

## Justifying the world as an aesthetic phenomenon\*

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**Abstract:** This article scrutinises one of the most challenging theses of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, that only as an aesthetic phenomenon can existence and the world be (or appear to be) 'justified'. Through a close examination of the work's frequently masked reevaluation of a series of Greek sources of thinking, not least its 'inversion' of both the metaphysics and the aesthetics of Plato's *Republic*, the article shows how the thesis of aesthetic 'justification' is caught up in a tension between Apolline and Dionysian interpretations, the first entailing a quasi-Homeric sense that the Olympians justify human existence by living a transfigured form of it themselves, the second involving a tragic insight into reality as itself the creative work of a 'world-artist', the latter allusively associated by Nietzsche with the philosophy of Heraclitus.

'For those who wish to derive only a *scholarly* satisfaction from the work, I have not made things easy, since when all is said and done I did not take them into account at all. I do not cite my sources.'<sup>1</sup> With that blunt but rather understated (and in some degree disingenuous) entry in one of his notebooks from 1872 – far more deadpan in tone than many others of the same period (there is, for instance, a nearby note which equates philologists with castrati ...)<sup>2</sup> – Friedrich Nietzsche encapsulates the inescapable provocation of *The Birth of Tragedy*: a work written by a classical scholar in defiance of the most fundamental norms and protocols of his profession. In the near century-and-a-half since the publication of Nietzsche's first book, so much has changed in classical scholarship (partly, of course, under the influence of forces which Nietzsche himself helped shape) that the original scandal of the work has inevitably faded into the historical middle distance. Indeed, the paradoxical status which Nietzsche himself conceived for his book, with its lack of documentation serving (among other things) as a pointed symbol of resistance to what he took to be the dead weight of institutionalised philological practices, has been ironically reversed by the subjection of *The Birth of Tragedy* itself to the operations of historical-critical scholarship, including extensive

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<sup>1</sup> 'Denen, welche nur eine *gelehrte* Befriedigung dabei empfinden wollen, habe ich es nicht leicht gemacht, weil ich auf sie zuletzt gar nicht rechnete. Die Citate fehlen.' Nietzsche, KSA 7, 437, 19[55]: for citations from Nietzsche, see the note at the head of the Bibliography below; *The Birth of Tragedy* is abbreviated as *BT* throughout. All translations from Nietzsche are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> KSA 7, 437-8, 19[58].

treatment in the scholarly genre *par excellence*, the commentary.<sup>3</sup> Scholarship, it might seem, has defeated Nietzsche's attempt to circumvent or even overcome it.

I make no apology (either to Nietzsche or to the reader) for the fact that this paper will add, after a fashion at any rate, to historical-critical scholarship on *The Birth of Tragedy*. It will do so, however, in a spirit which tries to respect the book's provocative strangeness while nonetheless endeavouring to make sense of its multi-layered texture of thought. Like many readers, I find the work alternately exhilarating and frustrating both in its ideas and in its mode of discourse. A similar ambivalence is captured by the world's leading authority on the Dionysiac in ancient Greek religion, Albert Henrichs, when he says of the work's central polarity of the Apolline and the Dionysian that 'it is almost irresistible, and yet it must be resisted ...': Henrichs finds the book flawed by elements of 'sheer fantasy' and wilful disregard for evidence, yet also valuable for its 'sublime prose' and 'daring vision'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the mixed feelings which the book now readily elicits from scholarly readers is arguably an appropriate counterpart to Nietzsche's own conception of it – and of classical scholarship in general – as a 'centaur': a combination of 'art' and 'science', creativity and knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Precisely how, so to speak, the anatomical proportions of the centaur are calibrated by its readers has proved a crucial factor in determining verdicts on the importance of the book. If *The Birth of Tragedy* represents an intellectual watershed for its author, it can also be seen as an epoch-making symptom of conflicting forces within the values of Classics as a discipline.<sup>6</sup> Grappling with the book remains a significant challenge, therefore, for

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<sup>3</sup> The most recent commentary in German, Schmidt (2012), was preceded by Reibnitz (1992), which deals with just the first twelve sections (but in a more philological manner than Schmidt), and Landfester (1994), which also contains a useful selection of Nietzsche's other early writings on the Greeks. In English, Lenson (1987), though calling itself a commentary, is lightweight and flawed; Burnham and Jesinghausen (2010) takes a wide-angle cultural approach. Silk and Stern (1983) remains indispensable as a book-length study which incorporates some of the elements of commentary; not dissimilar, though more compact, is Ugolini (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Henrichs (2005) 455, 457. Cf. Henrichs (1984), which remains an important analysis of Nietzsche's influence on modern approaches to the Dionysian; see also Zimmermann (2012) on Nietzsche's influence on subsequent approaches to tragedy. Some details of Nietzsche's relationship to 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarship on both Apollo and Dionysus can be traced in Konaris (2016): see s.v. Nietzsche in the index of scholars.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche called classical philology 'this strange Centaur' ('dieses sonderbaren Centauren') as early as his inaugural lecture (1869) on 'Homer und die klassische Philologie': KGW II.1, 253, Landfester (1994) 15 (with modernised spelling 'Zentauren').

