound spirit of self-preservation, but a warning remains: belief can lead to harmful delusions. Dionysus, however, is the one god believing in whom entails simultaneous disbelief. When this divinity appears as an individual in Nietzsche's writing he is shaped into the same type of idol that humanity finds comfort in bowing before, but the truth that has been falsified in order for the god to appear in an intelligible form is still implicit in his character. The stable mask is not undermined by the fluid face it conceals, but made complete. In questioning the reality of its own solidity it becomes genuine in a way that no other religion can be. In this divine figure the chaotic has been harnessed by the intelligible surface, therefore representing a microcosm of the structure of all existence. The superficiality that is vital to survive chaos is provided, but the underlying contradictions are still present and charge this religion with the strength of truth. Both elements powerfully unite to give man a god to devote himself to, and therefore a reason to live. Dionysus is uniquely descriptive of *this* world and offers the paradoxical benefits of

falsified belief, but in doing so leads his initiates to believe affirmatively in the very chaos that afflicts them.

This project will also claim that Nietzsche's style itself mimics the structure that Dionysus represents as the unifier of the intelligible signifier with the unintelligible signified. His personal experience of his subject matter cannot be fully articulated, and therefore clothes itself in a symbolic form that hopes to evoke a parallel experience from the reader, who must feel resonance with the universal topics under discussion in order to comprehend the philosopher's labyrinthine works. He blends different genres, such as scientific inquiry and hymnal language that is more poetic than analytic, to contain this experiential, expansive message. The form that his work appears in is the result of the structural harnessing of universal motivations which reach out of one soul that has inhabited the depths and inspires others who have felt a similar calling to explore these hidden realms. To allow his god to touch and perhaps even possess his audience, Nietzsche aims to conjure Dionysus into a tangible, literary immanence. Once present, the divinity could be capable of having a transformative effect on these initiated individuals, and perhaps modernity as a whole.

Trapped between utter chaos and uncompromising order, both of which threaten the ability to live, mankind must balance precariously in between these opposite sides of the spectrum. Nietzsche's solution is a form of belief in which he pledges himself to the concrete image of a contradictory god that he reappropriates and fashions himself. The fluid signified and solid signifier are codependent and work together in this unified figure to make tumultuous realities efficacious. Since these two elements have opposing contents, loyalty to the image of the god—his tangible, actively present mask—is in a way self-deceptive, for it must falsify that which it represents. The initiate must deceive herself into accepting the truth of a being she knows quite well is not entirely true. This is not a refutation for Nietzsche, but rather the nature of the only belief that can be fully believed in. A sort of disclaimer is

necessary for the religion to be genuine. This motion of self-deception can be identified not only in Nietzsche's particular form of belief, but also his stylistic methodology, his description of the world as a whole, and his depiction of the figure of Dionysus to whom he devotes himself. Self-deception is inherent in the method that prompts him to arrive at Dionysus as the perfect god, the method he utilizes to worship the god in his work, the context that necessitates these approaches, and the object of his religiosity itself. Thus, the worship of Dionysus can be interpreted as Nietzsche pledging himself to the transformative power of belief and exaltation in this reading of existence.

Late in his life, Nietzsche writes the following letter to Cosima Wagner: “Ariadne, I love you. -Dionysus” (*Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 204<sup>1</sup>). In this single, short quotation Nietzsche implies every theme that I will present in this entire work. By using mythological characters mired in their historical contexts to achieve communication between two real, contemporary (at that time) human beings he realizes the universal themes that transcend particularities. These characters have essences that are uprooted from Ancient Greece and transported to modernity, where they enjoy a parallel relevance. There is an underlying connection between all historical moments, but Nietzsche still uses the Greek names, implying that his understanding of this connection is always informed by its temporally original manifestation. This is the way in which the language he uses is symbolic, for the historically determined names are merely the surfaces for the universal meanings they express, but carry a certain weight of their own. In addition, these are mythological figures turned into representations of real beings, recreating the literary reality that Nietzsche works to forge for Dionysus in his philosophical texts. Myth stands in for the real by virtue of its resonance with the universality that the real also draws upon. Finally, by signing the letter “Dionysus” he implies that the god in a defining part of his own being; he has been possessed by the divinity he worships, and thus enhanced

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1 204 refers to the number assigned to this letter. All in-text citations in the body of the project will refer to page numbers, with the exception of ancient primary sources, which will refer to line numbers.

by his power to take in chaos, embrace it, and laugh.

Just as Nietzsche takes up these names to make his point, he adopts Greek tragedy, or rather his reading of Greek tragedy, as the prototype for his attempt to create a sense of Dionysian religiosity. He believes the dual forces of illusion and reality collided in antiquity and produced a new, beautified version of the real on stage. He brings these two elements together in his own work to create a self-deceptive structure of belief. To construct my interpretation of his project, I combined a grounding in Nietzsche's philosophy and Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*, the central primary source on the Greeks' Dionysus, to recreate Nietzsche's reading of the ancient version of the god. Then I applied this reading to Nietzsche's philosophy in order to determine how much he altered, why he felt justified in making alterations to history, and to arrive at a new comprehension of the offspring of his labors—the living pages of his books. Since that product is a masked version of universality, I concluded, against prominent trends in the scholarship on Nietzsche, that it is both legitimate and necessary to see a profound continuity in Nietzsche's invocations of Dionysus throughout his career. I believe that his incorporation of historically transcendent language and content permits a manipulation of form that does not sacrifice meaning. Though his ideas clearly develop over time, the fact that he regards the true object of his inquiry as timeless means that juxtaposing two statements made at different moments in his career is singularly useful as a tool to access the universal instincts behind his convoluted modes of expression—just as Nietzsche utilizes Greek society, alien in context but not necessarily in content, as an access point to the same instincts he experiences. His authorship is dependent on a relationship between the book and the reader that allows for these leaps, integrates a personal sense of understanding to fill in the gaps, and ushers into metaphorical life a transcendent being who reshapes and revitalizes what is meant by reality.

## Chapter 1: The Re-birth of Tragedy

*“And I looked up through a pain so intense now that the air seemed to roar with the clanging of metal, hearing, HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE FREE OF ILLUSION... And now I answered, 'Painful and empty,' as I saw a glittering butterfly circle three times around my blood-red parts”-Ralph Ellison (The Invisible Man 569).*

The *Birth of Tragedy* is both a description of the process that culminates in the creation of Greek tragedy and the beginning of an attempted recreation of that original moment of genius. Nietzsche believes that he taps into the motivations the Greeks experienced that led to their invention, and believes that these are universal motivations that are as relevant to his work as they were to his predecessors'. His discussion assumes a context-defying continuity between disparate moments in time and types of inquiry; a literary formulation of facts that indicates an aggressive reappropriation of antiquity's evidence. While this in itself does not conflict with his philosophy of acquiring meaning through a process of recreation, such fictions can only be accepted in his conception if they can claim to describe a version of reality. Though Nietzsche's success or failure in this critical matter would seem to hinge on the accuracy of his facts, for him it seems to be more dependent on his perception of a profound communication with these lost spirits via the evidence they have left behind. This does not indicate a disregard for information, but rather a reading-through information that finds more than is immediately apparent. Though these are impossible claims to justify historically, Nietzsche ascribes to a unique, but also thorough, form of justification for his work, based on his views on existence and truth, that is more concerned with understanding than with knowing. To express himself in such a way that accounts for these generalized themes which are found within specifics, he adopts a type of symbolic language that can deal in particulars but simultaneously transcend them.

### 1.a) Original Crisis

The supra-historical elements that Nietzsche has identified are drives that he calls the Apollonian and the Dionysian. That these drives are named after Greek deities does not restrict them to relevance in Ancient Greece, but rather identifies that context as the origin of their emergence into representation. The figures of Apollo and Dionysus embody “claims about the fundamental nature of human beings,” and are Nietzsche's alteration on the Schopenhauerian understanding of the will (28 Burnham). Though his differences with Schopenhauer are profound, the “bare notion” of the will remained an essential aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy throughout his career, and it is this universal force that he assumed behind his descriptions of drives (20 Silk). They are active both within the individual and outside of him, and appear as instinctual motivations guided by particular understandings of reality (34 Burnham). These particular understandings that are realized in Apollo and Dionysus are opposed but codependent, and as they continuously clash together and break apart energy is released in reproductive eruptions.

Along with Schopenhauer's concept of the will, Nietzsche also adopted the presupposition that nature is irrational and that man must find a way to grapple with its often painful turns (20 Silk). The world offers no explanations and humanity is trapped searching for them, plagued by “the meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering itself” (162 *Genealogy of Morals*). This state is not sustainable, because it means that man cannot value his life. Silenus, a companion and tutor to Dionysus, is forced to share a piece of wisdom with King Midas that is informed by the paralyzing state that humanity finds itself in with regard to such rampant absurdity:

“Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond you reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon”

(42 *Birth of Tragedy*).

The utter hopelessness of this situation threatens the destruction of the species—the overwhelming truth leads to a complete abandonment of life, which cannot be endured. That each person has been brought into such a world is in itself a tragedy, and the only educated response to uncontainable wretchedness is to leave it as quickly as possible.

No response is feasible in this state, because knowledge of this truth strips man of the capacity to function. Nietzsche illustrates this paralysis by analyzing a more recent manifestation of tragedy. He sees in Hamlet the same horror at reality that forces Oedipus to blind himself, continuing his argument that individuals throughout history have had parallel experiences that are expressed in their art. He refers to “what is symbolic in Ophelia's fate,” implying that Shakespeare folds his universal provocations into his characters, encrypting his inspiration by the drives into his plays (60 *Birth of Tragedy*). In an incredibly temporally complicated maneuver, Nietzsche writes that the “Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things” (60 *Birth of Tragedy*). Even going so far as to say that Hamlet is able to understand the wisdom of Silenus, Nietzsche brings these two historical instances into immediate conversation and finds a powerful resonance between them. The lesson he learns from these geniuses is that “knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion”(60 *Birth of Tragedy*). Bereft of any love for the depths of existence, man needs to develop the ability to look away.

Man's attempt to justify his terrifying existence and escape the wisdom of Silenus manifests as a refusal to acknowledge it; he pledges himself to the power of illusion, which Nietzsche calls the Apollonian. He writes that the Greek, being part of a culture that was especially attuned to suffering, was compelled to “interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians,” who

acted as a “transfiguring mirror” for him and reflected his own existence back as a beautified image (42, 43 *Birth of Tragedy*). The horror of life was forgotten in this dream and reconfigured into a form where “there is nothing unimportant or superfluous” (34 *Birth of Tragedy*). The gods of Mount Olympus played out man's own experience, but idealized into a state where life was made meaningful. Part of this idealization is the “glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*,” which creates the appearance of orderly, separate beings where in reality there is only chaos. (36 *Birth of Tragedy*). The causal connection between these themes of order and chaos is vital, for the delight of intelligibility only comes out of a reaction against the unintelligible. Throughout the dream, we can never escape the horror buried at its base which is still “glimmering through it, the sensation that it is *mere appearance*,” lest the dream's effects become pathological (34 *Birth of Tragedy*). This requires a constant awareness and “measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder emotions,” which is an important defining aspect of Apollo (35 *Birth of Tragedy*).

The Dionysian finds the cracks in Apollonian restraint and gashes them apart. Apollo's attempt to justify life through illusion “paled before an art that, in its intoxication, spoke the truth” (46 *Birth of Tragedy*). Once the individual is introduced to the “raving chorus of sounds, bodies and appetites” of Dionysus, the Apollonian solution which “appeared previously as a blessed disentanglement is now seen as a horrible dismemberment” and the individual is beset by “images of fatal constriction and death by suffocation” (28 Sloterdijk). The Apollonian alone is just as unsustainable as the world view it set out to conquer. In contrast to the suffocating resort to pure illusion, the Dionysian drive is stimulated by truth instead of undone by it. In fact, the situation that Silenus describes as death is now interpreted as quite the opposite; “it is only in [...] the psychology of the Dionysian condition, that the *fundamental fact* of the Hellenic instinct expresses itself—its 'will to life' [...] *true* life as collective continuation of life through procreation” (120 *Twilight of the Idols*). Whereas Apollo beautifies into

individuation through falsification, Dionysus finds “blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature, at this collapse of the *principium individuationis*,” and thrives in the relief of reunion with the whole of reality (36 *Birth of Tragedy*). Dionysus represents a unity with nature that results in glowing health and the complete recreation of civilization:

“Now the slave is a free man; now all the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or 'impudent convention' have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of *māyā* had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity.” (37 *Birth of Tragedy*)

When possessed by this drive, man forgets himself and his subjectivity and becomes a raving hysteric, channeling and discharging an uncontainable surplus of procreative energy. He is simultaneously overcome by the rapture of oneness and submerged in the agony of reality, which amounts to a sublime and transformative delirium.

The duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian is the source of generativity, “just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes” (33 *Birth of Tragedy*). The product of this turbulent but occasionally communicative relationship is art—all artistic endeavor develops directly from these drives. This implies a recasting of the human artist, who becomes more of an “imitator” than an originator (38 *Birth of Tragedy*). The impulse towards the creation of art “burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*,” who merely appropriates a portion of this force and tries to harness it (38 *Birth of Tragedy*). Nietzsche associates music with Dionysian art, which deals with intoxication, and painting with Apollonian art, which deals with images.

The center of Nietzsche's inquiry is when these two forces merge. After perpetual antagonism and only superficial reconciliations, “eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic 'will,' they

appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollonian form of art—Attic tragedy” (33 *Birth of Tragedy*). In tragedy the reality of the Dionysian is embraced by the illusion of the Apollonian and an idealization is played out, as it was with the Olympians, but this time it is enhanced by the energy of existence's actual chaos. The previous attempt at beautification was weakened by its arbitrary content, and now the illusion is accompanied by the “metaphysical comfort” that “life is at the bottom of things” (59 *Birth of Tragedy*). As tragedy came into its own, a miraculous transformation took place for the audience to this new-born phenomenon:

“*Dionysus*, the real stage hero and center of the vision, was, according both to this insight and to the tradition, not actually present at first, in the very oldest period of tragedy; he was merely imagined as present, which means that originally tragedy was only 'chorus' and not yet 'drama'. Later the attempt was made to show the god as real and to represent the visionary figure together with its transfiguring frame as something visible for every eye—and thus 'drama' in the narrower sense began.” (66 *Birth of Tragedy*)

The fusion of illusion and reality causes an unprecedented psychological state wherein the spectator “is forced to recognize real beings in the figures on the stage” instead of maintaining consciousness of the deception, as in the purely Apollonian dream-world (57 *Birth of Tragedy*). An alter-reality has been created that must be considered actual because of the force of Dionysus' contribution. The Greek audience beheld “a new world, clearer, more understandable, more moving than the everyday world and yet more shadowy, [presenting] itself to our eyes in continual rebirths” (66 *Birth of Tragedy*).

Through tragedy, humanity is rescued after “being in danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art—life” (59 *Birth of Tragedy*). Silenus' devastating wisdom is completely overcome (though not negated) as man recreates his reality on stage. Nietzsche considers this constructed reality to be as valid as the one underlying it: “That the artist places a higher

value on appearance than on reality constitutes no objection to this proposition. For 'appearance' here signifies reality *once more*, only selected, strengthened, corrected” (49 *Twilight of the Idols*). The capacity to channel the Dionysian and therefore grant art the power of truth is the precise element that secures mankind's hold on life, for, “what justifies man is his reality—it will justify him eternally” (96 *Twilight of the Idols*). Without this invention of a new existence, living in the world would not be legitimately meaningful for humanity, but our ability to continually reform our experience affirms the will to live. By beautifying the world, we finally become able to maneuver in it without being overwhelmed to the point of destruction. Painting over the original canvas, humans “bestowed beauty upon the world,” though in modernity he often “*forgets* that it is he who has created it” (89 *Twilight of the Idols*).

### 1.b) This Forgetful World

This is the setting for Nietzsche's writing; the new crisis that necessitates his attempt to usher in a rebirth of the momentous invention of the Greeks. The Greeks were inspired to create tragedy because of a need to escape the wisdom of Silenus and Nietzsche clearly feels a parallel need which inspires him to form his own craft—he is threatened by the failings of modernity guided by Socratism. In the Platonic dialogue the *Apology*, Socrates travels to experts of every type and gradually discovers that he does not consider any of them wise. He went to the poets, bringing them “those poems of theirs which it seemed to me they had worked on the most” and inquired “thoroughly what they meant,” and after speaking to them “soon recognized that they do not make what they make by wisdom, but by some sort of nature [...] they know nothing of what they speak” (22b *Apology*). This process of demoting innate, unquantifiable knowledge to an unfit form of wisdom is what interests Nietzsche. For him, Socratism is a regime of logical optimism based on three basic claims: “Virtue is knowledge; man

sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy.” (91 *Birth of Tragedy*). These principles meant the death of tragedy in ancient Greece and a “turning point and vortex of so-called world history” that still determines humanity's conception of its place in the world (96 *Birth of Tragedy*). Originally, Socrates' perspective was another “human protection mechanism” from the “cruel, inhuman depths” of life, and in this way it has also promoted man's will to live (21 Burnham). This demonstrates the fact that none of these mechanisms actually solve the problem, but are more like ways to struggle with it. Dauntingly, Nietzsche writes that, “If one needs to make a tyrant of *reason*, as Socrates did, then there must exist no little danger of something else playing the tyrant,” which justifies Socrates' intent, if not the content of his reaction (43 *Twilight of the Idols*). Nietzsche ascribes great importance to the ancient philosopher in this respect, and asserts “that without accepting the fictions of logic, without measuring reality against the purely invented world of the unconditional and self-identical, without a constant falsification of the world [...] man could not live” (12 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Just as tragedy repainted the world in a justifiable light, Socrates falsifies his experience into one where logic can actually determine the principles of existence; a “subtle last resort” against truth (18 *Birth of Tragedy*).