<sup>6</sup> For recognition that *BT* reflects a tension in 19<sup>th</sup> century German classical scholarship between positivist/historicist and creative-imaginative approaches to antiquity, see Mansfeld (2010), though he wrongly credits Nietzsche with the 'discovery' of Greek pessimism (55), which had earlier been recognised by Leopardi and Schopenhauer. On the tension in question as a wider phenomenon, cf. Grafton (1992) 225-8. We know from his notes for *Wir Philologen* (1875) that Nietzsche was influenced by Wolf's principle that the best scholarship needed to be harnessed to a kind of artistic creativity: see KSA 8, 26-7, 3[45] and [47]; the same notion underlies the piquant

classicists of various persuasions. I shall attempt to meet the challenge myself by combining close reading (an aspect of philology for which, in a certain sense, Nietzsche always retained a sort of nostalgia)<sup>7</sup> with an interest in a number of those Greek ‘sources’ which the work declines to cite but with which, just beneath the surface, it is tacitly and yet sometimes antagonistically engaged.

The core of my argument will take the form of a sustained scrutiny of what is often described as *The Birth of Tragedy*’s most important idea.<sup>8</sup> The idea in question, which will turn out (so I shall contend) to be something more than a single claim, is highlighted by Nietzsche himself in his remarkable ‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’, written for a new edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1886, as the ‘provocative’ or even ‘offensive’ proposition that ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the existence of the world *justified*’ (with Nietzsche’s own emphasis here and below).<sup>9</sup> That wording does not, in fact, correspond exactly to either of the two main formulations of the point in the original book, the first of which, in §5, states that ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally *justified*’, and the second, in §24, that ‘only as an aesthetic phenomenon does existence and the world seem justified’.<sup>10</sup> It is no mere pedantry to note those small-looking variations of wording (and emphasis); they will acquire more significance once we take account of other parts of the

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description of Leopardi as ‘the modern ideal of a philologist’, *ibid.* 22, 3[23]. *BT* §20 itself shows that Nietzsche sees a radical conflict between the cultural ideals of Hellenism and the technical-historical methods of scholarship: KSA 1, 129-31.

<sup>7</sup> See, most poignantly, the Preface §5 to *Morgenröte*: ‘Not for nothing has one been a philologist, perhaps that is what one still is – that is to say, a teacher of slow reading’ (‘Man ist nicht umsonst Philologe gewesen, man ist es vielleicht noch, das will sagen, ein Lehrer des langsamen Lesens’, KSA 3, 17.10-12). Ugolini (2000) provides a compendium of Nietzsche’s own philological writings; Jensen and Heit (2014) is an uneven collection of papers on the subject. See also Cancik (2000) and many of the contributions to Bishop (2004), with Porter (2000b) and Benne (2005) for detailed but contrasting readings – the former radical, the latter relatively conservative – of the long-term strands of ‘philology’ in Nietzsche’s thought.

<sup>8</sup> For such descriptions, see Landfester (1994) 584 (‘Schlüsselsatz’), Schacht (1983) 344 (‘central proposition’), Tanner (1993) 120 (‘cardinal tenet’, and treating it as an idea which suffuses the whole work, xiii), Müller (2005) 35 (a fundamental ‘Credo’ of young Nietzsche). Silk and Stern (1983) 391 call it an ‘elusive apothegm’. Two recent philosophical readings of Nietzsche’s proposition are Came (2006), who puts emphasis on justification as ‘subjective’ but is careless with Nietzsche’s text (e.g. wrongly claiming, 42, that *BT* never explicitly refers to pessimism, and dubiously ascribing to Nietzsche the claim that ‘real suffering can be beautiful’, 52), and Leiter (forthcoming), who interprets aesthetic justification as a matter of affective reattachment to life in resistance to existential, moral and epistemic aversion.

<sup>9</sup> ‘... dass nur als ästhetisches Phänomen das Dasein der Welt *gerechtfertigt* ist’: KSA 1, 17.11-12 (‘Versuch einer Selbstkritik’, §5); here and elsewhere italics are used in place of Nietzsche’s emphasised letter-spacing (German ‘sperren’). ‘Provocative’ or ‘offensive’ are possible translations of the adjective ‘anzüglich’ with which Nietzsche (ironically?) describes his proposition.