However, this doctrine has a “cowardice” that the predecessor it replaces did not have—it distances man from the power of his authentic experience and never incorporates it back into its structure in the way that the Dionysian was incorporated into tragedy (18 *Birth of Tragedy*). There is a crucial disconnect that reason initiates between humans and “the evidence of the senses. In so far as the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie” (46 *Twilight of the Idols*). Instead of coming to terms with reality through an idealization of what is true, Socrates “infers the essential perversity and reprehensibility of what exists” and condemns truth entirely as it seeks to evade it (87 *Birth of Tragedy*). Nietzsche understands this denial as a type of nihilism similar to Silenus'. The historical evidence for this comparison comes from Plato's *Symposium* when Alcibiades, in love with

Socrates but also furious at being romantically scorned by him, exclaims drunkenly, “Look at him! Isn't he just like a statue of Silenus?” (215b *Symposium*) Later he adds to his comparison; “Come to think of it, I should have mentioned this much earlier: even his arguments are just like those hollow statues of Silenus” (221e *Symposium*). In relating Socrates and his philosophy to Silenus, the ultimate symbol of nihilistic abandonment of the will to live, Alcibiades establishes an ancient basis for Nietzsche's claim that Socratic thought is in opposition to life. This is further supported by Socrates' argument that, “those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying” (68a *Phaedo*). Life is merely an obstruction of truth for him, an assumption which Nietzsche believes obscures the truth of this world. Socrates' condemnation, visible in the *Apology*, that people come to their conclusions “only by instinct” is the key to his entire philosophy, and marks the divide between this defense against truth and the earlier Greeks (87 *Birth of Tragedy*). He holds a beautiful poem in his hand in the *Apology*, something he refers to as a “noble” product, but determines that it is worthless because its creator cannot “thoroughly” elucidate the rationale behind it (22c *Apology*). In this “practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*” Nietzsche sees weakness and “physiological weariness” that can never achieve the reality of tragedy, but rather remains a kind of “ruse” (21, 18 *Birth of Tragedy*). This ruse is incredibly destructive through its “audacious reasonableness” that declares, “to be beautiful everything must be intelligible” and therefore negates the source of tragedy's power—its incorporation and beautification of absurdity (84 *Birth of Tragedy*). Indignantly, Nietzsche writes, “What demonic power is this that dares to spill this magic potion into dust?” (88 *Birth of Tragedy*).

Without the propelling energy of instinctual drives, Socratism turns to the “controlling agency of consciousness” (11 Burnham). This consciousness manifests as a kind of self-defeat which represses the instinct and rules over it. Nietzsche illustrates this phenomenon in a description of Socrates' encounter with a foreigner who visited Athens and “knew how to read faces” (40 *Twilight of the Idols*).

This man told Socrates that he “*was a monstrum*” who embodied every “foul vice and lust,” to which Socrates replied, “You know me, sir!—”, “but I have become master of them all.” (40-41, 43 *Twilight of the Idols*). His ability to master himself and his impulses leads to a consciousness-driven existence that is horribly inverted:

“In this utterly abnormal nature, instinctive wisdom appears only in order to *hinder* conscious knowledge occasionally. While in all productive men it is instinct that is the creative-affirmative force, and consciousness acts critically and dissuasively, in Socrates it is instinct that becomes the critic, and consciousness that becomes the creator—truly a monstrosity *per defectum!*” (88 *Birth of Tragedy*)

This drastic reversal implies a new task for the Socratic; to manufacture a “net” that captures within itself all the data that appears in the world through logical explanations and keeps out chaos by weaving itself “impenetrably close” (97 *Birth of Tragedy*). Consciousness sets out to conquer the world of the instincts and its “pathological,” “out-of-control logical drive” forces Apollo, and especially Dionysus, underground (12 Burnham).

Though neither Apollo nor Dionysus can be understood as logical, “the struggle was directed against the Dionysian element in the older tragedy,” making “Socrates the opponent of Dionysus” (86 *Birth of Tragedy*). In order to pursue its rationalization of existence, this new phenomenon “alienated itself as much as possible” from the insight of the “Dionysian abyss,” and strove to replace those intoxicated ecstasies with its own artificial stimulants (83, 89 *Birth of Tragedy*). The Socratic regime strips man of the “capacity to relate to a 'primal artistic phenomenon,'” limiting his modes of comprehension and expression (77 Burnham). His entire processing mechanism is reshaped in such a way that the life force of the Dionysian is drained from his existence. Burnham argues that we are linguistically stunted because of this draining: “In the great rational systems of modern Western

philosophy a hardening of linguistic (and conceptual) expression has occurred, so that ideas and methods have become disconnected from the forces of life” (76 Burnham). Thus, we find ourselves with the opposite problem from the Greeks'. While they were compelled to “tame” the truth in order to make it bearable, we are charged with discovering a way to tear apart the “ever tightening straightjacket of modern culture”(13 Burnham). Not only is this situation strangling, Burnham claims that it is nonfunctional with regard to the original goal; “We have inherited from the Greeks a desire to control nature, but thereby have lost absolutely what we set out to control” (13 Burnham). We have drained our language of significance and made it worthless.

This means the inevitable failure of Socratism, which can never lead to truly satisfying conclusions. It is an “unwitting” art that does not recognize its own foundation, and therefore cannot know its boundaries (104 Burnham). Wrapped in its unacknowledged illusions, it “speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck” (97 *Birth of Tragedy*). The necessity for this wreckage is already contained in its structure, which engages it in a futile search performed in a futile manner and evokes the image of

“men who wanted to dig a hole straight through the earth, assuming that each of them realized that even if he tried his utmost, his whole life long, he would only be able to dig a very small portion of this enormous depth, and even that would be filled in again before his own eyes by the labors of the the next in line, so a third person would seem to do well if he picked a new spot for his drilling efforts. Now suppose someone proved convincingly that the goal of the antipodes cannot be reached in this direct manner: who would still wish to go on working in these old depths, unless he had learned meanwhile to be satisfied with finding precious stones or discovering laws of nature?” (95 *Birth of Tragedy*).

Nietzsche is attempting to be that revolutionary who convinces the drillers to redirect their efforts. To

accomplish this enlightenment, the Dionysian must rush in and violently revitalize the species: “The desire for *destruction*, change, and becoming can be an expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future (my term for this is, as is known, 'Dionysian')” (*Gay Science* 370 (non vidi)<sup>2</sup>). Modernity has fallen into crisis once more, a crisis of uncompromising consciousness and suppression of the instincts, and it aches for a new transformation. As Socratism is led “again and again to its limits,” humanity requires it to become infested and uprooted by the Dionysian so that history can again turn to a self-acknowledged, life-infused art; “it is this hope alone that casts a gleam of joy upon the features of a world torn asunder and shattered into individuals” (95, 74 *Birth of Tragedy*).

### 1.c) Overcoming Decay

The concept of Dionysus as a rebellious figure is founded in the evidence from antiquity, predisposing him to be the perfect renovator of the broken society of modernity. The blending of gender roles, the emphasis on the body, and the wanton violence that can be observed in Euripides' *The Bacchae* are all counter-culture in some way, and in this play Dionysus incontrovertibly intends to shake up civilization. Hera is said to have caused the death of Semele, Dionysus' mother, and considering that Hera is the goddess of marriage and tradition, this portrays the god as the enemy of establishment (9-10 Euripides). When his women rise to dance for him, they are leaving behind their normal roles in the household: “I have left my shuttle at the loom; I raised my sight to higher things—to hunting animals with my bare hands” (1236-1238 Euripides). The chorus of Asian women brazenly defy the Theban structures in place, retorting, “I am no Greek. I hail my god in my own way” (1033-1035 Euripides). Again, they turn insubordinate when they say that “Dionysus, not Thebes, has power over me,” rejecting the notion that such regulations can even effect those with divine concerns (1038-1039 Euripides). They abide by laws that “no quibbling logic can topple,” and their way of life offers

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2 Quotation obtained from *The Affirmation of Life* by Bernard Reginster

joys that those still ruled by the petty law of Thebes cannot imagine (203 Euripides). The prize that is gained is freedom, though the uninitiated refer to it as “unruliness” (248 Euripides). Pentheus threatens to “confine” and Dionysus acts to “free” (496, 498 Euripides). The Bacchae soak up this liberation and it transforms them: “in ecstasy, like a colt by its grazing mother, the Bacchante runs with flying feet, she leaps!” (166-167 Euripides) Unrestricted by societal bounds, the women embody their natural wildness and take off into the air. The impact they make on the world they leave behind is revolutionary, for it renovates the civilians' vision of possibility at the same time as Dionysus physically renovates the structures of their lives by tearing down the palace. He incurs both a literal and a metaphorical metamorphosis when he shouts, “Let the earthquake come! Shatter the floor of the world!” (585 Euripides)

The fact that Pentheus wants to “clap [Dionysus] in chains” feels even more sacrilegious when the god is seen as a power specifically invested in freedom (355 Euripides). The king threatens to send the vibrant, liberated women back to work at the looms or sell them as slaves in order to silence their drum, insulting the dignity of their epiphany. The gravity of this offense leads to the gravity of the god's menacing command to Pentheus' men: “I give you sober warning, fools: put no chains on *me*” (501-502 Euripides). The reference to sobriety, so atypical for this figure, stands out as a weighty anomaly. Though his character is generally being subtly manipulative in some intoxicating way, in this moment he is deadly serious. They do not realize what a crime they are committing—how opposed their actions are to the forces of freedom that are part of their world. In return, Dionysus completely disassembles their society and sends all of the Thebans off in different directions, scattering them and making it impossible for them to impose any more blasphemous, artificial order upon his divine freedom. Dionysus is the ultimate rebellious figure in that he must undo the culture that seeks to imprison him because of the leaping colt inherent in him.

Nietzsche's goal is to shatter the Socratic chains placed on his god and instigate that infestation which must reclaim modernity for Dionysus. *The Bacchae* has already set the god up as exactly the figure that civilization yearns for in order to reconnect it with its basest truths. Tragedy is the “core” of his book, and in pointing this out in his “Attempt at Self Criticism” he urges us to consider why it is so (17 *Birth of Tragedy*). He sees the roots of his own craft in the Greeks' manipulation of reality and takes his cues from these beginnings: “Philosophy is this tyrannical drive itself, the most spiritual will to power, to the 'creation of the world,' to the *causa prima*” (16 *Beyond Good and Evil*). In philosophy, humanity is once again given the ability to renovate its understanding of existence, except the “vehicle to achieve the tragic depth of existence” is this time “born from within consciousness,” on account of the influence of Socratism that cannot be undone (12 Burnham). Though Nietzsche was inspired by the possibility for Wagner's music drama to occupy this role, he ends up disappointed by the evolution of the composer's thought process and imagines himself with the sole responsibility. Tragedy begins again when his own philosophical creation begins to teach the world its doctrine. Thus, the *Birth of Tragedy* contains a transition from antiquity to modernity within its conceptual structure. In discussing the Greeks, Nietzsche discusses the basis for what he himself is doing by addressing the Greeks in a philosophical format. Instead of limiting himself to one temporal realm, he engages in a “verbal passion play based on old and new heroes with neoreligious gestures of ecstasy,” making something new out of analyzing something old (15 Sloterdijk). His appreciation for the ancient creation is profound, but “since the clock of history cannot be turned back” because Socratism has already made an impact, “it has got to be pushed forward,” and he sets out to sculpt the means by which this is possible in a combination of mimicry and innovation (12 Burnham).

In a way that by no means undermines his genuine interest in the original phenomena, Nietzsche utilizes his study of antiquity as a source of “exalted symbolism” through which he can

address universal issues that have manifested in different times (121 *Twilight of the Idols*). In developing this technique he implicitly asks about “whether beauty is perhaps not 'infra-historical' but 'suprahistorical'—not beneath historical change but above and beyond it,” which forces his readers to consider everything he presents in the light of both a particular context (because the subjects are still, for the most part, posited as historical) and the transcendence of that context (148 Kaufmann). Here we glimpse the foundation of his “new language,” which is always representative of worlds beyond itself (11 *Beyond Good and Evil*). The meaningfulness of this language is dependent on the degree to which it manages to “bring out the significance of the *original* mythic structure” by constructing a novel structure that can communicate with the past, the present, and the future that the author envisions (81 Burnham). Even this method has a Greek antecedent, for the magnitude of the tragic hero was that as an “individualized representative” he symbolized the “sufferings of Dionysus,” which stem from the universal (79 Burnham). Nietzsche's project is entirely one of creative reappropriation in which he alters the form of tragedy to incorporate consciousness, but believes that he remains true to the universal content that was originally expressed. The continuity is maintained in spirit but not structure, because structure is bound to accounting for historical fluctuation in a way that spirit is not.

When Nietzsche's readers do not take this idea seriously enough, they are in danger of perceiving breaks in his philosophy that are actually continuations of this recursive methodology. For Kaufmann to claim that Nietzsche “unmistakably abandons his previous preoccupation with art” to focus instead on “Darwinism,” he fails to give sufficient weight to Nietzsche's view on art as a perpetual and evolving refocusing, which necessarily progresses to different subjects as time passes, but must be present in any new world view. Darwinism is a form of art, and the response to Darwinism is another. Nietzsche's later perspectives are dependent on his assertion that existence is justified as an aesthetic phenomenon and they continue to give life to his early philosophy rather than rendering it

“inadequate” (142 Kaufmann).

Nietzsche's perceived insight into the motivations behind the Greeks' creation of tragedy justifies his reappropriation of their art which unhinges it from its specific historical context. He feels that man's constructed civilization is nullified by the power of Dionysian drives in modernity, and “similarly, I believe, the Greek man of culture felt himself nullified” by Dionysian tragedy (59 *Birth of Tragedy*). Since he has personally experienced the universal drives that he believes spurred the Greek theater, he has a link to the creation of tragedy that transcends temporal data. He writes about the Greeks to emphasize this universality; Sloterdijk characterizes this type of writing by claiming that “whenever he does call upon the ancients, it is as a modern mystagogue and leader of orgies who always speaks from a perspective of inner simultaneity with the early Greek mysteries” (18 Sloterdijk). Such data serves as the signifier for the omnipresent truth that is contained behind the particulars. The history must exist for these truths to emerge into appearance, but their power originates at a deeper source.

## Chapter 2: Stylistic Evocation

*“He ate and drank the precious words,  
His spirit grew robust;  
He knew no more that he was poor,  
Or that his frame was dust.*

*He danced along the dingy days,  
And this bequest of wings  
Was but a book. What liberty  
A loosened spirit brings!” -Emily Dickinson (poem # XXI)*

The key to Nietzsche's certainty about the truth of the universal drives lies in his personal exposure to them. He feels his philosophy with a tangible ardor that compels him to forge new channels of communication that can express not only intellectual thoughts, but ideas that are intimate aspects of a whole being. In order to transmit his own experience and evoke a particular experience in his readers, he blends genres of writing and develops a performative model for his work that attempts to enact the changes necessitated by the content he describes. For his idea to be thoroughly efficacious and touch the audience the god he hinges his efforts upon must regain the immanence he achieved in Greek theater. All Nietzsche's efforts culminate in the invocation of the instinctual truth he represents with the figure of Dionysus, who he is working to summon into a vital, though literary reality.

### 2.a) An Indirect Confessional

When Nietzsche revisits the *Birth of Tragedy* fourteen years later and writes an “Attempt at Self Criticism” which describes and critiques his work in light of his later, matured clarity, the sentence he begins with indicates that this book was always based on an ambiguous, evasive principle. He claims not to have a comprehensive hold on this principle himself but rather a feeling for it when he says, “Whatever may be at the bottom of this questionable book, it must have been an exceptionally

significant and fascinating question, and deeply personal at that” (17 *Birth of Tragedy*). This question “at the bottom” of the book is important and personal, perhaps even important because personal, which could provide insight into the work's overall “questionable” nature. Nietzsche's grasp on profound ideas does not come to him in clearly articulated arguments, but rather as internal epiphanies that must work their way out of him through his craft. There is no separation between his inner life and his metaphysical hypotheses, which he demonstrates by advising a friend to cling to philosophy for guidance in the immediate aftermath of the death of the friend's brother:

“You have experienced at first hand . . . why our Schopenhauer exalts suffering and sorrow as a glorious fate, as the deuterios pious [second way] to the negation of the will . . . This is a time for you to test for yourself what truth there is in Schopenhauer's doctrine . . . If [it] . . . does not have the power to raise you up . . . to that mood where one sees the earthly veils pull away from oneself - then I too want to have nothing more to do with this philosophy” (21 Silk).

The point of philosophy for Nietzsche is far from offering academic gratification, which is the implied assumption behind the critiques he received from his contemporary philologist colleagues, “who accused him of going off on unscholarly tangents” (30 Burnham). Instead, its purpose is that it can illuminate aspects of the crises inherent in life and act in a therapeutic manner to allow man to confront suffering productively. The excess of suffering that Nietzsche endured in his own years on account of persistent illness and loneliness crept notably into the emphasis on suffering in his ideas, and his ideas crept back out into his world. He personally related to many of the concepts he developed, such as the importance of the mask. This is a theme that appears in many of his books, and its correlation to his intimate experience of life is corroborated in a letter to Franz Overbeck in which he writes, “all my human relationships have to do with a mask of me” (*Letters* 206f (non vidi)<sup>3</sup>). This means that a philosophy's success could only come in conjunction with the manifestation of its concepts in

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3 Quotation obtained from *A Penchant for Disguise* by Daniel Berthold

existence; if the philosophy is composed of the manifestations of ideas in Nietzsche's reality, the resultant ideas must also be fully applied to that reality to be complete. With the belief that “man must express himself as a whole self” in mind, he had to write in such a way that the affirmation that he envisioned and devoted himself to could come to life (12 Sloterdijk).

The result is a kind of “literary staging process” in which Nietzsche “had to compress the entire spectrum of his impulses into the narrow medium of his writing;” which is but another phrasing of the symbolic structure that permits him to communicate through and above history (7 Sloterdijk). The literary signifiers he uses (such as the name Dionysian) contain a depth of human experience which he perceives as universal but must be represented with structure for the sake of communication. To adapt this medium to his grandiose needs, Nietzsche blends aspects of aesthetics and technical analysis to develop what Sloterdijk calls,

“a new art of indirect confession. For what, if not the manifestation of his own psychodrama, can be at issue when an author extends himself (with a reckless sense of superiority) beyond historical facts in order to outline a new image of Hellenic culture and its tragic psychospiritual foundation.” (15-16 Sloterdijk)

The dubious regard for factual evidence he employs when sculpting his vision of the motivations behind antiquity's rendering of tragedy originates in his own “psychodrama,” which asserts a sense of recognition of this tragic art that takes priority. There are facts from antiquity that Nietzsche stretches, ideas that he could not have known or has clearly taken liberties with, that he still regards as legitimate aspects of his inquiry; for example, he often describes the drives with temporally muddled portrayals that, technically speaking, hardly make sense from a historical perspective: “Transform Beethoven's 'Hymn to Joy' into a painting; let your imagination conceive the multitudes bowing to the dust, awestruck—then you will approach the Dionysian” (37 *Birth of Tragedy*). In this quote Nietzsche asks

us to use a piece of art to elucidate the character of a figure who appeared thousands of years before it did. Clearly the Dionysian was not originally informed by Beethoven in either a musical or a visual format. The multitudes he refers to may be the Greeks who worshiped Dionysus, throwing us back in time again after dragging us forward, or they may be representative of mankind in general, which brings both of these context-dependent phenomena out of their settings altogether. We cannot assume that these confounding complications simply escaped Nietzsche's notice. Instead, we must renounce our desperate clinging to clear factual coherence and accept his data points as artistically evocative of a certain feeling which is itself the object of his study.

Nietzsche's awareness of the "indirect and mixed" aspects of his writing led him to believe that he was in part "a composer who had been mistakenly driven to literature," but during times of greater confidence this same stimulus brought him to the point where Sloterdijk reports that "he experienced himself as an expressive total phenomenon that was being evaluated only by philistines who used the usual literary, philological, and philosophical standards of measurement" (7 Sloterdijk). Such standards cannot interpret the life-force behind Nietzsche's creations, which defy the rigid compartmentalization of methods that they look for. Just as Nietzsche claims that "foreign music we do not hear well" because we "try involuntarily to form the sounds we hear" into patterns that are more "familiar," his contemporary critics, and many even today, try to categorize his unique approach into one of many predetermined options and therefore miss his point entirely (105 *Beyond Good and Evil*). A scientific reading of the *Birth of Tragedy* will only discover imperfect science as opposed to the development of a new, experimental genre. For Nietzsche categories function as limitations to his full, personal expression, and so Sloterdijk reads what he does write as though,

"one talent functioned *through* another, so that he was not, like many artists, simultaneously an artist and a musician, a poet and a philosopher, a producer and a theoretician, and so on, but

rather a musician as writer, a poet as philosopher, and a producer as theoretician” (6 Sloterdijk). A poet-as-philosopher cannot be analyzed with the same terms as a straightforward analytic, but it would be a great mistake to consider this approach a less valid one because it is less 'scientific'. It is actually to the benefit of this type of science that modes of thought such as Nietzsche's exist, though his opponents may consider his work undermining to their endeavors since it considers them incomplete expressions. A way of thinking that has “been existentially blown open in this way intends no affront toward so-called serious research, even if the latter—with its incurable dull-wittedness—understands it as such. Rather, its intention is to replenish the vital essence of this research,” restoring the significance of inquiry that has become directionless (17 Sloterdijk). Nietzsche is getting at the point of research instead of doing it “seriously” himself. He claims outright that his project is in the service of scientific analysis in the first sentence of his first book, which is also itself an example of the genre blending that he uses to save science:

“We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality—just as procreation is dependent on the duality of the sexes.” (33 *Birth of Tragedy*)

This sentence surreptitiously dialogues with many aspects of the scientifically understood philosophical tradition even as it demands that this same tradition must renovate itself to encompass a more personal, more honest form of inquiry. In these few lines Nietzsche addresses the need to redefine the study of aesthetics as a broad, all-encompassing field as opposed to a specialized and limited one, and also brings up a reevaluation of the mind body distinction by contrasting logical inference, a purely mental realm, with vision, a bodily sense that provides a different, more immediate form of certainty. He approaches Hegel in his positing of two opposed 'others' that must interact, and perhaps even Darwin (a

figure who becomes more prominent in his later work) in his reference to “development,” which could also be translated as evolution (29-33 Burnham). All of this 'scientific' work is put to use in a sentence that claims that an immanent understanding takes priority over a scientific one. He refers to the duality of the sexes to provoke his readers to not only follow his train of thought, but comprehend it on a deeper level; everyone has some association with the relation between sexes, and he puts this personal data to work strengthening the meaningfulness of his claim. The genres of science and a type of intimate exposition best compared to poetry are melded into each other and used to support one all-important statement. All philosophy endeavors to acquaint itself with the heartbeat of existence in whatever way possible, and this philosophy's angle finds evidence of that heartbeat within instances of an inner life that must reappropriate the tools available to it.

### 2.b) Reaching into Readers

The purpose of this view on the writing process is to establish a successful mode with which to communicate universal themes. This seems to be the purpose behind his take on history also, for Sloterdijk claims that, “Nietzsche calls upon the spirit of genius in early Greece to answer the question, How does one mind speak to another?” (19 Sloterdijk). The genius referred to is an artistic phenomenon in the sense discussed in the previous chapter; an artist is one who creates a fresh perspective out of one that has become stagnant. There are universal influences that the limiting influences of both history and genre signify, and an artist attempts to express these influences within the framing of his set of tools. Nietzsche considers all artists both compelled to express their work and singularly gifted with the ability to do so: “He communicates it, he *has* to communicate it if he is an artist, a genius of communication” (93 *Twilight of the Idols*). This is a delicate subject, because there is a definite danger in expressing one's personal, artistic creations in words that are always limited.

Nietzsche warns us that, “We no longer have a sufficiently high estimate of ourselves when we communicate. Our true experiences are not garrulous. They could not communicate themselves if they wanted to: they lack words. We have already grown beyond whatever we have words for” (94 *Twilight of the Idols*). The “true experiences” that contain the content of his philosophy are “beyond” traditional articulation, and to speak of them as though structured articulations can fully encompass their meaning is to misunderstand the effusion of universal significance that cannot be contained. As a result, Nietzsche uses his words in a way that assumes that they only hint to their content in order to account for this unspeakable profundity. Since the “overgreen personal experiences” that are at the center of the *Birth of Tragedy* are “close to the limits of communication,” they must be “presented in the context of art” (18 *Birth of Tragedy*). Without regret, he asserts, “(I obviously do everything to be 'hard to understand' myself!)—and one should be cordially grateful for the good will to some subtlety of interpretation,” demanding a careful pen from himself and a careful eye from his readers (39 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Only in this way can the issues he cares about be addressed without losing their dignity. What this means is that the effort Nietzsche puts into crafting his complicated text must be mirrored by the reader in order for the endeavor to be successful and communicate itself. His precise handling of language is an intimate component of his message, and without addressing the language itself, the entire point may be lost: “there is *art* in every good sentence—art that must be figured out if the sentence is to be understood! A misunderstanding about its tempo, for example—and the sentence itself is misunderstood (182 *Beyond Good and Evil*). The reader's active participation, that she is acutely attuned to the way that Nietzsche sets forth his ideas, is a necessary component of the philosophy.

The strength and weakness of this dependence on the reader is that “one does not believe me, unless one already knows it—“ (82 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Nietzsche's words, charged with

experience, reach out to his readers in the hopes of meeting in them some parallel experience. Thus, the *Birth of Tragedy* is a “book for initiates,” which makes it “almost inaccessible” to an unengaged observer, but deeply gratifying to one who finds in him a peer (19, 17 *Birth of Tragedy*). As Burnham argues, he is not attempting to convince one to agree with his arguments, but rather to evoke an already innate understanding: “rather than aiming at clarity and logical development, Nietzsche employs irony and rhetorical tricks, plays with the reader, and approaches and then backs away from key subjects like an accomplished seducer” (10 Burnham). This conceptualization does not limit belief to the provocation of the memory of an epiphany, but rather enacts that epiphany to evoke the realization of an always-present truth of the continuity of human experience. Pulling his readers into the metaphysical realm that lies under all of life requires seduction, not an impenetrable wall of reason, and therefore he says that his writing is “mistrustful even of the *propriety* of proof” (19 *Birth of Tragedy*). Instead, “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,” taking those who feel as he feels and extending them from within, showing them how to develop the glimpses they have seen with his particularly ingenious comprehension of these mysteries (19 *Birth of Tragedy*). He utilizes the influence of resonance between peers, brought out by his reference to his readers as “fellows,” but focuses their energy on his particular insights as the more confident and experienced participant in the relationship.

The seductive method that Nietzsche uses in the hopes of finding in others an experience that resonates with his own raises the question of how those who are not seduced fit into his understanding of the project. Some may read his work and discover they are part of this community, but it is evident that not all people have this response. Does this mean that some people are predisposed to believe in the reality of the drives and some are left out? What does this mean about the drives' supposed

universality? Since it is necessary for his argument that the subjects he describes do indeed have relevance for each and every person it cannot be that only those who read his books the way he wants them to be influenced by the drives. It seems that Nietzsche assumes a hierarchy in which the upper layers are in touch with their foundational instincts but the lower layers cannot access this wisdom. Pentheus, for example, is simply unable to reach outside of his perspective, cemented by an effusive valuation of tradition, and undoes himself with pure stubbornness. Such a hierarchy recalls the levels of initiation in the mystery cults in Ancient Greece; Nietzsche is permitted into the most secret circles and tempts other, lesser initiates with tastes of deep wisdom. Even in his discussion of the Greeks Nietzsche refers to an inner connection to the “profound Hellene,” not the layman (*59 Birth of Tragedy*). Likewise, in his work he reaches out to the profound modern man only. This religion is not for all—so very few are. The outsiders perceive only the surface layer of his symbolic language and are unable to access the underlying truth being signified, therefore are condemned to a superficiality that precludes any possibility of genuine comprehension. Nietzsche does not occupy himself by arguing with these surface readers, but rather focuses only on the true initiates that he imagines might exist at some point. If one is unable to receive inspiration from his message it could be that he has not constructed it perfectly, but it could also be that the particular reader is too blinded by the influence of a tradition that is disconnected from nature to reconnect with his primordial base.

### 2.c) A Stage for the Strange Voice

Even Nietzsche does not seem to have a solid grasp on this elusive force that he brings into the open, describing it as a voice, not his own, that spoke through the *Birth of Tragedy*:

“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! What I had to say then—too bad that I did not dare say it as a poet: perhaps I had the ability” (20 *Birth of Tragedy*).

In this commentary on the compression of all of his motivation into his book's literary medium, Nietzsche acknowledges that, as far as he went along the road of revolutionizing philosophical expression, he did not go far enough (if such a thing is even possible). The soul that he channeled through his work sang in spirit, but was forced to speak in form. Looking back, he regrets that he “still lacked the courage (or immodesty?) to permit myself in every way an individual language of my own for such individual views and hazards,” implying that his language was indeed individual, but not quite in “every way” (24 *Birth of Tragedy*). His youth prevented him from following his premises through to their complete conclusions, but the premises are still active in the product we received, and though the earlier product did not yet have the utterly unapologetic poetic style of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the seeds of this birth were sewn in its foundation. The voice that spoke in the *Birth of Tragedy* was experimental and fresh; “a *strange* voice, the disciple of a still 'unknown God” (19-20 *Birth of Tragedy*).

The content of the experience that Nietzsche is trying to evoke from his readers is the instinctual truth that he perceives in both himself and the ancient Greeks. There is a “vast universality and absoluteness” in existence that compels one who wishes to describe the world to use “figurative speech” because “language can never adequately render” this kind of “primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of all primal unity” fully, and therefore must be made to stand in for and imply metaphysical elements that it cannot in itself contain (55 *Birth of Tragedy*). He calls language the “organ and symbol of phenomena,” the mechanism that promotes phenomenal functionality, and what he wants to access is truth that is “beyond and prior to all phenomena” (55 *Birth of Tragedy*). There is

an indication that in its attempt to poetically evoke such an inaccessible realm literature is the “*lingua franca* for free spirits, for those who cross the borders between spheres that shift away from each other, and for defenders of coherence” (13 Sloterdijk). Nietzsche is a defender of coherence only as an interpreter who ushers into a visible sphere the “eternally changing, eternally new vision of the most deeply afflicted, discordant, and contradictory being who can find salvation only in *appearance*” (22 *Birth of Tragedy*). He brings this contradictory being into his writing from behind phenomena so that, in appearing, it can be grappled with tangibly. Dialogue is only possible between separate, defined entities, and only as individuated symbols can universal forces become separate and defined enough to dialogue productively. As the architect of his readers' experience, Nietzsche has to give these vague ideas literary bodies so that they can educate: “The more abstract the truth is that you would teach, the more you have to seduce the senses to it” (87 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Abstraction cannot be taught in its pure form, but must be seduced into a bodily existence that can be contained, comprehended and communicated. Sloterdijk puts this in the terms of the theatrical reality that inspired the approach, arguing that embodied literary writing acts as

“a stage upon which modern individuals act out a drama that [...] could be characterized as their search for self. Elevated to such a stage, theory becomes dramaturgically porous, and is permeated with the most powerfully instinctual existential tensions of those who do their thinking upon it” (17 Sloterdijk).

Upon this literary stage Nietzsche and his readers call into presence the “instinctual existential tensions” that compose them. “What we find so fascinating in this today is not the audacity of this solution but rather its obviousness,” not the revolutionary bravery that could redefine philosophy in such a way, but the resonance we feel with the existential angst in the drama that is played out (12 Sloterdijk). Nietzsche allows us to recognize in ourselves the primordial power that moves mountains

in the linguistic or symbolic sense of renaming and reimagining. To complete the process of dramatizing his insight, he gives this power a name: “As a philologist and a 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” (24 *Birth of Tragedy*). The reference to the *Antichrist* indicates the anti-Christian (and therefore opposed to the modernity which has been largely understood through Christian means) essence of this god who must save us from our current crisis, and the decision to give the god a Greek name is a nod to the vital part that the Greeks played in the creation of the tragedy which has evolved into Nietzsche's own work. This revelation of the nature of Nietzsche's literary stage should entirely recast the way that his work is viewed. Burnham claims, “*The Birth of Tragedy*, so Nietzsche wants us to believe, is a covert hymn devoted to Dionysus; there is a wild, disembodied, dithyrambic voice audible in the background singing the god's praise” (18 Burnham). He ends this book by speaking to the audience in the voice of an “old Athenian, looking up at him with the sublime eyes of Aeschylus,” who invites the reader to actively participate in the profoundly inspirational Greek customs that began Nietzsche's process: “now follow me to witness a tragedy, and sacrifice with me in the temple of both deities!” (144 *Birth of Tragedy*). The reader is forced to see herself as a participant in the titanic events described, and thus sees these events as real and directly before her. Nietzsche's evocative use of language is not only seductive, but hymnal—it is meant to elevate the god to the position of savior and the state of presence.

#### 2.d) “The Word Became Flesh”

This presence should be compared to the presence evoked by the Greeks' creation of tragedy, which meant that “when the tragic hero appeared on the stage, they did not see the awkwardly masked human being but rather a visionary figure, born as it were from their own rapture” (66 *Birth of*

*Tragedy*). Nietzsche conjures up Hellenism with the tangible significance that the Hellenes conjured their Dionysian heroes. Within his drama, Nietzsche and his audience enter “right inside the world of the imagery he presents, 'as if one had really entered another body,'” inciting an intoxicating impact that pulls people outside of their previously all-encompassing understandings of their identities (78 Burnham). The figure of Dionysus is essentially best understood as a metaphor for underlying, inexpressible truths, and,

“Metaphor, which we will take here as a species of symbolization, raises the act of language to the level of a symbol which 'makes present' ('he can really see before him'). [...] Poetry overcomes, at least to this extent and in this way, the limits of language, which is merely to represent, and perhaps only represent, something that is already abstract—that is, already *dead*.” (75 Burnham)

In the section of the *Birth of Tragedy* that Burnham is analyzing in this quote, the word “alive” or “living” appears three times in the space of ten lines in reference to metaphor (63 *Birth of Tragedy*). It seems that this is the one manipulation of language which maintains the life of the subject instead of suffocating it with detailed and always insufficient technical descriptions. This symbolic, literary stage is the “medium through which the one truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance,” and then revitalizes those he encounters (52 *Birth of Tragedy*). The Dionysian man, who would be the hypothetical recipient of Nietzsche's efforts, is said to enjoy “to the highest degree the instinct for understanding and divining, just as he possesses the art of communication to the highest degree” (84 *Twilight of the Idols*). To be revitalized by metaphorical realities would be to speak in solid formulations that contained such life that an audience would themselves experience the primordial truths that were being signified: “In poetry the metaphor or symbol reconnects with sensations, with the basic physiological stirrings of the sensitive body, reactivating the original metaphor that led away

from them” (76 Burnham). Modernity's logical train of thought is cold and empty of significance and must be reactivated by a metaphor that can evoke the sensations of active, vibrant life.

The necessity of immediacy is a central aspect of the Greek Dionysus as well as the Nietzschean reappropriation of this figure. Though Dionysus tells Pentheus that he is from Lydia, he is also referred to as a “god of our own blood” (1250 Euripides). He is closely related to the Thebans, they are his mother's family, which makes his immanence as informative as his foreign qualities in the quest after understanding his character. In fact, the entire plot is a play on his unacknowledged nearness since he enters the city in the disguise of a mortal man, familiar and comprehensible, and slowly unveils himself as the god Dionysus as events progress. This disguise, or even alter ego, produces a peculiar double persona in the twice-born god<sup>4</sup>. He refers to himself in the third person multiple times to draw out this oddity, even introducing a separation between his divine and human selves: “The choice was his, not mine” (478-479 Euripides). In one instance he tells Pentheus that, “I have conspired—with god,” making his mortal and immortal selves accomplices for the sake of his goals for mankind (810 Euripides). Dionysus says near the end that “Bromius and I” are the ones who were victorious over Pentheus, and this is in a private address to the audience, when there was no need for secrecy about his true identity (976 Euripides). In a similar moment Dionysus says, with only the audience overhearing, “O Dionysus, now action rests with you. And you are near,” pointing to his twofold identity at the same time as he indicates the closeness of both aspects of himself (848-849 Euripides). The reason that he arrived in Thebes as a “god incognito” at all is entirely ambiguous (4 Euripides). His mission is to prove his deity, and conversely, his method is to “have laid my deity aside and go disguised as a man” (53-54 Euripides). Like his barefoot women, he arrives in Thebes bare, and relies on a human body, a vessel that is physically related to the people he encounters, to take him through the process of redeeming his divine honor.

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4 See section 3.b for an explanation of why Dionysus is called the twice-born god

The body is a large theme in the discussion of Dionysus. The Bacchae do not simply follow him, they are “those who belong to the holy body of god,” and they rapturously celebrate that, “my body is bound to god” (75, 546 Euripides). In addition to speaking to the closeness shared between the god and his women, these quotes add a physicality in the description of the god that is far from the detached stance of the ethereal. When Pentheus asks about Dionysus' meetings with mortals, he questions whether a meeting occurs in a dream or face to face, and Dionysus indicates the latter (468 Euripides). Again, he has a physical face, a mortal body, for the duration of this play, and it seems to suit him. It makes it feasible for him to be a participating character in his own drama in an upfront, entirely present way. This presence turns violent at times, since along with reveling in the immanence of embodiment, he also “delights in raw flesh” (138 Euripides). The possessed revel in the carnality of the bodies they destroy, and Euripides spares us no gory detail: “One tore off an arm, another a foot still warm in its shoe. His ribs were clawed clean of flesh and every hand was smeared with blood as they played ball with scraps of Pentheus' body” (1133-1137 Euripides).