<sup>10</sup> See respectively *BT* §5, ‘nur als *aesthetisches Phänomen* ist das Dasein und die Welt ewig *gerechtfertigt*’ (KSA 1, 47.26-7), and *BT* §24, ‘dass nur als ein *aesthetisches Phänomen* das Dasein und die Welt *gerechtfertigt* erscheint’ (KSA 1, 152.19-20).

intricate web of motifs with which they are connected. In the ‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’, Nietzsche links the thought at issue directly to the statement in the work’s 1872 Foreword to Wagner that art is ‘the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity’ of human life.<sup>11</sup> In *The Birth of Tragedy*, ‘art’ and ‘aesthetics’ are mutually dependent concepts,<sup>12</sup> so it is legitimate to paraphrase the statement from the Foreword as claiming that aesthetic experience is the most important of life-values, and therefore, in some sense (psychologically at least, though not logically), the ultimate justification of life.<sup>13</sup> In those very general terms, there is no doubt about the complexion of the *The Birth of Tragedy*’s aesthetic philosophy, nor about the status of its notion of an exclusively aesthetic ‘justification’ of the world as a radical anti-theodicy,<sup>14</sup> a repudiation of the theologico-ethical foundations of several major worldviews, including those of Platonism and Stoicism in antiquity, Christianity and Leibnizian philosophy in more recent times. But it is much easier to say what is being rejected here than what is to replace it, not least because of a recurrent instability between, so to speak, internal and external perspectives, both of them experienced through art but the first of them humanly constructed, the second ‘eternally’ valid (in Nietzsche’s piquant appropriation of that adverb from traditional theodicies). The chief aim of this article is to try to clarify the proposal of an aesthetic justification of the world through a careful re-examination of some of the Greek ideas sown into the fabric of the work.

In the opening section of *BT*, Nietzsche famously characterises Apollo as the god of all image-making activities, whether externalised (as in sculpture) or enacted in the mind’s inner fantasy world, especially dreaming. He includes prophecy in this same realm, and takes the healing powers of sleep and dreaming to be ‘the symbolic analogue of prophetic skill and in general of the arts through which life is made possible and worth living’.<sup>15</sup> Despite the breadth of this formulation, the application to strictly Apolline art is unequivocal. That point

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<sup>11</sup> KSA 1, 17.8-10: ‘Bereits im Vorwort an Richard Wagner wird die Kunst – und *nicht* die Moral – als die eigentlich *metaphysische* Thätigkeit des Menschen hingestellt’, with reference to the original Foreword, KSA 1, 23.14-16 (‘... dass ich von der Kunst als der höchsten Aufgabe und der eigentlich metaphysischen Thätigkeit dieses Lebens im Sinne des Mannes überzeugt bin ...’).

<sup>12</sup> Note the work’s very first sentence, KSA 1, 25.1-6, where ‘die ästhetische Wissenschaft’ and ‘Kunst’ are correlative terms.

<sup>13</sup> For the psychological conversion of life’s ‘highest value’ into a ‘justification’ of the world, see the important notebook entry of 1887 where Nietzsche rejects this same aspect of every ‘philosophical-moral cosmody [cf. n. 41 below] and theodicy’: KSA 12, 533.24-7, 10[137].

<sup>14</sup> See *BT* §3, KSA 36.23 (quoted below), for the idea that the Greeks’ Olympian religion was ‘the only satisfactory theodicy’. Elsewhere, Nietzsche sometimes prefers to say that because the Olympians did not create the world, a theodicy was not a problem for the Greeks: e.g. KSA 7, 77, 3[62] (notebook of early 1870), repeated in *Die Geburt des tragischen Gedankens* (also 1870), KSA 1, 589.9-10. Later in his career, he is prepared to borrow the term ‘theodicy’ for his own philosophy of ‘saying yes to life’: KSA 12, 467-8, 10[21] (late 1887). For various aspects of *BT*’s relationship to traditional theodicies, including Lutheran fideism, see Schmidt (2012) 59, 162-4, 371-2.

<sup>15</sup> KSA 1, 27.33-28.1, ‘... das symbolische Analogon der wahrsagenden Fähigkeit und überhaupt der Künste, durch die das Leben möglich und lebenswerth gemacht wird’.

matters, as does that fact that, in Nietzsche's evaluative idiom, the vocabulary of making life 'worth living' is closely associated with the idea of 'justifying' life.<sup>16</sup> We need to keep in mind here that, independently of the Apolline-Dionysian polarity, Nietzsche had a permanent attachment to the thought that art existed in order to make life worth living: as early as his Basle inaugural lecture of 1869 he declares, 'Life is worth living, says art, the most beautiful seductress; life is worth knowing, says science/scholarship [Wissenschaft]'; and similar suggestions can be found in the notebooks as late as 1888.<sup>17</sup> So at the start of the argument of the *Birth* it seems that it is Apolline art which occupies a space Nietzsche elsewhere ascribes to art *tout court*. It is only as the complications of the Dionysian enter the picture that thoughts of art as making life worth living, and/or providing a justification for existence, become entangled in further qualifications. But it will prove unclear, on my analysis, how far those qualifications modify Nietzsche's most indispensable aesthetic conviction.