The bodily immanence of Dionysus in Greek antiquity is translated into a second immanence in Nietzsche's philosophy, which describes the importance of Dionysus' coming into presence just as it performatively makes that presence real through metaphor. In this way, “the distinction between what his writing contains and what it produces can be at best provisional,” and we are forced to analyze Nietzsche's philosophy as one that hinges on the parallel nature of its content and form (1 Nehamas). Both describe the harnessing of universal, personal instincts by symbolic structures that must be crafted into adequate vessels for fluidity. He communicates to his readers with his customarily recursive methodology; “The form of the book is intended to be symbolic of what Nietzsche wants to say: it is a theory of symbolic forms in—symbolic form” (11 Burnham). Once his living metaphor is constructed, it is capable of touching an audience directly, and perhaps transforming them.

### **Chapter 3: Socrates Who Practices Music**

*“all deep, earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore” -Herman Melville (Moby-Dick 97).*

The “new world of symbols” that Nietzsche utilizes to maintain the life inherent in Dionysus throughout his attempt to communicate is the mask of the universal, elusive experience that he is trying to evoke (*40 Birth of Tragedy*). This mask is the Apollonian structure of the Dionysian content that is supposed to jolt modernity out of its rigid, Socratic detachment from the ardor of reality. The energy of chaos is channeled into a form which cannot be completely genuine to that unbounded energy, but in its illusory construction of order, it makes the chaos efficacious. The Apollonian makes the Dionysian significant and complete and these two opposed forces are irrevocably bound together. Structure and fluidity are revealed as codependent entities that interact within individual and shared cultural identities. Whenever Dionysus appears, either on stage or in Nietzsche's writing, he is wearing an Apollonian mask that enables him to enter appearance as an individuated figure. Nietzsche felt that his project was likewise a Dionysian hymn in Apollonian form; an unutterable truth clasped in the restrictive chains of language. As an artist who was able to reach down into the depths of the Dionysian abysses and draw inspiration up into an intelligible sphere, Nietzsche felt that his creations, while still reflective of his individuated perspective, contained truths that extended far beyond himself. He thought of himself as a revolutionary figure who could finally merge the separate art drives in his teaching; a Socrates who practices music, a forger of the future rooted in the past. Thus, Nietzsche becomes a priest for the Dionysian religion that he births with the power of his living metaphors.

### 3.a) The Mask and the Hidden Face

Dionysus, “the genuine mask god,” was thought to be tangibly present on his temple days in Ancient Greece (88 Otto). Other Gods are invisible on these days, but Dionysus is referred to as appearing “in the flesh” (83 Otto). This is sometimes manifested in “physical immediacy,” as in when he sexually claims the queen of Athens (85 Otto). The mask exhibits his presence with the same vigor; it is the incarnation of the God (89 Otto). This reveals that Dionysus is also the “God of confrontation,” staring out at the observer directly in depictions such as the Francois vase where all the other Gods are shown in profile (90 Otto). The face of the mask is fixed on the revelers, asserting the immanence of their interaction, but at the same time its intimidating gaze is “nothing but surface” (91 Otto). The mask allows the god to be both present and absent; there and not there. It is an incontrovertibly *real* manifestation of a being that has a place in that reality but “no complete existence” (91 Otto). In the mask's unavoidable gaze “the final secrets of existence and non-existence transfix mankind with monstrous eyes,” forcing us to reconcile two seeming opposites to begin to comprehend this sublime figure (91 Otto). Powerful poetry is never arbitrary, and the existence of Dionysus, though man has taken poetic liberties with it, is a true existence.

The juxtaposition of closeness and distance is continued through the institution of theater, which grew out of Dionysian practices. It was Aristotle who originally connected tragedy and comedy as being opposite transgressive aspects of Dionysian ritual (Henrichs). He identified tragedy as having developed out of the Dithyramb and comedy as having developed out of the Phallic song (Henrichs). The choral dance is perhaps the most palpable link between Dionysian ritual and Attic drama, as it is a reinterpretation of the unified dancing practiced in his cult (Henrichs). In Ancient Greece all actors wore masks for the duration of each performance, and in donning the God's mysterious symbol, “the wearer of the mask is seized by the sublimity and dignity of those who are no more. He is himself and

yet someone else” (210 Otto). In this one image, hidden and intangible truths reveal themselves and confront the onlookers in a solid form.

### 3.b) Destabilized Identity

The impact that interactions of solidity and fluidity have upon the identity is a central theme throughout *The Bacchae*. In order for belief in Dionysus to be capable of the revitalization of humanity that Nietzsche requires of him, he must have a transformative effect on people's understandings of themselves, a quality which is strongly supported by Euripides. To the confident, stable Pentheus, Dionysus says, “You do not know what you do. You do not know who you are,” uprooting the assumptions in place regarding Pentheus' self-knowledge (505-507 Euripides). Dionysus himself exhibits an extremely complicated identity, which may extend to or be dependent on his followers, but wears an unmoving, smiling mask for the duration of the production (scene directions, Euripides). The tumult of an undefined self may be the origin of Dionysus' emphasis on his name, as it is a tool that works to cobble together his identity. It is a gift to him from the king of the gods; at his birth Zeus says, “I name you Bacchus and to Thebes proclaim you by that name” (528-529 Euripides). This statement solidly confirms who Dionysus is, he is a god and the son of Zeus, and the people are exposed to this knowledge because they are supposed to accept it and complete his divinity by worshiping him. The authorities and the subjugated have to acknowledge his status for it to be consummate. So when Pentheus “forgets [Dionysus'] name in his prayers,” the insult is not only blasphemous but also debilitating (46-47 Euripides). For Dionysus to be a god he has to be respected as a god, which is not to say that his power depreciates as much as that his self-knowledge falters when its signifier is destabilized. The unbridled outrage he exhibits in the fight to retain his name demonstrates this vulnerability. Also, the threat that he throws at Pentheus, that he will repent his own name, carries extra

weight when conceived of as a warning that Pentheus will soon wish to shake off his complacent identity which has led him astray through arrogance and a lack of fluidity that could allow him to accept new, surprising alternatives (507 Euripides).

In addition to a name, another route to understanding one's identity is the family. The entire play could be reducible to a tragic family crisis with different members warring amongst themselves for recognition and loyalty. Though they are mired in conflict, their lives are also importantly interlocked by their closely related blood. Cadmus acknowledges the significance of this relation as he mourns for his grandson: "I have lived only to see this boy, this branch of your own body" (1306-1307 Euripides). He implies to Agave that her son is not only warmly linked to her, but actually a part of her. He is an aspect of her identity, which is perhaps disturbingly alluded to when she desperately attempts to piece the boy's ravaged body back together (1326 Euripides). She needs to repair the "flesh I brought to birth" to make him whole and make herself whole by association (1327 Euripides). Cadmus laments his own incompleteness as he mourns for his only male heir, who could have propelled his family on into the future (1305 Euripides). This phenomenon of dependent identities is also the force behind the punishment inflicted on Agave when she is banished from her father, who can no longer help her (1363 Euripides). Fragmented and miserable, the characters drag themselves into the world alone after Dionysus has undone them. He utilizes the vulnerability of the connection they share to sharpen his jabs and give them a deep-seated potency. His appearance alone begins to have this effect on Pentheus, who is suddenly confronted with a mother and grandfather who side with his enemies (229 Euripides). Dionysus' possession of Agave leads her to say of her son that he was born of no woman, isolating and weakening him further (989 Euripides). Dionysus' entire operation is focused on reversing the strength of established connections, which is indicated when the Bacchae shout, "Glorious is the game! To fold your child in your arms, streaming with his blood!" (1163-1164 Euripides). The power associated with

closeness is turned into a sinister inversion of itself and the characters are forced to destroy each other from within.

This motion of inversion is a central part of Dionysus' interactions with humanity. He embodies and instigates role reversals in many realms of human experience, one of the most primary examples being that of gender relations, to emphasize the concealed but inherent fluidity in human identity. He is portrayed as soft and beardless and is referred to as the “effeminate stranger” (353 Euripides). As a child, he was born of a woman first but was then required to “enter” the “male womb” of Zeus, from whence he was reborn (527 Euripides). His followers rebel against traditional gender roles also; in their wake “men ran, routed by women” (763-764 Euripides). The followers then gloat at the uselessness of the men's armor and the militant successes of their own bare hands (1205 Euripides). Pentheus is forced to don women's clothing once possessed, weakly protesting from the standpoint of tradition by saying, “*What?* You want *me*, a man, to wear a woman's dress. But why?” (821-822 Euripides). Then he is told that he looks just like his mother in his abnormal garb, and she later says that she hopes that her son takes after her (1253 Euripides). Both of these characters are under Dionysus' control when they deliver these lines—he seems to be playing with them, toying with the inversion of their identities as a cat toys with a fated mouse.

The power that Dionysus utilizes to transform people's minds seems to be a single force with a dual significance. The mysterious reality that Dionysus knows so well is both savage and joyous. Here too pleasure and pain are closely intermingled. The Bacchae proudly proclaim that their lord is “most terrible, and yet most gentle, to mankind” (862 Euripides). It is said that, “he loves the goddess Peace” and is a merciful “preserver of the young,” even persuading Pentheus to avoid unnecessary bloodshed (418, 420, 803 Euripides). On the other hand, he is a “hunter” who can “usurp” Ares' function (1193, 301 Euripides). The Bacchae are gifted with unnatural ferocity in addition to their unnatural strength:

“you could have seen a single woman with bare hands tear a fat calf, still bellowing with fright, in two, while others clawed the heifers to pieces. There were ribs and cloven hooves scattered everywhere, and scraps smeared with blood hung from the fir trees” (737-741 Euripides). These two sides of Dionysus, the harmonious and the vicious, coexist without conflict because “the gods have many shapes. The gods bring many things to their accomplishment” (1388-1389 Euripides). He can assume “whatever form he wished” and, though the different forms have little in common, they are still just varied reflections of the same essence (478 Euripides). The thrysus, which is an instrument of celebration, can also be used as a “violent wand,” and though the women are happily dancing at the time, Dionysus threatens that he can “marshal” the maenads (113, 53 Euripides). The thrysus and the maenads are single, unified phenomena with two sides. The power of this god is overwhelming to the point that it evokes both the greatest and most terrible aspects of human experience. Dionysus' punishments and his rewards are both the result of being consumed by his uncontainable power. The women are “compelled to wear my orgies' livery,” rebuking them for blasphemy and simultaneously embracing and initiating them (34 Euripides). Pentheus is killed as a part of the maenads' rejoicing, and is himself dancing for joy only moments before his death. The maenads acknowledge that the power they pray to is violently tumultuous and pray emphatically regardless because they understand that true power must contain this split persona: “Hard are the labors of god; hard, but his service is sweet. Sweet to serve, sweet to cry: Bacchus!” (68-71 Euripides). Encompassing the extremes of beauty and terror, Dionysus embodies the full spectrum of possible manifestations of power. The unified compound of opposites that characterizes the power of his truth and invades the intimacy of human minds prompts a metamorphosis of both individuals and society as a whole—they are possessed.

Though the loosening and reassignment of aspects of identity is used as a punishment in the above example, it can also be used as a reward. Teiresias and Cadmus, dressed for Dionysus' revelries,

celebrate, “how sweet it is to forget my old age,” and say that they could dance untiringly despite their many years (188-189 Euripides). That they are elderly is a crucial aspect of who they are, but to be freed from this aspect of themselves is blissful. Teiresias, possibly the most infallibly wise character in the play, educates the foolhardy Pentheus on the two greatest blessings gifted to mankind. The first is Demeter or the earth, names that he refers to interchangeably, and this is the gift of the nourishment of grain. The second, which is valued equally, is the gift of the oblivion of wine (278 Euripides). To wipe out part or all of one's conscious self is put on the same level with the ability of man to feed himself, implying that both are necessary and healthy for people. Thus, man finds that he must reorganize his identity in the way Nietzsche calls for in his critique of modernity, and also finds that the Dionysian is the influence that is necessary for this recreation to take place.

### 3.c) Codependent Opposites

The concept that an ordering, naming impulse of restriction and a disordering impulse of freedom are not only able to coexist but are actually dependent on each other is hard for scientific minds to integrate into their world-view. This leads to many misunderstandings of Nietzsche's descriptions of free, chaotic Dionysus and his tumultuous but surpassingly intimate relationship with Apollo, who needs life to be comprehensible to be worth living. Kaufmann claims that the *Birth of Tragedy* is the narrative of a desperate battle between the two gods, and that Nietzsche “favors” Apollo (128 Kaufmann). He argues that in order for nature and man to be artistically transformed, creating beauty, “Apollo must triumph over Dionysus” (156 Kaufmann). Since he views Apollo as the enabling element in the book Kaufmann ascribes all generative power to him, disregarding the union of the two and the indispensable Dionysian content that Apollonian structure must contain to be profoundly efficacious. He understands Dionysus as “a most destructive fever” that must be conquered before it

causes too much harm (129 Kaufmann). All that he can see by the end is the Apollonian mask that the *Birth of Tragedy* painstakingly affixes to Dionysus, and so he forgets the unseen monsters behind the surface, considering them defeated via veiling.

Kaufmann reckons with the fact that mention of Apollo fades from Nietzsche's work as he ages by assuming that a drastic change in Dionysus takes place after the *Birth of Tragedy*. He confidently undermines Nietzsche's more youthful inspirations by claiming, "It has been overlooked that the Dionysus whom Nietzsche celebrated as his own god in his later writings is no longer the deity of formless frenzy whom we meet in Nietzsche's first book. Only the name remains" (129 Kaufmann). He finds his proof in the idea that the later Dionysus "represents passion *controlled*" and the *Birth of Tragedy's* Dionysian is described as the wild release of passion (129 Kaufmann). The chaotic characterization of the Dionysian drives looks nothing like the "power of integration and self-discipline," and from this Kaufmann is led to believe that "nothing could show more clearly how the connotation of the Dionysian is changed in his later works" (153 Kaufmann).

Other attempts at analysis have looked at the same data and come up with opposite (but also misleading) interpretations. Burnham reverses Kaufmann's commentary and claims that in the *Birth of Tragedy* "the Apolline is sacrificed on the altar of Dionysus [...] the role is reduced in that its full status as a 'brother' to the Dionysiac is taken away" (22 Burnham). In this conception Dionysus overpowers Apollo, who is demoted to an inferior position. In Reginster's depiction, "tragic wisdom ceases to be (partly) Apollonian and becomes a fully Dionysian wisdom" in later books, and the illusion that makes viewing the Dionysian abysses possible becomes obsolete (249 Reginster). Granier claims that Nietzsche abandons the Apollo-Dionysus duality in order to signal his break with Schopenhauer, and Pautrat turns to a Derridean deconstruction of dichotomies to make the same basic argument (299 Reginster). In all of these examples Nietzsche's early emphasis on the inescapable codependency of

Apollo and Dionysus is devalued and the nature of the god he invokes is grossly misunderstood.

The power of Dionysus' truth is necessary for humanity, but dangerous—"when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you" (88 *Beyond Good and Evil*). To turn this from a soul-wrenching torment into "something visible for every eye" the visionary figure requires a "transfiguring frame," and thus drama begins (66 *Birth of Tragedy*). The attachment of the Apolline mask is the completion of the Dionysian, which no longer speaks as "an eternal sea," but with "clarity and firmness" (66, 67 *Birth of Tragedy*). The two are made one as the Dionysian content is given an Apollonian form and, as Sloterdijk describes it, a single, newly whole figure emerges:

"The music of the singing he-goats is a Dionysian paroxysm set apart in Apollonian quotation marks. And only because the quotation marks are summoned in order to make the sounds of Dionysian savagery palatable for the stage are the great dark driving forces able, their impersonal casualness notwithstanding, to bring forth their contribution to a higher culture. Within this arrangement, the impossible can also be raised to the surface—provided it acquiesces to the Apollonian quotation marks, that is, to the compulsion to articulate, symbolize, disembody, represent" (24 Sloterdijk).

When the abyss is held within limitations, "the enraptured servant of Dionysus senses the nearness of the god" who would have consumed her instead of communing with her previous to the taming process (66-67 *Birth of Tragedy*). The impossible and unspeakable can be seen and spoken as a product of this union. The closeness of these two gods is just as integral to their identities as their separateness, for "behind the Apolline necessarily stands the Dionysiac" (163 Silk). Apollo without Dionysus "may easily amount to no more than the Philistine's complacency," and Dionysus without Apollo "may run amuck and bathe the world in blood" (168 Kaufmann). Kaufmann acknowledges that they are codependent, but in claiming that one vanquishes the other he demotes this dependence to a superficial

level. The two cannot be understood apart from each other, for when Dionysus appears on the Greek stage or as a character in Nietzsche's writing, it is as an individualized, and therefore Apollonian figure. Though the descriptions of Dionysian drives in the *Birth of Tragedy* are not yet applied to the Apollonian, whenever Dionysus the god is referred to, and particularly when his depiction in early tragedy is discussed, we are being introduced to the same Dionysus that appears in Nietzsche's later work. Kaufmann's characterization of early Dionysus as unrestrained and later Dionysus as restrained is merely an analysis of the two aspects of this single, unified figure. Dionysus must be restricted, "to those who follow him one *more* constraint to press ever closer to him in order to follow him ever more inwardly and thoroughly," for only in the terms of restriction can he be cohesively named and understood (233 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Kaufmann accounts for the connection between the gods, but when he says that the deity of the early and late works "do not mean the same thing," he overlooks the entire point of joining them, which is to enable the manifestation of the Dionysian truths (129 Kaufmann). If his meaning were to be lost, the Apollonian symbolism would have failed in preserving Dionysus' life. Nietzsche advises his readers that his later work is "plain enough, assuming—as I do assume—that one has first read my earlier writings and not spared some trouble in doing this" (V, 8 *Genealogy of Morals* (non vidi)<sup>5</sup>). The books that he produces as he ages represent natural conceptual developments from the earliest one; changes are more the result of refined articulations and varied focal points than revolutionized, unlike ideas.

Thus, the mask is the ultimate tool of the symbolism which maintains the life of the signified even as it captures and restrains it. The Dionysian attains freedom of expression through limitation, expressing Nietzsche's view on "the need for limited horizons and the nearest tasks—teaching the *narrowing of our perspective*, and thus in a certain sense stupidity, as a condition of life and growth" (102 *Beyond Good and Evil*). When one is barraged by the entirety of existence the abyss enters the

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5 Quotation obtained from *Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* by Walter Kaufmann.

self and renders it non-functional, therefore the freedom of motion that could easily be associated with limitlessness is actually dependent on structure. For Nietzsche this is a fundamental principle of art and inspiration in general: “Every artist knows how far from any feeling of letting himself go his 'most natural' state is—the free ordering, placing, disposing, giving form in the moment of 'inspiration'—and how strictly and subtly he obeys thousandfold laws precisely then” (100 *Beyond Good and Evil*). This is the underlying formulation of all liberty, for any alternative results in paralysis. In order to communicate any idea, especially one of such dire importance, “one should recall the compulsion under which every language so far has achieved strength and freedom—the metrical compulsion of rhyme and rhythm” (100 *Beyond Good and Evil*). With these structuring elements Dionysus can come into direct contact with modernity. In Sloterdijk's (reappropriated) words, “the word became flesh and dwelt among us;” “long live the signifier!” (68, 41 Sloterdijk). In order to give birth to this flesh, an idea must be presented with a body, reversing the assumption that it is bodies that produce ideas. The importance of this backwards enabling device means that “around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually” (51 *Beyond Good and Evil*).

The idea of the masked and restrained Dionysus complicates the rebellious vision of the god, but *The Bacchae* does include an emphasis on the theme of compulsion which is also inherent in this character. The Theban women are possessed, and even Teiresias, Cadmus and the Asian women say they “must” worship and dance if they can (181, 323-324 Euripides). The *Bacchae* may be counterculture, but this is on account of the errors of the culture. The wild revelers are the “heirs of customs and traditions hallowed by age,” and they act against Theban law only to be in line with these more ancient laws (201-202 Euripides). Quite to the contrary of the immediate implications of Dionysus' shattering of the floor of the world, he is said to value the purity of an “unrebellious soul” (1008 Euripides). The reason Pentheus is so insulting is that he refers to the god as the “latest divinity,”

“whoever he may be,” and defies Dionysus' claim to these sacred customs (219, 220 Euripides).

Pentheus places himself “outside, alone” by reacting against the older ways, making him the rebel more than Dionysus (332 Euripides). Dionysus berates him by emerging as the champion of the disregarded ancients, declaring that “beyond the old beliefs no thought, no act shall go” (891-892 Euripides).

Viewed in this light, the play is more of a return to tradition than a revolution. The point seems to be that the god's laws are infinitely superior to Pentheus' upstart laws, especially since the former ones are equated with necessity (795 Euripides). They are inevitable aspects of the world, whereas Theban regulations are artificial. This is because one set of laws has arisen from divinity and nature whereas Thebes' society is the product of man. The kind of tradition that Dionysus honors originates from the foundational essence of the world: “Whatever is god is strong; whatever long time has sanctioned, that is law forever; the law tradition makes is the law of nature” (893-897 Euripides). The phrasing of this quote complicates the idea slightly in that tradition appears to be determining the qualities of nature, which can possibly be equated with the aforementioned necessity, as opposed to nature determining the qualities of tradition. The latter option would be more straightforward, but here the chorus is saying that nature depends on the rulings of time and strength. Being a god, Dionysus is the master of both of those elements to a large degree in that his power and lifespan are basically unlimited, which means that he is a determining factor for the laws of nature that he and his women adhere to. Whether he actually established these laws himself is unclear, but he is certainly a participant in their establishment and the enforcer of their importance. Thus, Dionysus is not rebellious *per se*; rather, he is the original force present in the world and causes the upheaval of new, man-made forces. Looking at him as a renegade is a mistake in chronology and perspective, though perhaps it is not a mistake in terms of understanding his character. He is still engaged in shattering the comfortable assumptions of Thebes and making the people he encounters recreate their lives in a new and freeing manner, but this act of

shattering and recreation are long standing, necessary parts of the world. Dionysus fights to remind mankind that freedom is inherent in the structure of nature, being representative of the foundation upon which civilization builds poorly.

### 3.d) Face of the God, Mask of the Priest

Rebellion and tradition are thus shown to be compatible aspects of the god, and are both present in Nietzsche's depiction of him. The sublime artist who has followed the process of holding chaos and order together, who “embodies primordial contradiction and primordial pain” but transfers them into appearance, has enacted his art in a transgressive, and perhaps even transcendent manner (49 *Birth of Tragedy*). Having identified with the “heart of the world” and emerged with an individual voice, his “I” is not a shallow illusion; it “sounds from the depth of his being: its 'subjectivity', in the sense of the modern aestheticians is a fiction” (49 *Birth of Tragedy*). He can see himself as “only the antagonist, not as the origin of art” since he has experienced the Dionysian origin—the “true author,” and is therefore “released from his individual will” and feels himself a “medium through which the one truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance” (52 *Birth of Tragedy*). An individual can only know anything about the “eternal essence of art” “insofar as the genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with this primordial artist of the world” (52 *Birth of Tragedy*). When Nietzsche refers to his personal experience of his philosophy, he is explaining the moments of submersion in Dionysian chaos that have legitimated his claim to being an artist who speaks with the force of the world behind him; his “program for the stage” was “intended to lend him credibility as the new Dionysian hero” (18 Sloterdijk). At the beginning of the *Birth of Tragedy* he asks his readers if they understand what the Dionysian means, and claims that “one 'who knows' is talking” (20 *Birth of Tragedy*). This inspiration leads to his writing style, for he is “conscious of a world of images and symbols—growing out of his

state of mystical self-abnegation and oneness” (50 *Birth of Tragedy*). Admittedly, he is not directly referring to himself in this quote, nor does he ever imply that he believes himself to be such an artist. However, his definition of an individual who gathers insight into the Dionysian and then represents it in appearance clearly aligns with his assertion that he knows the Dionysian and has represented it in his writing. Once one has felt the chaotic unity at the base of existence, it is necessary to forge this mystical revelation into symbols that make sense of it, and therefore he recreates the world in his art as an image of the truth he glimpsed: “To the sound of the chisel strokes of the Dionysian world-artist rings out the cry of the Eleusinian mysteries: 'Do you prostrate yourselves, millions? Do you sense your Maker, world?’” (38 *Birth of Tragedy*).

As this deeply developed, grounded artist, Nietzsche feels able to push modernity to the next step in which its Socratic delusions can be revitalized with the power of Dionysian art. He finds evidence that hints to the necessity of this transition in antiquity; specifically, Plato's description of Socrates' last moments. In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue in which Socrates succumbs to his hemlock, he confides in his disciple Cebes a description of a recurring dream he had: “The dreams were something like this: the same dream often came to me in the past, now in one shape nor in another, but saying the same thing: 'Socrates,' it said, 'practice and cultivate the arts’” (60e *Phaedo*). Socrates responds to this message, which he says that he believes was sent to him by a god, by writing poetry in prison, but this is after assuming for years before “that it was instructing and advising me to do what I was doing” (60e *Phaedo*). He develops his philosophy throughout his life by considering this dream to be an affirmation of his thought process as opposed to the observation of a critical failing in it. By the end he does take it slightly more seriously, but this could not nullify years of neglect. For Nietzsche, this represents both the presence of a confounding limitation on Socrates and the possibility of a Socrates who actually did understand and integrate the god's command. In his version of the dream-god's message to the ancient

thinker, “Socrates, practice music,” either divinity or Socrates' own uneasy conscience tries to save a brilliant man from blasphemy (*93 Birth of Tragedy*). Nietzsche identifies this as Socrates' only moment of uncertainty about instigating the phenomenon that would eventually drain civilization of life:

“It was something akin to the demonic warning voice that urged him to these practices; it was his Apollonian insight that, like a barbaric king, he did not understand the noble image of a god and was in danger of sinning against a deity—through his lack of understanding. The voice of the Socratic dream vision is the only sign of any misgivings about the limits of logic: Perhaps—thus he must have asked himself—what is not intelligible to me is not necessarily unintelligent? Perhaps there is a realm of wisdom from which the logician is exiled? Perhaps art is even a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science?” (*93 Birth of Tragedy*).

In the instant in which Socrates considers this apparition, he beholds his only opportunity to be a truly transformative and whole genius. He overindulges his inclination towards illusion, but does not regard his logic as an illusory description of an illogical world—only through music, the type of expression that Nietzsche identifies early on as the Dionysian art, could he have been saved from disregarding and appallingly insulting the god. Since Socrates failed himself and his successors by turning away from this deity, the movement he spawned must be reappropriated by one who can take hold of the consciousness that rules modernity but turn it aside to more productive paths. This is where Nietzsche comes in:

“Here we knock, deeply moved, at the gates of present and future: will this 'turning' lead to ever-new configurations of genius and especially of the *Socrates who practices music* ? [...] Concerned but not disconsolate, we stand aside a little while, contemplative men to whom it has been granted to be witnesses of these tremendous struggles and transitions. Alas, it is the magic of these struggles that those who behold them must also take part and fight.” (*98 Birth of*

*Tragedy)*

Observing the titanic battles waged in the backdrop of the universe between logic, chaos and illusion, Nietzsche feels himself absorbed by the conflict and must take a stand for the sake of life. He is a recipient and product of the historically instituted reign of logic, but is also “the initiate and disciple” of Dionysus (20 *Birth of Tragedy*). A Socrates who practices music is born and visualizes his project of reawakening Dionysus as the beginning of the next stage of the world's development.

Nietzsche indicates his vision of his own place in world history in momentary slips into directly self-referential language throughout his works. He writes that his goal is to “create things upon which time tries its teeth in vain; in form and in *substance* to strive after a little immortality,” proving that he intends to inundate, or at least inspire, the generations that follow him and transcend his isolated historical position (115 *Twilight of the Idols*). He calls *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the “profoundest book” mankind possesses, and refers to this work as a gift (115 *Twilight of the Idols*). “I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysos—I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence...” aim to harness the pervasive influence of Socratism and recreate it as a Dionysian art (121 *Twilight of the Idols*). Certainly, Nietzsche considers this role to be a duty that has pulled him in rather than one that he initially sought out, but there is no denying that he is entranced by his perceived position; “*it must seem bliss to you to press your hand upon millennia as upon wax*” (214 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

Though his perceived influence is dramatic, Nietzsche's part in this performance is to usher in a Dionysian era, not to live in this era himself. He sees the new philosophers “coming up” on the horizon and hopes to set in place the circumstances that would enable them to reign in the future, but he will never bridge the distance between himself and that paradigm shift (11 *Beyond Good and Evil*). He preaches for Dionysus, delivering his wisdom to the crowd, nowhere near the god's position. This is extremely important for him since he claims, “I want no ‘believers’” (326 *Ecce Homo*). The difference

between creating an object of belief that could inspire future generations and being that object himself is vast and crucial for his readers to understand. He sees himself as a mediator between mortals and universal forces; a necessary but a merely introductory element in the equation: “Certainly the god in question went further, very much further, in dialogues of this sort and was always many steps ahead of me” (235 *Beyond Good and Evil*). He confesses to having “a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced holy,” demonstrating the serious danger of considering prophets of gods to be themselves divine (326 *Ecce Homo*). The implication is that the road of thus elevating particular people leads to religious practice that is as rigidly dogmatic as Christianity became after disregarding Jesus' parallel plea to not be worshipped, whereas religion based directly on an intangible, fluid god could potentially be more fruitful. This fluidity is of the utmost importance to Nietzsche, who even critiques his own work as he finishes it for fear that it is losing some of this grace of motion:

“Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not so long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices—you made me sneeze and laugh—and now? You have already taken off your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull!  
(236-237 *Beyond Good and Evil*)

As his words settle into place, he finds that they solidify with frightening rapidity. Thus, he could never accept himself as a figure for the future generation to pray to. This does not alter the fact that the response that Nietzsche anticipates is an experiential one and the symbol of his message is a divine one, making his project as religious as it is philosophical. He understands himself as the spiritual leader of an unseen force that exists outside of him but needs him to spread the word through observation and prophecy. Nietzsche has witnessed Dionysus' epiphany and, in ecstasy and inspiration, has become the god's priest.

## Chapter 4: The Laugh of Pessimism

*“There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night”  
-Albert Camus (The Myth of Sisyphus 3).*

Nietzsche's perception of himself as a revolutionary whose role it is to initiate a new era of human development through conjuring an ancient god leaves a crucial question uncertain: why Dionysus? The importance of Nietzsche's emphasis on the Greeks has been established, but Dionysus in particular is the figurehead of the reawakening of the modern world and was chosen for his specific, bizarre attributes. He embodies Nietzsche's understanding of life itself, not in the sense of biological functionality but rather the swelling, vibrant, often savage force that is Nietzsche's highest philosophical priority. Though the Dionysian abysses are the primary threat to man's will to live, to truly delve into and accept them constitutes life's most profound affirmation. Man's salvation is the potential for transformation out of a doomed state that is at odds with nature via a strengthened will that can learn to love the suffering it experiences. The Greeks' Dionysus epitomizes this transition by compressing abundant contradictions, symbolic of the unintelligible truth of existence, into a single, joyful frame. The deep, unspoken wisdom of the god is that suffering engenders creation; the two apparent opposites are actually merged in the most vigorously affirmative unity. The force of the unity that Dionysus comprises is the cause of his madness, his form of power, which extends to his initiates when he possesses them. Possession by this divine insanity transforms one into a being who can do what no mere mortal could—look upon chaos and laugh—demonstrating for Nietzsche's readers the crucial benefits of belief in Dionysus.

#### 4.a) Contradiction of Dionysus

The instigator for the varied Greek responses to their suffering at the meaninglessness of existence is the instinctual determination to overcome such trials and survive. This instinct is active in Apollonian illusion and even Socratism, but originates in the thriving life of the Dionysian:

“*What* did the Hellene guarantee to himself with these mysteries? *Eternal* life, the eternal recurrence of life; the future promised and consecrated in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change; *true* life as collective continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.” (120 *Twilight of the Idols*)

Life as it is understood here dismisses concern with boundaries, even death, through existing as a constantly becoming, historically transcendent affirmation of what exists. The dynamic and sexually charged impulse that encompasses all of reality breathes out an eternal birth and rebirth. Human psychology is always informed by this universal element, but only in the Dionysian condition can it be fully expressed. Its revelation, and his reverence for it, is what Nietzsche regards as his “defining philosophical achievement” (228 Reginster). The distinctive attributes of the myths surrounding Dionysus resonate with Nietzsche's characterization of the “*creative life*” that embraces this all-important phenomenon (242 Reginster).

To support this value everything has to change about the way that Socratism deals with the truth of Dionysian insight; namely, its false optimism must be shattered. The Apollonian and the Socratic are each variations on optimism because they idealize away from reality, and both are weak in comparison to “the good, severe will of older Greeks to pessimism, to the tragic myth, to the image of everything underlying existence that is frightful, evil, a riddle, destructive, fatal” (21 *Birth of Tragedy*). This severity endangers life, but forsaking it altogether is ultimately a much greater threat. Nietzsche posits an “intellectual predilection for the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence, prompted by

well-being, by overflowing health, by the *fullness* of existence” which, instead of hiding in cowardly evasions of truth, “*craves* the frightful as enemy” (17, 18 *Birth of Tragedy*). This is the “pessimism of *strength*,” which must prove itself by encountering and withstanding the fathomless abyss (17 *Birth of Tragedy*).

Both the object and method of the strengthened capacity for acceptance are contradictory; the attempt is to refine the self to feel joy at pain caused by a contradictory existence. For Nietzsche, contradiction is itself a kind of liberation from the regimented logic of Socratic optimism. It is a preeminently intrinsic element of the world; “Contradiction, the bliss born of pain, spoke out from the very heart of nature” (46-47 *Birth of Tragedy*). Though it constitutes the torture of the human condition, it is also the fuel that leads us to construct justifications for life ourselves: “One is *fruitful* only at the cost of being rich in contradictions; one remains *young* only on condition the soul does not relax, does not long for peace” (54 *Twilight of the Idols*). Peace is stagnant and no longer creates, while conflict is generative.

Nietzsche finds evidence and inspiration for all of this in the Greeks' Dionysus. As in life generally, the most important flaw in critiques of divinity is that they strive for understanding in a realm where complete understanding is inherently impossible. “A god who is understood is no god,” especially one like Dionysus, who is defined by a mess of paradoxes and is always beyond us (xix Otto). The sense of contradiction inherent in his character is his single point of consistency: “If [Dionysus' provinces] share anything in common that illustrates the nature of this god, it is his capacity to transcend existential boundaries” (Henrichs). At his epiphany he appears as either a baby or a bull; his cult celebrates days of exuberant joy and devastating suffering; he is “the loud shouter” with bronze symbols on his ship to maintain the fray and he is frozen in a speechless trance, “as if turned to stone” (104, 94 Otto). Even his depiction in ancient art, in which no other god appears more, displays a jarring

disconnect within his character (Henrichs). Until 430 BCE he is shown as a mature, bearded man wreathed in ivy and wearing the skin of either a feline or a fawn (Henrichs). The earliest example of this image is in the Attic vases by Sophilos and Clitias c. 580-570 BCE (Henrichs). Later, he is painted as young, beardless, nude and effeminate (Henrichs). This hint of complication in his gender was played out in many of his festivals, in which social roles were reversed and boys and men cross-dressed and ran boisterously through the streets (Henrichs). These divergent qualities demonstrate what Otto calls Dionysus' "tragic contrast," or "dual reality," which has an enormous impact on those who encounter him (78 Otto).

The God's loyal women exemplify one of his most beautiful and gruesome contradictions. Dionysus is well known for both creative power and destruction. The animals whose forms he adopts are all either symbolic of fertility or bloodthirstiness, with his favorites, such as the bull, embodying both (111 Otto). His maenads are the women who invoke his coming, raise him from childhood, then revel with him, struck by the "maddening desire to dance," and finally die with him (81 Otto). He takes modest wives from their "bonds" into the "chaos of the night," winning their frenzied, liberated love (74 Otto). They become enraptured at his presence and blessed with miraculous attributes; iron weapons do not hurt them, and fire does not burn them (96 Otto). They are the perfect embodiment of the meeting of creation and destruction, for "they are so bewitched that their maternal instinct knows no limits anymore" and they suckle beasts in the forest, but then rend the same creatures limb from limb (101 Otto). There is also a theme of the women murdering their own children, as in the story of Ino, Semele's sister, who walks off of a cliff with her baby in her arms (73 Otto). This motif is repeated in multiple forms; for example, in the story of the three women who resisted dancing with Dionysus and remained in their regulated societies until the god's spirit compelled them to cast lots to determine whose son to eat. Upon choosing one little boy, they ripped him to pieces and devoured him lustfully

(105 Otto). In these tales, “the god punishes by revealing the absolute terror of his reality”; the women are exposed to the horrifying aspect of his duality (106 Otto). The same truth that maenads receive with wild ecstasy can be experienced as painful. Procreation and violence are intermingled in his essence, which is why his women exhibit such contradictory behavior. In Dionysus' festivals phalli would be put on display and marched around in elaborate processions, demonstrating the importance he placed on creation (Henrichs). However, the festivals also often included sacrifice, or even disturbing instances of gender violence, as in the Agrionia (Henrichs).