The initial identification of art in its Apolline capacity as a fundamental life-value is reinforced and elaborated in §3 of *BT*. We can trace here a telling sequence of ideas which it is worth enumerating concisely for future reference: first, that the Olympian gods (not just Apollo) are a collective 'deification' and artistic idealisation of the whole of existence, both good and bad (as opposed to representing morally or spiritually elevated forces); second, that Olympian religion was a means by which the Greeks could 'overcome' their Silenic knowledge of the underlying horrors of existence; third, that art (once again, the context strictly requires Apolline art) comes about in order to 'perfect' existence and 'seduce' us into continuing to live; fourth, that in Olympian religion 'the gods justify the life of men by living it themselves – the only satisfactory theodicy!'; fifth, that in Homeric epic life itself is desirable and death the only evil, as the famous sentiments of Achilles in the Odyssean underworld affirm.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a clear illustration of this point, note that in 'Homer's Contest' ('Homer's Wettkampf'), completed at the end of 1872, Nietzsche uses 'berechtigt', itself synonymous with 'gerechtfertigt' in the sense of 'justified', as interchangeable with 'lebenswerth': KSA 1, 786.1-3. For other pertinent uses of 'lebenswerth', see e.g. KSA 7, 101.23, 5[32] (notebook of 1870-1), 'Wie muß die Welt erscheinen, um lebenswerth zu sein?' ('How must the world appear in order to make life worth living?'), as well as *BT* itself, §25, KSA 1, 155.11 (of Apolline art).

<sup>17</sup> For the quotation from the inaugural ('Das Leben ist werth gelebt zu werden, sagt die Kunst, die schönste Verführerin; das Leben ist werth, erkannt zu werden, sagt die Wissenschaft'), see KGW II.1, 251-2; cf. the related formulation in a notebook entry of spring 1870, KSA 7, 59, 3[3]. For art as the supreme enabler of and seductress to life, see also e.g. the notebook entries of 1888 in KSA 13, 194.10-12, 11[415], and 521.18-20, 17[3].

<sup>18</sup> The gods as a deification of both good and bad: KSA 1, 35.1-3. Silenic knowledge, i.e. pessimism, overcome ('überwunden') by Olympian religion: *ibid.*, 36.7. Art (and Olympian religion) as the perfection of existence and a seduction to go on living: *ibid.*, 36.18-22. The gods justify human life by living it themselves ('So rechtfertigen die Götter das Menschenleben, indem sie es selbst leben — die allein genügende Theodicee!'): *ibid.*, 36.22-3 (for 'theodicy', cf. n. 14 above). Life as desirable, death as the only evil: *ibid.*, 36.23-30.

The sequence of thought just summarised displays an unmistakable (though often ignored) affinity with Nietzsche's aphoristic statements about the aesthetic justification of existence. The picture is made more difficult, however, by the interweaving of potentially divergent ideas. In particular, there is a tension between two conceptions of Olympian religion: one, which sees it as a magnified projection of all aspects of life, both good and bad; the other, which regards the divine world as one of ideal perfection, even (Nietzsche suggests) a kind of 'bright sunshine' radiating a sheer joy in existence. This tension might be thought to reflect a sort of ironic counterpoint (and the irony was drawn out in antiquity itself by the Menippean traditions represented in Lucian's writing)<sup>19</sup> between the background and foreground of the religious mythology of Homeric epic, in which the gods can be described programmatically as eternally blessed (μάκαρες) and serene (ῥεῖα ζῶοντες), yet also be shown as perpetually drawn to and immersed in a world of conflict which does indeed seem to entail the 'deification' of all aspects of experience (with the single exception of mortality itself). Where Nietzsche is concerned, the consequence of this point is a lingering uncertainty about his contention that art 'makes life possible'. Does Homeric epic do this by projecting a strongly human and non-idealistic form of meaning and value onto the imagined Olympians (as 'the gods justify the life of men by living it themselves' seems to suggest), or alternatively, as Nietzsche says in the same breath, by offering to the human gaze 'a transfiguring mirror'<sup>20</sup> which helps people live in its illusion of perfection and thereby block out the pessimism which the folk wisdom of Silenus would otherwise whisper to them?

However we try to resolve these uncertainties in §3, where Nietzsche's position is left somewhat suspended between the alternatives just outlined, it is undeniable that the Homeric justification of existence manifests a strictly Apolline capacity of art, a capacity to use seductively beautiful images to make life 'worth living'. At this stage of the work, no implications are yet visible for Dionysian art – nor, therefore, for tragedy. In this connection, it is a crucial consideration, though one which has rarely received its fair share of attention, that Nietzsche resolutely excludes the notion of Homeric epic itself as a tragic art-form – a notion widely attested in antiquity and implicitly incorporated by Nietzsche's Basle colleague

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<sup>19</sup> As a token example of the relevant type of irony in Lucian, see the piquant image of a psychologically oppressed Zeus at *Bis acc.* 1-3. On various aspects of Lucianic writing in relation to Greek life-values, see Halliwell (2008) ch. 9.