On account of Dionysus' paradoxical, confrontational nature he encounters “immediate opposition from gods and men” and, just as his rituals contain cyclical celebrations of his rebirth, they also mourn his death (74 Otto). There is a myth in which Perseus vanquishes the god and his followers. Also, at the behest of Hera, the Titans are said to have torn Dionysus apart (*Orphica Fragmenta* 35 O. Kern). Callimachus reports that he appeared in the form of Zagreus, the hunter, who was then himself hunted and collapsed as a bull (191 Otto). The hunter being hunted is another example of the reflexive state of Dionysus' violence, for he is forced to endure having his living flesh torn apart, which he often causes elsewhere. The fact that he is a god who dies and has days of the dead such as the Agrionia and Anthestria festivals is notable, especially since he is also a fertility god (117 Otto). There are claims that he lives in the underworld during his absences, and Heraclitus even says that, “Hades and Dionysus for whom they go mad and rage, are one and the same” (116 Otto). On an Apulian funerary crater by the Darius painter Dionysus and Hades are shown holding hands in the underworld surrounded by characters from Dionysian myth (Henrichs). Greeks and Romans decorated tombs with Dionysus, usually using the imagery of maenads, the cantharus (Dionysus' drinking vessel), ivy or an inscription such as “she knows her share of the blessings,” which appears on the tomb of Alcmeionis, who was the chief maenad in 200 BCE in Miletus (Henrichs). During the Anthestria festival of

Dionysus Athens was said to have been invaded by spirits of evil or the dead, embodied by strangers called Carians, who silently sat drinking at separate tables (Henrichs). Dionysus is also, then, a god of the dead. This is the dark half of his reality; “Behind the enraptured truths there looms another truth which brings on horror and catches up the dancers in a madness which is no longer sweet but somber” (103 Otto). The dancing and loving god gives potency to life by revealing its proximity to death, which is a terrifying but necessary aspect of his existence. Otto claims that, “the rapture and terror of life are so profound because they are intoxicated with death. As often as life engenders itself anew, the wall which separates it from death is momentarily destroyed” (137 Otto). Otto paints this idea elegantly in the vision of a newly-born child with all of its dead ancestors reflected in its face (138 Otto). The collaboration of these extreme opposites finally breaks through to illuminate Dionysus' basic nature: “At the height of ecstasy all of these paradoxes suddenly unmask themselves and reveal their names to be Life and Death. Dionysus, who holds them together, must be the divine spirit of a gigantic reality” (121 Otto).

#### 4.b) Unity of Contradictions

Suffering and joy are woven into the single Dionysian fabric that underlies all existence. The moments in which one cries out in pain upon beholding the meaningless emptiness of death which infiltrates the unfolding of life are not only obstacles to be endured, but are actually constitutive of living. Schopenhauer's version of happiness in which all desires are satiated is not only unattainable for Nietzsche, but also abhorrent (242 Reginster). Instead Nietzsche supports Faust, who sells his soul to the devil to get food that will never satisfy him (240 Reginster). His version of a fulfilled and empowered being is

“the soul that, having being, dives into becoming; the soul that *has*, but *wants* to want and will;

the soul that flees itself and catches up with itself in the widest circles; the wisest soul that folly exhorts most sweetly; the soul that loves itself most, in which all things have their sweep and countersweep and ebb and flood—' *But that is the concept of Dionysus himself*' (306 *Ecce Homo*).

In order to maintain momentum this soul must never allow itself to complacently rest in its accomplishments, but rather inflict ever new pain upon itself; dive into fresh wounds to arouse a revitalized need to grow stronger. It must find another lack every time it attains another gain so that it never stops gaining. In this way suffering is integral to the generative instinct; "Creation—that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's growing light. But that the creator may be, suffering is needed" (87 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). The need to forever suffer to forever promote creativity has a fitting illustration in the image of childbirth. In this single experience anguish directly contributes to new life, which justifies but does not nullify the mother's anguish;

"the 'pains of childbirth' sanctify pain in general—all becoming and growing, all that guarantees the future, *postulates* pain... For the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself, the 'torment of childbirth' *must* also exist eternally... All this is contained in the word Dionysos" (120-121 *Twilight of the Idols*).

In her relentless creation the unsated soul produces the future of the world. The mother of new generations must suffer to bring them forth, but they make her pain meaningful. This gift of meaning is a tremendous relief from the unintelligible absurdity that establishes the conditions that form "one who, creating worlds, frees himself from the *distress* of fullness and *overfullness* and from the *affliction* of the contradictions compressed in his soul" (22 *Birth of Tragedy*). The chaos of contradiction is released in energetic bursts of painful creation; all of these elements are part of one fluid motion and cannot be significantly differentiated.

To embrace the unity of opposed forces restores the “*innocence* of becoming” that has been corrupted in modernity's fearful evasion of suffering, a vital portion of the unity (65 *Twilight of the Idols*). Dionysus offers the saving wisdom that “*nothing exists apart from the whole!* [...] *this alone is the great liberation* (65 *Twilight of the Idols*). All apparent boundaries are eclipsed and one is consumed by the power of the whole. The Dionysian cults' worship exalted in this same power:

“the curious blending and duality in the emotions of the Dionysian revelers reminds us—as medicines remind us of deadly poisons—of the phenomenon that pain begets joy, that ecstasy may wring sounds of agony from us. At the very climax of joy there sounds a cry of horror or a yearning lamentation for an irretrievable loss. In these Greek festivals, nature seems to reveal a sentimental trait; it is as if she were heaving a sigh at her dismemberment into individuals” (40 *Birth of Tragedy*).

Here it is apparent that the unity of suffering and procreative joy unveils the grander truth of the Dionysian abyss wherein all is unknowable but all is one. The whole pervades reality and has been unjustly differentiated into unlike parts for the sake of human comprehension. That differentiation is necessary for mankind to function, but will never cease to be a kind of abomination.

The contradictions of Dionysus, expressive of a single underlying reality, are locked in eternal conflict because, “it is only the opposite of all agreements, in supreme tension, when the antitheses become wild and infinite, that the great mystery of oneness is proclaimed from the very depths of being” (120 Otto). His qualities are wildly divergent, but it is because Dionysus “must be actively manifest [...] in a thousand ways, and yet always remain the same. This realm must be a whole, and not just a part or section of the world, but instead, one of the eternal forms of its totality” (152 Otto). By exhibiting confounding complications Dionysus is reflecting the world in its complicated totality. “His divine intelligence holds the contradictions together,” and through him, it is possible to see that

opposite ideas come from a single, foundational source (140 Otto). This is the god's secret, beautiful and horrifying, and when people become intoxicated by his primary gift, wine, it is what they experience.

Like the mask, Dionysus is not only represented by but is actually embodied by wine (101 Otto). As Plutarch writes, it “frees the soul from subservience” and “reveals that which was hidden” (148 Otto). Vaulted out of modest society by Dionysus' wild influence, his followers consume the drink of the vine and revel in the mixture of “joy and burden” that results (Hesiod fr. 231.1 (non vidi)<sup>6</sup>). It is thought of as a miracle in itself, and was also reported to behave particularly miraculously at times in Ancient Greece by growing to full maturity on the day of the festival for Dionysus in Parnassus, for example (99 Otto). People are able to forget their sorrows and celebrate when drinking wine but are also pushed to create new sorrows in a delirious haze. This combination is what makes it sublime. In Thrace and Delphi there were prophetesses of Dionysus who drank wine to break into their god's divine frenzy and see the future (144 Otto). It has a transcendent power, and “has in it something of the spirit of infinity which brings the primeval world to life again” (101 Otto). To drink wine is to participate in the mysteries of Dionysus and relinquish control for the sake of adopting his hysterical spirit, for his essence is actually in the wine. He is in himself what he enacts on the world. When he is hunted as a hunter, when he is persecuted with his women, when he becomes enraptured and his passion spreads to mortals, he embodies what he instigates (107 Otto). In the unified symbol of wine contradicting elements are brought together and simultaneously manifest in an effusion of freedom and chaos, love and violence, that the drinker actively takes into her own body and is transformed by.

The unification of opposites is exemplified in multiple different areas of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, such as differences in age, nationality, wealth and gender. Unity does not mean the absolving of these differences, for Dionysus affirms that “customs differ” and this is not a problem (483

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<sup>6</sup> This quotation, and all subsequent non vidi quotations, obtained from *Dionysus, Myth and Cult* by Walter Otto

Euripides). He even says that he is from Lydia himself despite his close familial relation to Pentheus, making him both a foreigner and a citizen (463 Euripides). The Asian Bacchae bring and use their native drums in worshipping Dionysus, which is in no way profane because he says that foreigners are not more ignorant than Greeks in these divine matters (60, 483 Euripides). Cadmus and Teiresias, “incongruous and pathetic,” are the old men who are the only willing worshipers of Dionysus in Thebes (177 Euripides). “All as one the old women and the young and the unmarried girls” revel in the glory of the god (694 Euripides). Indiscriminately “to rich and poor he gives the simple gift of wine,” and “where Greeks and foreign nations, mingling, live, my progress [is] made” (421-422, 18 Euripides). “No one [is] excluded from his worship;” even Pentheus is told that he shares the same Zeus as the foreigners (209 Euripides). Disregarding these differences, people come together under Dionysus and speak “with one voice” (724 Euripides). He “drops to the earth from the running packs” and summons the Bacchae together into a running pack of their own (135-136 Euripides). The “hordes of women” have astonishing destructive power that they could never achieve as individuals: “thousands of hands tore the fir tree from the earth” (745, 1109-1110 Euripides). Then they all share the glory and the feast (1183 Euripides). Dionysus' message is one for “all mankind,” and one that brings them all together (208 Euripides).

For Nietzsche, a profound sense of acceptance emerges from knowledge of the base unity of existence. Since he is not divorced from any of the world's essence, “like the artist, the theoretical man finds an infinite delight in whatever exists, and this satisfaction protects him against the practical ethics of pessimism” (94 *Birth of Tragedy*). The delight in what exists is what Nietzsche reads into the Greek worship of such a calamitous god as Dionysus: “what is amazing about the religiosity of the ancient Greeks is the enormous abundance of gratitude it exudes: it is a very noble type of man that confronts nature and life in *this way*” (64 *Beyond Good and Evil*). To adore an organ of chaos as a divine being

exhibits an elevated orientation of acceptance that Nietzsche views as a sign of nobility. Being surrounded by the optimism of denial, he sees these noble men as amazing and constructs his vision of excellence in imitation of their achievement:

“My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it” (258 *Ecce Homo*).

To possess an understanding that can actually evoke love of the necessary, an uncompromising affirmation of existence, is to have genuinely received Dionysian wisdom.

#### 4.c) Truth of Unity

In Euripides Dionysus seems to always be concealing a great truth of which he is the master, implying that his personality traits, such as the unification of contradiction, are in no way arbitrary. In the play he is hiding his true identity, which puts him in this position already, and the way that he addresses those who do not follow him implies that they are missing out on some important element that he embodies. He will not tell them anything about it except that it is “worth knowing” (473 Euripides). Those who do not dance “are all blind,” not just misguided—they are not aware of major aspects of the reality of the world (197 Euripides). Euripides also uses deafness as a metaphor for the way in which those who defy Dionysus are ignorant: “you do not hear, or else you disregard” (787 Euripides). This divine knowledge is like a sense, or a path to experiencing existence. One who is restricted from this is numb to an important component of what life should be. When Dionysus takes hold of a person's mind, the person is invaded not with devotion and joy, but with a primal truth that inspires those responses. The elated behavior is a reaction to being opened up to a new sense that

allows the recipient to inhabit a vivacious, free mental state. It is a truth that is at the center of Dionysus' revelries; a truth that causes the madness and the joy that the maenads exhibit.

The content of this truth is emphatically not revealed to the audience. Throughout the play its enigmatic nature is protected viciously by all of the initiated. Dionysus arrives in Thebes not just to expose his divinity, but also to “establish [his] mysteries” (16 Euripides). Again the symbol of the mask is relevant in that he aggressively shows the outside world the surface but will never reveal what, if anything, is behind it. He seems to need the outsiders to know that there is something that they do not know with the same intensity as he needs to collect more insiders. Euripides delving into these unspoken depths would be a terrible blasphemy and antithetic to the point, which is preserving their secrecy. All of the people who have this knowledge are forbidden to tell of it since their “mysteries abhor an unbelieving man” (476 Euripides). Agave says while riling up her cohorts that they must kill Pentheus to protect the secrets of their worship (1109 Euripides). This is the motivation for the beginning of the climax of the play. In a way, the entire drama is centered around the preservation and revelation of mysteries.

#### 4.d) Power of Truth

The secret knowledge whose mystery Dionysus protects gives him tremendous, uncompromising power in *The Bacchae*. Knowledge is linked to power because he is a god of prophecy—gifted with the supernatural power to have access to supernatural understandings. He uses this ability to predict Pentheus' destruction and toy with his victim; for example, he tells the king that he will be carried home from the mountain in the luxury of his mother's arms (970 Euripides). The gift of prophecy is shared by Dionysus' followers as well because, as Teiresias says, his worshipers get mantic powers when god enters their bodies (299 Euripides). He proves his claim when he anticipates

that the god will soon rule in all of Hellas (273 Euripides).

That Dionysus is powerful is undeniable and a testament to his divinity. The manner in which he is powerful is more complex and requires a detailed development of his particular character. One of the primary effects that is extended to his maenads is that they are invincible to human attack. Fire does not burn them and spears draw no blood (756-757 Euripides). Their bodies have become agents of a divine force and adopt a suitably divine invulnerability. They are armed with ivy and fawn skin, which has implications that are reminiscent of the separate standards that gods and men have for justice (25 Euripides). By humanity's standards, such ornamentation would not be substantial, but the Bacchae have allied themselves with holy standards and thus are not even effected by human aggression. The chains that Pentheus places on them snap open by themselves and they freely walk back to their revelries (447 Euripides). Similarly, Dionysus is entirely unconcerned about Pentheus' attempts to imprison and harm him. The issue does not even seem to be that Pentheus will prove himself unable to hurt the god, but rather that it is fundamentally impossible for god to be hurt in any situation resembling the one he is in: "I go, though not to suffer, for that cannot be" (515-516 Euripides). Pentheus is only thinking in terms of human judgments of strength and is therefore completely unprepared for the battle he is taking on. When he has been possessed and asks if he could lift the mountain up with his bare hands, Dionysus tells him that he is finally thinking sanely (947-948 Euripides). The king is operating on an unlimited, godly level of thought when he believes such impossibilities to be feasible; he is at last taking events of divine proportions into consideration, which Dionysus encourages. The reference to sanity is partially playful on account of the god's association with madness and partially genuine. Statements about lifting mountains would be absurd to Pentheus when he is in an unaltered state of mind, since he truly believes that "I am the stronger here" when he is arrogantly bantering with his enemy (504 Euripides). Dionysus responds, "you do not know the limits

of your strength,” indicating that Pentheus is employing a single, bounded version of strength that cannot conceive of the forces that are beyond it (505-506 Euripides). In a puzzling moment that problematizes what strength is for the gods and for this god specifically, he advises Pentheus to “not be so certain that power is what matters in the life of man” (310-311 Euripides). This could either be saying that man has no business meddling with power, which is the affair of the gods, or that life is not shaped by force, but rather an alternate kind of influence. Perhaps Euripides had prophecy or possession in mind, which neutralize all of the effects of force by redirecting will and manipulating knowledge. In other words, Dionysus focuses on intoxicating the mind while Pentheus thinks he can make a difference by shoving people around in his prisons. Dionysus describes this idea by talking about a vast army that is easily defeated with the single weapon of panic (303 Euripides). To prove this point beyond doubt Dionysus turns Pentheus' attempt to chain him into a laughable disaster by tampering with his captor's brain. This seems to make more of an impact on the king than the physical destruction of his palace. Dionysus also says many times that “no effort was required” for him to bring catastrophe to his enemies (614 Euripides). He emerges from the rubble of the palace “calm and smiling still” and Pentheus runs around in a sweaty panic (603 Euripides). This also shows that the god is physically superior to the king, but the fact that he is never depicted as showing any exertion at any moment suggests that force is not his chosen venue for agency.

#### 4.e) Madness of Power

Dionysus “enters the world as a conqueror” and transforms it by overwhelming the rationalistic violation of a naturally disordered unity with his own form of power: the ability to alter mortals' identities via madness (77 Otto). Otto writes that, “the visage of every true god is the visage of a world. There can be a god who is mad only if there is a mad world which reveals itself through him” (136

Otto). The turmoil that Dionysus embodies is inherent in existence and Dionysus is the vessel that exposes it. Through him, “the primeval world has stepped into the foreground, the depths of reality have been opened, the elemental forms of everything that is creative, everything that is destructive, have arisen, bringing with them infinite rapture and infinite terror” (95 Otto). This is both an act of liberation, for, “everything that has been locked up is released,” and a rending apart, because mankind is plagued and plunged into insanity upon looking on this truth of reality (95 Otto).

The god himself is submerged in the chaos of his divided nature, for he is enraptured by the tumultuous fever of his characteristic ecstatic madness. The name “maenads” comes from the word for madness, and Otto suggests that in this context, “madness is a cult form” in itself, and the Dionysian “mountain dancing” is the prototype of all ritual madness (94, 133 Otto). Madness does not occur because of some falsification on account of intoxication, but an intolerable reality: “No illusions or fantasies but truth—a truth that brings on madness” (95 Otto). The elemental contradiction of life and death that Dionysus holds together as a figure that encompasses both of them is too much for a mind to encounter without being shattered. In the face of its chaos, people abandon the regulations of civilization and rave in the woods or in the mountains. Though it seems a large price to pay, this insanity is a fundamental aspect of Dionysus' truth. It holds within it the meeting of paradoxical forces and this clash produces incredible generative energy. To create, one must confront this calamitous moment to soak in the power it radiates:

“he who begets something which is alive must dive down into the primeval depths in which the forces of life dwell. And when he rises to the surface, there is a gleam of madness in his eyes because in those depths death lives cheek by jowl with life. The primal mystery is itself mad—the matrix of the duality and the unity of disunity” (136,137 Otto).

This mystery, the truth hidden under the surface of existence that Dionysus brings to light in such a

way that it cannot be ignored, is a reality that the Greeks worshiped as divine (141 Otto). Wonderfully redefined, the nature of divinity reveals itself in antiquity as the glorious and terrible mixture of death and life that ignites mankind with the primal majesty of madness and creation.