<sup>20</sup> '... einen verklärenden Spiegel': KSA 1, 36.21. Although this phrase was surely borrowed from Schopenhauer (see *The world as will and representation*, vol. 2, ch. 30, for the statement that life itself is never beautiful, only its representation in the transfiguring mirror of art: 'im verklärenden Spiegel der Kunst', Schopenhauer [1988] vol. 2, 436), Nietzsche's application of it to Apolline Greek art may also have been influenced by Alcidamas's description of the *Odyssey* as 'a beautiful mirror of human life' (καλὸν ἀνθρώπινου βίου κάτοπτρον), as quoted (and criticised) at Aristotle *Rhet.* 3.3, 1406b12-13, a text Nietzsche knew well from his work on Greek rhetoric. *BT*'s more extensive use of the language of 'mirroring' must owe something to Nietzsche's tacit revaluation of the terms of Socrates' contemptuous comparison of mimetic art to a mirror at Plato *Rep.* 10.596d-e: Plato's mundanely realistic mirror (so easy to turn in any direction, as Socrates sarcastically says) becomes a metaphysical instrument of transformation, most pointedly in *BT* §19, KSA 1, 126.17-21, where the Dionysian mirror is contrasted with the slavish imitation of appearances! Cf. n. 48 below.

Jacob Burckhardt into his own perspective on Greek pessimism.<sup>21</sup> Because of his interpretation of the Apolline-Dionysian aesthetic dichotomy, Nietzsche commits himself to adopting a one-sided view of epic as a glorification of heroic achievement. He takes epic, in its supposedly Apolline delight in pure semblances, to be intrinsically incapable of achieving a tragic effect, as he will spell out most unambiguously in *BT* §12.<sup>22</sup> Equally, however, the concept which Nietzsche calls a ‘pessimism of *strength*’ in the 1886 ‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’,<sup>23</sup> and which he ties directly to the work’s account of tragedy, is prefigured in §3’s view that Homeric epic overcomes and reverses the wisdom of Silenus, suppressing the knowledge of existential horror behind the illusion of Apolline beauty.

But if that is so, a larger question poses itself: if Homer’s Apolline art can defeat, or triumph over, unmitigated (‘Silenic’) pessimism, why is that not enough as an aesthetic justification of existence? Why did the Greeks need tragedy at all? Nietzsche’s answer, in §4, purports to be not just aesthetic but historical. He supposes that Homeric epic is a kind of ‘naive’ dream-state, with its beautiful glorification of life, which depends on a complete suppression and ‘forgetting’ of the terrible, primordial ground of being, the domain of irremediable contradiction and suffering. This means in turn that, historically speaking, it was possible for a Dionysian awareness of the primordial to irrupt at a certain point into Greek consciousness, to break into what Nietzsche, in a proto-Freudian metaphor, calls the ‘artificially dammed-up world’ of Apolline illusion.<sup>24</sup> In some sense, then, Apolline art, even in its Homeric form, was not enough for the Greeks. Converting a chronological relationship between poetic genres into an overarching cultural teleology, Nietzsche is driven to saying that archaic Greeks came to recognise in themselves a kind of close relationship to the Dionysian and an overwhelming need to give expression to it. ‘Apollo could not live without Dionysus!’<sup>25</sup>

In scrutinising how Nietzsche’s idea of justifying the world as an aesthetic phenomenon unfolds in a complex series of moves, each of them a response to his Greek ‘sources’, I need at this stage to draw attention to a vital Platonic subtext in this same section (4) of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche here positions art in a conspicuously tripartite

<sup>21</sup> Homer as tragedian is not just a Platonic motif at Plato *Rep.* 10.595b-c, 605c, 607a; it is clearly taken as already *familiar* to Plato’s readers: one earlier trace may lie in Aeschylus’s putative description of his plays as ‘slices of fish from Homer’s great banquets’, Aeschylus T112a *TrGF* (*apud* Athenaeus 8.347e). Aristotle *Poet.* 4, 1448b34-49a2, reaffirms the point. Further references are provided by Herington (1985) 213-15, together with various Homeric scholia which connect Homer and tragedy, e.g. schol. AT on *Il.*1.1a (Homer’s creation of a tragic proemium). In attempting to vindicate Nietzsche’s view of Homeric ‘illusions’, Young (2013) 175 offers a superficial view of epic as entirely ‘objective’ averse to ‘empathy’ – a view which flatly contradicts ancient Greek perceptions. Burckhardt’s treatment of Greek pessimism makes no distinction between epic and tragedy: Burckhardt (1977) vol. 2, 348-87, translated in Burckhardt (1998) 85-117.

<sup>22</sup> Epic as incapable of the tragic effect, ‘die *tragische* Wirkung’ (Nietzsche’s emphasis): *BT* §12, KSA 1, 83.27.

<sup>23</sup> KSA 1, 12.12-13, ‘einen Pessimismus der *Stärke*’.