The insanity that takes hold of Dionysus affects his followers in Greek antiquity in powerful ways. It seems to have provided a cathartic social function by giving people a ritual outlet for their “infectious irrational impulses” (76 Dodds). Plato and Aristotle regarded Dionysian ritual (as connected with the rituals of the Corybantes) as “a useful organ of social hygiene—they believe that it works, and works for the good of the participants” (79 Dodds). Madness and its expression through cult “purged the individual” and relieved her of some of the “anxieties characteristic of a guilt-culture,” which is how Dodds describes Ancient Greece (76 Dodds). As he explains this stage in history, “the individual, as the modern world knows him, began in that age to emerge for the first time from the old solidarity of the family,” implying that novel forms of anxiety were plaguing people who did not yet know how to deal with them (76 Dodds). In response to such societal pressures, “Dionysus offered freedom: 'Forget the difference, and you will find the identity; join the thiasos, and you will be happy today’” (76 Dodds). This release was accessible to all, even the slaves and freemen who were excluded from other cults. (76 Dodds). Dionysus was a “god of the people,” liberating them from the limitations and frustrations of normative culture (76 Dodds). He allows you to “stop being yourself”; a phenomenon that is epitomized by the institution of the theater and the mask (94 Dodds). The influence of Dionysus exercises its sweeping power in all situations that he touches regardless of the structures in place or the will of the individuals he encounters. His form of liberation “takes possession without the consent of the conscious mind,” meaning that people's inner wildness is unleashed without consideration for what is civilized in them (272 Dodds). This indicates both a more effective form of catharsis and a more overwhelming form of enchantment. It explains the dramatic breakdown that people experience when

they attempt to refuse the god, for they are refusing an aspect of themselves that inherently yearns for liberty. The undercurrent in mankind that resonates with Dionysus, the voice he is appealing to underneath the conscious mind, cannot be ignored without devastating results: “To resist Dionysus is to repress the elemental in one's own nature; the punishment is the sudden complete collapse of the inward dykes when the elemental breaks through perforce and civilization vanishes” (273 Dodds). Those who do pledge themselves to the god also experience the collapse of these inner structures and share in his inspired insanity.

Though Dionysus is incontrovertibly at the center of Euripides' play, it is named for these maddened followers. Despite the effusive display of the god's superhuman capacity, most prominently executed in his catastrophic destruction of Pentheus' palace, Euripides chose not to name his work *Bacchus* but *The Bacchae*. This decision immediately orients the audience's expectations around those who are converted as opposed to he who converts, and counter-intuitively implies that the mortals who encounter Dionysus are, in a way, the standard of his success as a god. This is an interesting reversal of the god's complete disregard for mankind's standards in the discussion of justice. As the play begins the god's obsession with bringing mankind over to his side becomes evident. His motive for initiating the entire plot-line is, “that I might be revealed on earth for what I am: a god” (18 Euripides). He has a compulsion to be understood accurately by humans regardless of the holy status that one would think would elevate him above concern with petty men; he has to teach his “dances to the feet of living men” (17 Euripides). He claims that he is indeed unconcerned with the opinions of the Thebans when he says of the person he interacts with the most extensively, “for Pentheus I care nothing,” but his actions regarding Pentheus, the extravagant process he goes through to entrap and destroy him, seem to indicate otherwise (638 Euripides). Though Thebes has special significance for him on account of his native roots in the place, this city is merely the “first in Hellas” to fall to him (20-21 Euripides). He

boasts to the audience that, “when all is well I will go on and be revealed to men in other lands,” continuing his quest as a missionary of his own religion (49-50 Euripides). “Overland [he] went,” despite the abundance of classical evidence that he is known to travel over the ocean in the mythological tradition, because he wants to reveal himself to as many people as possible as he makes his way (13 Euripides). Even the first line of the play is an enactment of this theme, directed at us. “I am Dionysus, son of Zeus” he instantly proclaims, opening with an epiphany that continues to tease us with his divinity throughout as he veils himself for the sake of effecting another epiphany later (1 Euripides). Though the god is loth to admit it, the humans in this story have a powerful influence over him and it is their judgment that he is ultimately swayed by. Until they believe in him, his mission is not done.

The methods that he uses to accomplish this mission are not entirely forceful ones, because he does not seek to alter them physically as much as he seeks to alter their minds. This is reminiscent of Nietzsche's emphasis on evocative persuasion over rigid argumentation in his rhetoric. Though Dionysus has the ability to create earthquakes and crumble palaces at his disposal, this is merely used as foreplay in his grand seduction. He could easily just crush Pentheus' head himself, but instead he “calls imperiously to him” and says, “*Wait!* Would you like to *see* their revels on the mountain?” (811 Euripides). Slowly and artfully he tantalizes Pentheus with the lure of the erotic drunkenness that the king is certain is occurring on the mountain until “our prey now thrashes in the net we threw” (846-847 Euripides). Thus, Dionysus wins Pentheus over, changes his mind and secures his doom with the power of intoxicating enticement. This catching seduction that the god employs is what wins for his movement the associations with infection. To worship him is referred to as an “obscene disorder” that “pollutes our beds” (232, 354 Euripides). Though Dionysus would consider it a blessing as opposed to a disease, the motions of allurement and contamination share many qualities. They both spread

exponentially, and likely without the full consent of the converted.

Dionysus is he “for whom the day is blessed but doubly blessed the night,” because “darkness is well suited to devotion” (425-426, 486 Euripides). It is easier to ensnare when the victim cannot rely on his senses; while his eyes are clouded with night. The god stirs people up and carries them away while they are lost within themselves. Clothed in nocturnal ambiguity, he coaxes Thebes into his service and they hardly know what has happened to them at all. There is also an aspect of privacy that is gained by these circumstances, for they “dance where darkness is deepest, where no man is” (878 Euripides). There is an intimacy going on between man and his god, facilitated by either the darkness or Dionysus' bewildering invasion into the mortal's mind, that is vital to the intensity of the relationship that results.

#### 4.f) Transformation through Madness

The power play between Dionysus and his followers is exceedingly complex; the way in which their identities extend into each other allows for a divine transformation in the human initiates. He “leads us” and even coerces the people into his service, giving him immense influence over mortals' minds (141 Euripides). However, he does so because he needs those people to worship him. The Bacchae are his escorts and his bearers: “On, you Bacchae, bear your god in triumph home” (83-84 Euripides). The two parties share a powerful closeness that binds them together. Both the benefits and downfalls are common, for, “blessed is he who hallows his life in the worship of god,” but also, “his victims will be his women” (73, 797 Euripides). Just as Zeus crowns his infant son with serpents, the maenads wear crowns of snakes; they imitate and reflect each other on many levels (102 Euripides). This produces a wondrous intimacy. The Bacchae feel “their feet maddened by the breath of god” and take on some of his superhuman attributes (1091-1092 Euripides). They can understand him instinctively: “The Bacchae heard that voice but missed its words,” and the impression of the voice

alone leads them to do their master's bidding exactly as he intended (1086 Euripides). With Dionysus infecting their minds and lending them his abilities and the Bacchae carrying him on their shoulders, the two blend into each other and become a powerful whole.

This fusion leads to the complicated question of possession, and who exactly people are when they are possessed. Are they themselves, altered and freed? Are they a mindless extension of he who possesses? Is their loyalty really loyalty, and do they really count as devoted followers if they have been coerced into following? Dionysus has multiple different groups of worshipers amongst whom this friction is played out. His Asian women, accumulated through his journeys across the land previous to this incident, show no signs of being forced into service and love the god by choice. His Theban women were driven from their houses by his spirit which entered into them and caused their frenzy. Pentheus, who strives to be a “real Bacchante” with the air of a child playing at make believe, also wears the garments of Dionysus and feels compelled to attend his revelries, but cannot seriously be considered one of the Bacchae, as he is still referring to the maenads as “counterfeit” (1060 Euripides). However, Dionysus tells Pentheus that he is sane once he has been possessed, “you see what you could not when you were blind,” and the king dances for joy once he has put on his outfit (923 Euripides). What is the difference between one group of the possessed and another? For Agave does seem to count as one of the initiated, as the chorus of Asian women says to her, “I welcome a fellow-reveler of god” (1173 Euripides). On the other hand, once Agave is no longer possessed she discovers that “all the victory she carries home is her own grief” (1147-1148 Euripides). What is interesting about this quote is that the fact that it is actually grief she carries does not necessarily take away the victory, it just qualifies it in an unfortunate light. When she is in one state of mind the victory is real, but in another she regrets that it transpired. It is merely a matter of perspective, and from the perspective of Dionysus, “blessed is he who the spirit of god possesseth” (74 Euripides). While possessed, the love the

characters feel for the god is genuinely powerful, but when they are soberly grounded they are again culpable for their perceived wrongs. The possessed self and the unpossessed self are two aspects of the same individual since Pentheus and Agave are both punished during their possession, but the moment of possession itself is a glorious and liberating one for them. Dionysus is utilizing a destabilization of identity to both punish and reward his opponents. Unsettling their identities is the source of the power he has over them. He is exploiting the dual nature of reality which seems to be at the base of the truth that he is the emblem of: “I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens. And now two Thebes, two cities [...] And you—you are a bull” (918-920 Euripides). This line occurs at the beginning of Pentheus' possession, and shows that he has been given insight into this duality, as well as into the unseen aspects of Dionysus himself. Possession has made him wise, at least in the ways of Dionysus, because his possession by Dionysus means that he is inherently a participant in the god's mysteries. Dionysus has bled into Pentheus, who is still condemned by his previous actions but who has been temporarily introduced to the truth that is about to destroy him. Agave also exhibits signs of being part of the god while possessed. She fights for him “not by her own strength, for the god had put inhuman power in her hands” (1127-1128 Euripides). She has mingled with divinity by slipping into the god's control.

To be possessed by the power of Dionysus' divine wisdom is the ultimate transformation for Nietzsche. This is the cause of the desperate need for his tangible presence; he must become immanent, so immanent that he enters the most intimate corners of the identity, to enact his epiphany. Only then can his wisdom be experienced in such a profound way that one is able to run alongside the maenads. The conjured, present Dionysus is,

“the genius of the heart from whose touch everyone walks away richer, not having received grace and surprised, not as blessed and oppressed by alien goods, but richer in himself, newer to himself than before, broken open, blown at and sounded out by a thawing wind, perhaps more

unsure, tenderer, more fragile, more broken, but full of hopes that as yet have no name, full of new will and currents, full of new dissatisfaction and undertows” (234 *Beyond Good and Evil*).

Acutely aware of both the unity and the chaos in life, alive to the truth and shattered by its contradiction, he who encounters the god head-on is possessed by his divine madness and recreated entirely. When Nietzsche relates an encounter with Dionysus, he claims that the god expressed a desire to cause this kind of improvement in humanity:

“I often reflect how I might yet advance [man] and make him stronger, more evil, and more profound than he is [...] also more beautiful!—and at that the tempter god smiled with his halcyon smile as though he had just paid an enchanting compliment” (236 *Beyond Good and Evil*).

Here Nietzsche retains Euripides' emphasis on the compulsion Dionysus exhibits to convert, and paints conversion by this force as mankind's path to elevation. Beyond human standards like morals and through to godly standards like profound strength, Nietzsche urges his fellow men not just to know what he knows, but to “*to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming*” (121 *Twilight of the Idols*). His hope for the future is that it will be run by spirits liberated from all fear of suffering by Dionysian possession:

“A spirit thus *emancipated* stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed—*he no longer denies...* But such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name *Dionysos*.—“ (114 *Twilight of the Idols*).

A members of this “higher community” is permanently intoxicated; he can “express enchantment” in his “very gestures” and “supernatural sounds emanate from him [...] he feels himself a god [...] like

the gods he saw walking in his dreams. He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art” (37 *Birth of Tragedy*). This man, a Dionysian masterpiece, is infiltrated by divinity that his god imparted to him via possession. He is “the noblest clay, the most costly marble,” and has been “kneaded and cut” by tangibly interacting with a truth that extends far beyond him and into an utterly undefinable unity.

Teaching his imagined disciples how to encounter the genuine teacher, he who communicates by possessing, Nietzsche advises, “you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists” (26 *Birth of Tragedy*). The laugh erupts from a consciousness long battered with suffering and absurdity that, delirious with its trials, has finally accepted existence and given itself over to Dionysus. Charged with the energy of a thousandfold contradictions, the laughter exudes life force won through conflict. He loves where he used to abhor and gratefully exalts where he used to cower and shield himself. Nietzsche says of himself, “the most incomprehensible thing about us is our cheerfulness...” hinting at the inconceivable depth behind his laugh (73 *Twilight of the Idols*). To be overcome by the truth of unified contradictions, worship it, and rebirth it more brilliantly than ever is to transcend all mortal bounds and rise up; “he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing” (37 *Birth of Tragedy*).

Dionysus is himself a representation of the world as Nietzsche perceives it. The chaotic contradictions at his core are masked by his Apollonian appearance as an individuated, intelligible being. In embracing possession by this being, which means to become a part of him, an initiate can integrate the power of the universal truth inherent in the divinity's composition into her identity. This allows for a way of living in the world that is affirmative and perhaps even transcendent. Thus, belief has phenomenal benefits that can provide an answer for humanity, which must forever grapple with the horror of existence. Within this form of madness there is salvation. Nietzsche may disregard the potency of many religions that attempt to give answers, but he cannot disregard belief as a whole. His

version of religiosity is focused on a god who describes the world as it is by containing contradiction within himself, and therefore he can pledge himself to this deity wholeheartedly.

## Chapter 5: Initiate of Self-Deception

*“I am on a plane where no reproach can touch me, since what I really am is my transcendence. I flee from myself, I escape myself, I leave my tattered garment in the hands of the fault-finder. But the ambiguity necessary for self-deception comes from the fact that I affirm here that I am my transcendence in the mode of being of a thing” -Jean-Paul Sartre (Self-Deception 14).*

The truth Nietzsche unveils through the process of provoking a divine experience in his readers is importantly not his own; it is Dionysus'. In declaring, “I am a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus” he pledges himself to Dionysus and the power of the god's wisdom, but always retains a space between himself and certainty (217 *Ecce Homo*). Belief is necessary for the preservation of the will to live, but unquestioning, concrete belief is a dogmatic institution that would ultimately drain that same will because it is not genuinely descriptive of existence's chaotic nature. Nietzsche's project is therefore to construct the possibility for a psychological condition wherein one can reap the benefits of belief, but not be pathologically unaware of its inherent incompleteness. Hence Nietzsche's dependence on the profundity of the surface. Though a superficial appearance is a falsified account of the depths it conceals, it stands in as a functional signifier for that depth. These signifiers must be read as literary parables that simultaneously conceal and expose their meaning. Thus, the thinker's fluidity of motion is not impaired by artificially cemented arguments, but is still capable of action and direction. Nietzsche personally conjures Dionysus into tangible presence and then calls himself the god's initiate; he is imposing a self-deception upon himself that fulfills his need for a type of religiosity to justify the world. The metaphorical, living Dionysus is himself an illusory Apollonian representation of an indecipherable truth—this form mimics Nietzsche's stylistic method of achieving religious devotion, implying that when Nietzsche prays to Dionysus, he prays to his version of belief itself.

### 5.a) Balance

The transformative capacity of possession by Dionysus illustrates the indispensable benefits of belief, but unquestioned conviction in any concrete idea conflicts with the same reality that Dionysus himself divulges. Though the Dionysian drive is not itself so concrete, being composed of motion and contradiction, the Apollonian form that it needs to enter tangible existence and revolutionize the structures in place is. Nietzsche suggests that all philosophical dogmatizing of this nature is “no more than a noble childishness and tyronism,” and cannot maintain the will to life that it sets out to secure (1 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Its “solemn and definitive” airs are adopted in the same way that a child does when playing pretend, and is a similarly inadequate description of reality (1 *Beyond Good and Evil*). In his stubborn ambition to “hold a hopeless position,” a dogmatic metaphysician exhibits a “despairing, mortally weary soul” in that he manages to “prefer even a handful of 'certainty' to a whole carload of beautiful possibilities” (16 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Caught between the need for and dangers of staunch belief, Nietzsche must find a third option.

In an attempt to straddle both options and balance precariously in the middle, he develops a two-sided approach that loves but also destroys the creations it constructs to devote itself to. If all of art exists to reproduce reality in a beautified light, every artistic product is, in a way, a new world to believe in: “But this is an ancient, eternal story: what formerly happened with the Stoics still happens today, too, as soon as any philosophy begins to believe in itself. It always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise” (16 *Beyond Good and Evil*). The genesis of each product is an inspired instant of affirmation, but to allow any particular perspective an unending reign of belief would be to preclude the possibility for additional affirmative moments. The world view eventually grows stale and can no longer provide a compelling justification. This is the joint joy and sorrow of the artist; “Whatever I create and however much I love it—soon I must oppose it and my love: thus my will wills

it” (115 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). When the artist abandons his creation he does not abandon his love, but must force himself through a painful loss for the sake of perpetually renewing his loving engagement. Whoever has turned himself into a Nietzschean artist has chosen a conflict-ridden but rewarding path; “There must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators” (87 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*).

The juxtaposition of death that is forever immanent and eternally renewed life is importantly reminiscent of the divide between Dionysus' immortal divinity and his fated mortality. This complexity arises in the dramatic tale of his origins. When Dionysus' mother Semele was pregnant she was destroyed by her lover, Zeus, in fire and lightning. Zeus snatched the infant out of his mother and put the baby in his thigh, from whence he was subsequently born (71 Otto). Thus, Dionysus is called the “twice-born one,” having emerged first from his mortal mother and then again from his divine father (65 Otto). Dionysus saves Semele from the underworld and she ascends to immortality (Iophon, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* 22 F 3). Semele's sister Ino, Dionysus' first foster-mother, is also transformed from a human woman to a goddess (73 Otto). These divine women serve as the prototypes for the human women in the cults. (134 Otto). The God emerges from this confusion of mortality and godliness as the “fruit of the storm” (65 Otto). He is a “native of two realms,” and in this “union of heavenly with the earthly [...] man's tear-filled lot was not dissolved but preserved” (73, 78 Otto). The tangible Dionysus is Nietzsche's artistic creation and is the lens he understands the world through, and this product contains the same themes of death and rebirth that his creative method adheres to. As was addressed in the previous chapter, Dionysus was both a fertility god and a god of the dead in Ancient Greece; his thorough grounding in both realms means that Nietzsche does not have to abandon him as an object of devotion because the object is a constant recreation in itself. Pledging himself to a god who is literally born two times and consolidates mortality and immortality is pledging himself to the optimal

artistic process.

### 5.b) The Psychology of Belief

That Nietzsche finds such a unique figure to steadfastly devote himself to implies his profound compulsion to remain on the surface. In this way he identifies himself further as one who as seen beneath that veil:

“Anyone who has looked deeply into the world may guess how much wisdom lies in the superficiality of men. The instinct that preserves them teaches them to be flighty, light, and false [...] let nobody doubt that whoever stands that much in *need* of the cult of surfaces must at some time have reached *beneath* them with disastrous results.” (71 *Beyond Good and Evil*)

The danger of the unmediated underbelly drives the wise to the surface, dogmatic as it may appear. Though the falsity of the surface is therefore undeniable, these wise people can “recognize untruth as a condition of life” and go on unrepentant (12 *Beyond Good and Evil*). This may be what Nietzsche refers to as a “philosophical sense of humor:” being aware that you are actively deceiving yourself and uncompromisingly forging onward (37 *Beyond Good and Evil*).