<sup>24</sup> ‘... künstlich gedämmte Welt’, KSA 1, 40.32.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Apollo konnte nicht ohne Dionysus leben!’, KSA 1, 40.28-9.

metaphysical schema: at its base, the primordial, undifferentiated Will, with all its contradiction and pain; above that, the realm of phenomena or appearances, ‘Erscheinung’, in which our waking lives are entirely enmeshed; and at the top, art *qua* a ‘semblance of semblance’.<sup>26</sup> Needless to say, Nietzsche is here adapting Schopenhauerian categories, from which one can construct a related but different tripartition consisting of the Will, representations/phenomena, and Platonic ideas as apprehended in art.<sup>27</sup> But Nietzsche is also tacitly undertaking a revaluation of Platonic motifs themselves, in particular a combination of the *Republic*’s Cave analogy with the tripartite metaphysics employed to downgrade the status of mimetic art in book 10 of the same dialogue.

Despite considerable interest in Nietzsche’s relationship to Plato more generally, the present point tends to receive scant notice.<sup>28</sup> It was during the very period when he was working on *The Birth of Tragedy* that Nietzsche famously described his own philosophy, in a notebook entry from early 1871, as inverted Platonism (‘umgedrehter Platonismus’), whose aim he glossed as living in the realm of appearances.<sup>29</sup> The metaphysics of *BT* 4 exemplifies that description. The result, in relation to the relevant parts of the *Republic*, can be schematically simplified as follows, where the right-hand side inverts the hierarchical value-scheme of the left.

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<sup>26</sup> This last phrase, “‘Schein des Scheins’” (KSA 1, 39.12), is placed in inverted commas by Nietzsche, a detail ignored by the German commentators but possibly an allusion to its occurrence in Jean Paul’s novel *Titan*, Cycle 130, where it refers to the idea of a play-within-a-play, as in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Miller (1975) vol. 6, 756. Cf. n. 36 below.

<sup>27</sup> Schopenhauer himself mentions Plato’s Cave several times in *The world as will and representation*, esp. vol. 1, §§31, 36 and the Appendix: Schopenhauer (1988) vol. 1, 235-6, 258-9, 536-7 (this last mention calling it the most important passage in all Plato’s works). Note also that Schopenhauer cites the metaphysics and aesthetics of *Rep.* book 10, *ibid.* §41, Schopenhauer (1988) vol. 1, 284-5. For some recent discussion of the larger question of Nietzsche’s relationship to Schopenhauer in *BT*, see Harloe (2008), taking issue with Porter (2000a).

<sup>28</sup> There is, surprisingly, no reference to Plato in connection with this aspect of *BT* §4 in Reibnitz (1992). The Platonic connection is noted by Landfester (1994) 480, 492, Schmidt (2012) 148, Burnham and Jesinghausen (2010) 42, 59 (though ‘copy of a copy’ is not authentically Platonic: cf. Halliwell [2002] 138), 82 (though ‘playful’ hardly seems right), 170 n. 42. Cf. Young (2013) 174, but he fails to register that the Platonic critique applies to tragedy as much as to Homer (and indeed to Homer himself as ‘tragedian’, n. 21 above).

<sup>29</sup> ‘My philosophy, *inverted Platonism*: the further from true Being, the purer, more beautiful, better it is. Living in appearances as the goal.’ (KSA 7, 199.14-16, 7[156]: ‘Meine Philosophie *umgedrehter Platonismus*: je weiter ab vom wahrhaft Seienden, um so reiner schöner besser ist es. Das Leben im Schein als Ziel.’) For analysis of *BT*’s inverted Platonism, see now Cattaneo (2016). Unfortunately one learns little from the Basle lecture course on Plato which Nietzsche must have been preparing when completing *BT* and which he delivered for the first time in the winter semester of 1871-2: for the lecture notes, see KGW II.4, 1-188; cf. n. 40 below for one telling detail.



Plato	Nietzsche
transcendent reality: Forms, the Good	dreams/Apolline art: ‘semblance of semblance’ (= redemption, ‘Erlösung’)
empirical world: appearances (φαινόμενα)	empirical world: appearances, semblance (‘Schein’, ‘Erscheinung’)
dreams/mimetic art: deceptive apparitions (εἰδῶλα)	primordial reality: the primal oneness (‘das Ur-Eine’) of pain and contradiction

In both cases, the empirical world of human experience is one of illusory becoming, but whereas in the metaphysical vista opened up by Socrates in the *Republic* the purpose of philosophy is to escape from illusion towards a knowledge of transcendent truth and value, the direction of Nietzsche’s thought is defiantly in the opposite direction: he proposes the doubling and intensification of illusion through art as the only ‘salvation’ or ‘redemption’. One might add that whereas intelligibility on the Platonic scheme of things lies outside the Cave, Nietzsche takes pains to stress that it is dreaming, and therefore art as well, which possesses a special degree of intelligibility.<sup>30</sup>

To accept the thesis that, in an allusive manner highly characteristic of his writing, Nietzsche inverts the metaphysics of both the Cave and the aesthetics of *Republic* book 10, we do not need to resolve the knotty problem of how those two parts of the *Republic* are themselves related (is mimetic art part of the Cave allegory, as some have thought? or do the arguments of book 10 form a kind of aesthetic supplement to the metaphysics of the dialogue’s middle books, as I am more inclined to believe?).<sup>31</sup> The thesis is reinforced by several key details: first, that thoughts of the Cave had already been prompted by §1’s description of dreaming (on the part, at least, of the artistically sensitive person) as something more than a ‘shadow-play’, a description should be compared with Socrates’ metaphor of dreaming for existence in the Cave (*Rep.* 7.520c); second, that Nietzsche’s phrase ‘Schein des Scheins’ is close to Socrates’ description in *Republic* 10 of mimetic art as a ‘mimesis of a phantasm’ (φαντάσματος ... μίμησις, 598b), and that the latter is probably the very passage which Nietzsche has in mind when, revealingly, he later (in §14) makes a direct reference to the aesthetics of *Republic* 10 and takes Plato to treat art as ‘the imitation of an apparition’ (‘Nachahmung eines Scheinbildes’); lastly, by the fact that the Cave allegory will be powerfully evoked, as we shall see in due course, in §9 of Nietzsche’s book.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See *BT* §1, KSA 1, 27.8, for the deeply counterintuitive claim of the total intelligibility (‘Allverständigkeit’) of dreams (and therefore of Apolline art).

<sup>31</sup> For a reading of the Cave as in part a critique of mimetic art, see Burnyeat (1999) 236-43. Cf. Halliwell (2002) 57-8 for difficulties in matching up the Cave with the aesthetics of *Rep.* 10.

<sup>32</sup> More than a shadow-play: ‘nicht nur wie ein Schattenbild’, KSA 1, 27.12 (but contrast the reference to Apolline drama as only a ‘Schattenbild’ of the world, *BT* §21, KSA 1, 138.25). ‘Schein des Scheins’: KSA 1, 39.12; see n. 26 above. The imitation of an apparition: ‘Nachahmung eines Scheinbildes’, KSA 1, 93.11; cf. the related passages in both ‘Socrates and Tragedy’ (KSA 1, 542.31-2, 543.30-1), ‘Socrates and Greek Tragedy’ (KSA 1, 631.20), and a notebook entry of 1870-1 where the ‘Socratic’ definition of art, allegedly followed by Plato, is formulated as

If the first three sections of *The Birth of Tragedy* ground the life-value of (Apolline) art in the seductive beauty of illusion, and if §4 underscores this with its inversion of Platonic metaphysics and aesthetics, our understanding faces a severe challenge when in §5 we reach the first of the two main occurrences of Nietzsche's 'provocative' dictum about an aesthetic justification of the world. The thrust of §5 is to contest the prevailing stereotype of lyric poets, including Archilochus (a 'Dionysian-Apolline genius', who in that respect anticipates the supposedly unique achievement of tragedy),<sup>33</sup> as 'subjective' artists. All true artists, Nietzsche insists, must escape from their own individuality and achieve a creative state of pure, will-less, disinterested contemplation (a state, significantly, which Nietzsche elsewhere associates specifically with Apolline art).<sup>34</sup> In the case of the lyric poet, this starts with a Dionysian and mystical experience, mediated through music, of the primal realm of being, which is then symbolically transmuted into Apolline images of an only ostensibly subjective 'I'. A number of important details involving Nietzsche's suppression of his 'sources' will have to be left aside here, among them the somewhat ironic fact – ironic, given his general attitude to Aristotle – that the picture of Archilochus as a Dionysian musician is partly dependent on the testimony of Aristotle's *Politics* about the ecstatic 'melodies of Olympus'.<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of my present argument I want to focus on the startling way in which Nietzsche translates his conception of the lyric musician-cum-poet into a surrogate for the artistic creativity of what he calls (in a unique use of the term) the world-genius (Weltgenius).<sup>36</sup> It is precisely *à propos* the suggestion that human life is itself the artwork of this world-genius or world-artist that Nietzsche introduces (and in curiously parenthetical fashion) the very proposition that 'only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*'. The proposition accordingly shifts us into deeply mysterious

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'the copy of an apparition' ('... in der sokratischen Definition der Kunst – als des Abbildes des Scheinbildes ...'), KSA 7, 179.26-8, 7[124]; see full translation of this last note in Geuss and Nehamas (2009) 40-2. Cf. also the idea of the genius as producing 'copies of the copy', i.e. artistic reflections of a life which is already a representation: KSA 7, 200.15, 7[157].

<sup>33</sup> In addition to the first sentence of *BT* §5, KSA 1, 42.15-16, Archilochus is explicitly called a 'Dionysian-Apolline' artist in two notebook entries from 1870-1: KSA 7, 190.23, 7[127] (part of a lengthy draft for *BT*) and 222-3, 8[9].

<sup>34</sup> See esp. *BT* §22, KSA 1, 140.22-6, with my discussion below.