Euripides establishes the use of deceit as a tool for truth when he has Dionysus possess Agave and Pentheus in order to ultimately reveal the reality of the god's divinity. Instead of presenting himself in his godly appearance from the outset, Dionysus chooses to “bewilder” his disbelievers into a maddened state in which they accept the truth (851 Euripides). After the illusion subsides Agave is left with no choice but to see that Dionysus is a god, and Pentheus is left in pieces—literally torn apart by the force of epiphany.

A sense of humor that can consider illusion to be in the service of truth requires a very specific psychological condition of self-deceit that can render the philosopher “concerned and yet unconcerned”

(17 *Birth of Tragedy*). Fittingly, Nietzsche declares that “psychology is now again the path to the fundamental problems,” paving the way for his formation of a state of simultaneous belief and disbelief (32 *Beyond Good and Evil*). The possibility of a “neuroses of *health*” allows him to commingle opposites within his own mind in a distinctly Dionysian manner (21 *Birth of Tragedy*).

This self-deception is more comprehensible and plausible when considered as a kind of literary arrangement of reality. Each idea Nietzsche posits is like a parable to read into so that the reader can further her search for meaning. The suspension of disbelief is a necessary component of finding the legitimate paths to significance encrypted in the parable. Reading in such a way,

“the whole divine comedy of life, including the inferno, also pass before him, not like mere shadows on a wall—for he lives and suffers with these scenes—and yet not without that fleeting sensation of illusion. And perhaps many will, like myself, recall how amid the dangers and terrors of dreams they have occasionally said to themselves in self-encouragement, and not without success: 'It is a dream! I will dream on!'" (35 *Birth of Tragedy*).

Nietzsche says that the impulse to dream on in this situation is brought on by “our innermost being, our common ground,” the universal drives that want to live and live meaningfully (35 *Birth of Tragedy*). He invokes Dante to describe the breathtaking realism that can arise out of a literary experience and contribute new significance to existence's challenges. To read the Divine Comedy is to suffer with Francesca in reality even as one acknowledges that she is trapped within the confines of the literature.

Through adopting this literary twist on reality and finding a god who epitomizes his understanding of the phenomenon of artistry, Nietzsche can enact a revolution of self-deception inspired the Greeks' institution of theater. They recreated their sufferings on an artificial stage, and now Nietzsche constructs his own stage: his symbolic writing that unifies the importance of the signified and the signifier. Dionysus, who emphasizes the same union, is evoked into tangible presence by this

writing and can therefore possess and transform his initiates. The possibility of this transformation is the reason that his presence, which is admittedly a kind of deception, must be enacted: “It may be that until now there has been no more potent means for beautifying man himself than piety: it can turn man into so much art, surface, play of colors, graciousness that his sight no longer makes one suffer” (71 *Beyond Good and Evil*). In his piety man is made more than himself; he is blessed with aspects of his god's divinity, especially when his god is Dionysus who is known for extending his abilities to his followers. The religiosity of this figure is therefore as important as the life-promoting content of his character: “The profoundest instinct of life, the instinct for the future of life, for the eternity of life, is in this word [Dionysian] experienced religiously—the actual road to life, procreation, as the *sacred road*” (121 *Twilight of the Idols*). Nietzsche scorns Christianity but mourns that “today, as I have been told, you no longer like to believe in God and gods,” since the understanding of an idea as a divine force is possibly the most powerful way to transformatively influence mankind (235 *Beyond Good and Evil*). Historical, concrete signifiers are the necessary mask that conceal the universal, Dionysian chaos, and life is composed of the (also Dionysian) unification of these opposed elements. Belief in Dionysus is a signifier for the need for belief.

## **Conclusion: Evohé!**

What image of divinity has emerged from the array of sources that claim to know its nature? How are we to understand Dionysus after taking in a barrage of data, all mired in mystery, all originating from divergent areas that overlap but do not run parallel—how are we to understand a god that we can only glimpse at through the fragmentary and the literary? The evidence from antiquity is distant and incomplete and the evidence from Nietzsche fills in the gaps with a historically unjustifiable wealth of interpretive certainty, which cannot avoid being scrutinized with a certain skepticism by an audience that is not sure of having been initiated. The forms in which our information is delivered make a critical contribution to the way we receive content, or even to what content we receive. Just as form and content were shown to rely on each other in Nietzsche's writing and through Dionysus who wears an Apollonian mask, they are paired even in the work that goes into analysis, especially when the object of analysis is as wily and inaccessible as an ancient, possibly reincarnated god. It so happens that the forms that our testimonies appear in all require the reader to actively participate in order to acquire any kind of meaning. The Greeks left behind scattered proofs of cult practices that confirm the existence and intensity of Dionysian religiosity, and myth, which arrives to modernity clothed in theater; the *Bacchae* is the most comprehensive remnant of the mythological history of Dionysus. Both of these sources demand that one read between the lines to fill in the spaces that time's passage has left vacant. Nietzsche does just this with surpassing enthusiasm, but there are also missing pieces in his rendering that he asks his readers to supply. He is clearly informed powerfully by the Greeks, particularly Euripides, but pushes some of the playwright's concepts to dramatic conclusions that were never authorized by the original work, and he also disregards facts that do not suit his vision. However, to claim that this undermines the validity of his project, which is focused on the Greeks specifically for

the sake of learning about the god, is to imply that there is a true Dionysus with concrete attributes lurking behind the incomplete human expressions, which may be a misleading assumption. Every formulation he is presented in is literary in that it necessitates interpretation, both in terms of how the evidence is represented and what that evidence contains. Perhaps his reality is contingent on this ambiguous space between the entirely concrete and the ungraspably abstract; perhaps Dionysus is real in that he is resonant—an idea that means something to us because it communicates primal truths but lives only insofar as we read into it. All approaches to him would therefore be important not because of their accuracy, but because they contribute vitally to his reality.

The name Dionysus appears for the first time on three fragmentary tablets from Pylos and Khania (Crete) which are dated to c.1250 bce (Henrichs). They confirm his divinity in these regions, also indicating that he may have foreign origins. Few if any Greek gods do not have some foreign roots; Dionysus' beginnings may have been Phrygian, Lydian, Phoenician, or Hittite (Henrichs). Henrichs hints that the earliest Dionysus may be sought in Minoan Crete, where he also finds Ariadne, the god's mortal lover. The earliest reference to maenadic ritual, the religious practices that Dionysian cults engaged in, can be found in the Homeric version of the Lycurgus myth, which is the story of a mythological king in Thrace who bans and imprisons Dionysus and his women and is punished severely in return (Henrichs). Dionysus' hometown is Thebes, which is also called the mother city of the Bacchantes (Henrichs). Thebes had professional maenads who other cities imported to lead their own rituals. It is halfway between Athens and Delphi, which is significant because ritual maenadism was not practiced within Attic borders so maenads from the area traveled to Delphi to join the Delphic Thyiads on the slopes of Mt. Parnassus (Henrichs). Despite the regulations concerning the area around Athens, it was very much an area that worshiped Dionysus regularly. In any given year five festivals happened for Dionysus in Athens alone, including the Ionian-Attic Anthesteria, which is his oldest

festival (Henrichs). It occurred in spring and was celebrated by the breaching of new wine and a drinking contest (Henrichs). The Oschophoria, City Dionysia, Rural Dionysia, and Lenea were his festivals in this region that were celebrated with the performance of tragedies and comedies (Henrichs). There are also records of other festivals in Athens called the Theoinia and the Iobakcheia, but the details about these days are unknown (Demosthenes 59.78). The ancient Anthesteria was held in honor of Dionysus' arrival from across the sea. He is called the “god of the sea” in Pagasea, and the “god of the seacoast” in Chios (163 Otto). The bottom of the ocean is one of the places that he is reported to have hidden, concealed by the muses, during the long absences that accompany his moments of intense presence (79 Otto). This strong association with the water can be interpreted either as an indication of his foreign origins or as a gesture to some archetypal otherness inherent in his nature.

Every other year, a group of women traveled to the top of Mt. Parnassas in midwinter. The god himself was said to lead these adventurous expeditions that could prove extremely dangerous, as Parnassus is over 8,000 feet high (270 Dodds). In Plutarch's lifetime they were once cut off by a snowstorm and had to be rescued from their steadfast devotion to the god (271 Dodds). Worship of Dionysus is risky in general, as it is easier to start dancing manically than it is to stop. It was an infectious experience in which people would literally dance until they dropped and were trodden underfoot by their fellows (272 Dodds).

Though elements of Dionysus' historical worship are translated into Nietzsche's account, particularly this last notion of its danger communicated by the perils of climbing Parnassus, he does not rely on this kind of information to prove his points. He does not write as though he knows about Dionysus because of the tablets and vases that provide evidence of his cult, but because they have met and communed personally. He even throws data out, such as the fact that Dionysus was said to have originated from overseas; Nietzsche puts great emphasis on the Greeks' creation of the god. Regardless

of any justifications on his part about why he felt that this approach was necessary, this means that Nietzsche's Dionysus is not identical to the Greeks' Dionysus. There are two distinct characters at work whether their creators had parallel motivations behind their inventions or not. On account of the chronology Nietzsche's Dionysus is dependent on the Greeks' Dionysus, which is most visible in that the themes Nietzsche emphasizes were almost universally raised by Euripides' rendering. Euripides interpreted the Dionysian in one way and Nietzsche interpreted that product. This is not meant to imply that Euripides is more accurate because he comes first, or that Nietzsche is more accurate because his version is more developed. Rather, both images must be understood together as fractions of a whole that is greater than and more indescribable than either author could encompass. That both of them write symbolically, requiring their readers to construct for themselves what the meaning of dismemberment, nature, or the mask might be instead of spelling out the implications of their work, speaks to their awareness of the incomplete status of their descriptions. This is implicit in literary writing such as the *Bacchae*, but also applies to the entire structure of mythology and cult, the two elements that contribute the rich and enigmatic data that constitutes our knowledge of the Greeks' figuring of Dionysus.

In a way a myth is a fiction, but it claims to tap into truths about the world that defy recognition at the surface, that resonate with “the primeval [...] which is most alive—in fact, it alone is truly alive” (120 Otto). This is what prompts Sallustius' description of myth when he says, “this never happened but always is” (75 Otto). There is a living, universal quality to these stories that are still remembered and the practices of cult which bind to and reflect them. Both myth and cult exist to give utterance to the awe of communion with God, and “their ceremonial actions and the revelation of this colossal form were one and the same thing” (40 Otto). The worshipers helped the relationship into reality through the action of cultus, the “most sacred language” through which a divine occurrence could be pronounced (19 Otto). “With their own bodies they created this image,” for in the practice of cultus man himself is

the cathedral built in God's honor (22 Otto). The best possible position for man is to be this monument to his God and to overflow with the divine's immanence. That immanence is the defining factor for cultus, which gradually lost vitality exactly because it was so reliant on closeness (20 Otto). As distance developed between man and the deity as civilization cemented cultus faded. Instead of religion starting from a simple, meaningless idea and developing into a complex one, the origin is punctuated by the powerful significance of nearness to a God who gradually recedes.

The great era of myth occurred after cultus had already begun to fade. Only when the moment of contact had already lost freshness and had become fixed did myth begin to articulate it, for myth is described as being the poetic translation of the ritual of cultus (17 Otto). It is decidedly ambiguous which calls which into life, they have a fittingly intertwined, indiscernible relationship, but the idea of cultus being an imitation of myth or of myth being the rationalized explanation of cultus are both too simplistic and are thus insufficient (17 Otto). The concept of translation puts them on a more equal playing field, for they are both methods of describing the same ultimately important epiphany. Myth takes its life force from the primal revelation of the God and gives it form. Instead of interpreting the revelation with "holy laws" and "secret wisdom" which Otto equates with "denial of the world," the Greeks "gained the key to a great theatre" within the scope of the world (22, 23 Otto). The limitless, sacred being became clear through an abundance of living forms in myth, which is "mobile" and "distinct" (23 Otto). The Greek spirit was "born to observe," and thus produced a multiplicity of symbolic descriptions as opposed to a litany of regulations (24 Otto). This is, emphatically, not less religious. It is merely a different manifestation of religiosity that has become obscured through modernity's interpretation of the ancient through the lens of the modern.

Euripides' *The Bacchae* is one of the most influential primary sources for a modern understanding of Dionysus' mythological background. As a theatrical portrayal of the god of theater, it

enacts the spirit of representation and communication in a uniquely provocative way. Like the rest of the surviving data that composes our image of this ancient figure, the play is enigmatic and almost contradictory in its vague but rich allusions to the essence of Dionysus and Dionysian worship. To pick apart the messages embedded in this elaborate work of art is a challenging and uncertain science, but the powerful impact that it transmits into the minds of its readers after thousands of years is poignant enough to translate an understanding that is not entirely reliant on coherent comprehension. That I can read the *Bacchae* in 2011 and be emotionally taken aback by the horror of Agave's discovery that she killed her child, the wonder of the Baccant's revelry in the mountains, or the force of Dionysus' introductory epiphany proves the existence of this undefinable comprehension, and perhaps even the reality of the historically transcendent, primordially resonant Dionysian.

Both myth and cultus are powerful insofar as they claim to “serve the true reality of the world of the Earth and the stars” (41 Otto). Knowledge of these matters can only come from the world itself communicating to humanity. To investigate these ideas genuinely one must be “seized” by “that which is,” not impose systematic, rational understandings upon something inherently paradoxical and beyond our limitations—instead, we must “expand our ideas to come to terms with the phenomenon” (46 Otto). Whether we are seized by the description of “that which is” as our own ultimate realities or not, we must accept that this is how myth and cultus were originally conceived of to view them genuinely. When the Greeks danced ecstatically at religious festivals it was because they believed in and experienced the presence of divinity.

Greek gods in particular endure a complicated classification in modernity, since we hesitate to believe in them in the same way that contemporary religious figures enjoy belief. However, we do not assume that the Greeks looked on their deities in the cartoonish way that they have often been portrayed today: “while modern scholars regard Dionysus inevitably as a construct of the Greek

imagination, in the eyes of his ancient worshipers he was a god—immortal, powerful, and self-revelatory” (Henrich). Disparate perspectives on the nature of ancient divinity emerge from this contradiction, with the predominating one being an attack on mythic awareness via psychoanalytic theories that “eliminate the objective experience or external reality of a deity” (xiii Otto). The question that must be solved, or at least approached, before any analysis of a Greek god can get underway is how to best do justice to these figures and be honest about who they were in themselves and to their devotees.

There are many variations on the view that the gods are a reflection or construction of the self. Kant refers to God as an internal moral condition that people project onto a mysterious 'other' (xiii Otto). Freud claims that God exists to unconsciously meet people's psychological needs created by complicated yearnings for a father figure to protect them or be destroyed by them (xiv Otto). Whatever the specific rationalization, there is a common understanding that the self is primary and, for some utilitarian purpose, constructs a divinity to pray to. The god has an inherent dependence on his worshipers, who indulge in the solipsistic assumption that they are the central agents in their world. When we look analytically at the gods then, what we see is a commentary on “Greek self-definition”—a god who is thought of as a foreigner exists to portray the “archetypal 'other' in a culturally normative sense” (Heinrichs). The qualities ascribed to the god are qualities of the “Dionysus in us,” for example, and serve to help us understand our own being by dissecting the externalized product of our being (Heinrichs). This way of thinking, though it lends valuable insight as to the significance of man's gods, jeopardizes our ability to see their existence as a whole. “We murder to dissect” them and render them impotent (xii Otto). This is not a complete vision of the Greek gods, who had specified personalities brimming with life and countless human subjects reeling in ecstasy at their touch, overwhelmed with “ecstasy, devotion, allegiance, and exaltation” (15 Otto). To worship is not a rationalized decision but

overwhelming contact with the divine. A person is blessed by immediate communion with “the world itself as a divine form” and cannot help but express the emotion of this touch (33 Otto).

There is a sense of certainty in claims such as these that feel only tenuously convincing. 'Knowing' lacks a vital scholarly openness, but 'doubting' undermines the faith that is possibly necessary for belief. Are we asked to truly believe that Dionysus was a physical and spiritual being that reigned divinely on Earth for a while and then inexplicably withdrew, to be recalled centuries later by a perceptive philologist? Or is there a statement about reality embedded in this ambiguity, perhaps the reality of an experience of contact, which should not be belittled at any cost? The modes of inquiry that contribute to Dionysus as we know him are all engaged in this debate formally and through their content. Myth, cult, fragments, plays, scholars and philosophers are all artistically recreating one idea via different access points. It seems that the truly Dionysian answer to the inherently unanswerable question of how to grapple with the figure of a god characterized differently through different lenses is that one must hold together opposite ideas in order to approach a transcendent solution. By taking in these angles side by side and finding the common energies that peek through, the truth of daemons restrained seems broken open like floodgates—unknown still but ever-present and universally relevant. Ultimately, Dionysus is what he has long claimed to be: composed of an artistic amalgamation of contradictions that resonate mysteriously with the souls of his intrepid initiates.

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To what end have we followed Nietzsche, this “insidious pied-piper” for our innermost uncertainties; what new horizon is encountered by those honestly endeavoring to love the ever-hateful (25 *Birth of Tragedy*)? Does burrowing into a work which claims to contain knowledge bring me any closer to integrating the essence of that knowledge? No, in all likelihood a year of devotion and careful passage-parsing does not prepare me for initiation. And I cannot say whether I would accept that

dubious honor—commit to perceiving under my joys, suffering; under my intuitions of meaning, the hollowed echo of an indifferent universe. However, even viewed through my doubts the allure of Nietzsche's vision does not die out, for what would it actually mean for an identity to be infused with the mad divinity? Each word on any page would unfold itself, expand from minute hints into an intimate universality... the Dionysian man, communicative genius, shriveling the man of culture into a “mendacious caricature,” would rise up from his paralysis and shake Silenus' cold hand with genuine warmth (61 *Birth of Tragedy*). No academic critique that I might offer of Nietzsche's philosophy could distance me from longing for the epiphany he allows me to glimpse; the possibility of no longer feeling at odds with any aspect of a world laden with too-true suffering. But I have emerged on the other side of the experiment untransformed, asking of this dead German the same thing he asked of dead Greeks: How now? I accept the necessity of acceptance, I believe in the requirement for belief, but how to struggle skyward from those chaotic depths—where are the footholds? Condemned to be an outsider, how to reconstruct what agonized, rapturous wisdom rings in the Bacchants' cry, “Evohé!”

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