<sup>35</sup> The Aristotelian passage is *Pol.* 8.5, 1340a9-12. Nietzsche surreptitiously takes it as support for his conception of Dionysian music as affording an experience of unity with the primal ground of reality. He alludes to the passage in *BT* §6, KSA 1, 49.27-34, where the description 'orgiastic' reflects Aristotle *Pol.* 8.6, 1341a22 (of the *aulos*), 8.7, 1342b3 (of the *aulos* and the Phrygian mode, with a following reference to dithyramb). For proof of Nietzsche's (con)fusion of Aristotle's evidence with his own idea of the Dionysian, see also the notebook entry from 1870-1, KSA 7, 196, 7[143], where, as well as a bare mention of 'Olympus in Aristotle, *Politics*', there is the explicit note: 'Die dionysische Musik (Aristoteles über den Orgiasmus)'. Nietzsche must also have noticed, in this connection, the reference to Olympus at Plato *Symp.* 215c.

<sup>36</sup> KSA 1, 45.26. None of the commentators says anything about this word as such. It seems likely that Nietzsche had met it in a note to Jean Paul's *Hesperus*, '8. Hundposttag': Miller (1975) vol. 1, 589 n. 1. Cf. n. 26 above.

territory, positing a world in which humans are themselves figures in a work of art.<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche twice asserts that life's entire 'comedy of art' (Kunstkomödie) is created by, and performed for the pleasure of, the world-artist, while we humans ourselves know no more of our artistic significance than do soldiers, as he puts it, on a painted canvas.<sup>38</sup>

Many discussions of the aesthetics of *The Birth of Tragedy* smooth out the strangeness of this passage in §5. In the 'Attempt at Self-Criticism', indeed, Nietzsche himself partially does so by connecting his provocative aphorism with the conviction expressed in the Foreword to Wagner, already quoted, that art is the 'highest task and the truly metaphysical activity' of human life (my emphasis). But *BT* §5, with its extravagant image of a world-artist, explicitly locates its principle of aesthetic justification beyond the consciousness or perspective of human beings themselves.<sup>39</sup> It is essential to observe here that, had he wanted to, Nietzsche could have hypothesised the cosmic aesthetic of a world-artist without making this inaccessible to human minds: on the Greek side, after all, antecedents for such a view were to be found both in Plato (including, in different ways, passages of the *Symposium* and *Timaeus*)<sup>40</sup> and in Stoicism. But to do that would have been to produce something in the mould of a traditional theodicy – an external justification which human minds could nonetheless come to understand – rather than the scandalous *anti*-theodicy which *The Birth of*

<sup>37</sup> This idea was anticipated in *BT* §1, where participants in Dionysian celebrations are described as themselves a work of art, the product of nature's own artistic power and/or the work of the Dionysian world-artist: KSA 1, 30.9-15.

<sup>38</sup> KSA 1, 47.18-34; with the idea of human life as 'Kunstkomödie', cf. *BT* §1, 'the entire "divine comedy" of life' ('die ganze "göttliche Komödie" des Lebens'), KSA 1, 27.10-11. On Nietzsche's world-artist, note the critique in Silk and Stern (1983) 351-4, though they strangely turn this into the notion of 'a benevolent deity' (354); cf. Nietzsche's own retrospective gloss, 'an entirely thoughtless and amoral artist-god' ('einen gänzlich unbedenklichen und unmoralischen Künstler-Gott'): 'Versuch einer Selbstkritik' §5, KSA 1, 17.15-16.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche qualifies the notion that humans lack awareness of their own 'aesthetic' status by allowing for the individual genius's momentary fusion with the world-artist in the very act of artistic creation: see esp. KSA 1, 45.23-29, 47.34 – 48.6. For the status of Nietzsche's hypothesis as an 'assumption', see KSA 1, 47.22-3 ('wohl aber dürfen wir von uns selbst annehmen ...').

<sup>40</sup> As regards the *Symposium*, Nietzsche's own aphorism, 'only as an aesthetic phenomenon ...', can be heard as a subtle gesture of inverted Platonism in its ironic echoing and revaluing of Diotima's remark at *Symp.* 211d that 'here, if anywhere, is where a human being should live, in the contemplation of beauty itself' (ἐνταῦθα τοῦ βίου, ... εἴπερ που ἄλλοθι, βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπων, θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν): Nehamas (2007a) 137 touches on this rarely noticed connection; and cf. the quasi-Nietzschean translation of Diotima's remark in Nehamas (2007b), though without any reference to *BT*'s aphorism. We know that the sentence in question struck Nietzsche: in his Basle lecture course on Plato (n. 29 above), Diotima's remark is paraphrased as 'Only in this vision [sc. of the beautiful in itself] is the right way to live revealed to him' ('In diesem Schauen [sc. des Schönen an sich] geht ihm erst das rechte Leben auf': KGW II.4, 109.17). For the demiurge in *Timaeus* as a kind of 'artist', see esp. *Tim.* 55c (where the verb διαζωγραφῶν is a metaphor from painting), with 29a for the idea of the cosmos as 'most beautiful', κάλλιστος (cf. Taylor [1928] 72, 'The world is the supreme work of art').

*Tragedy* advocates. In fact, it is, I suggest, Nietzsche's ambiguous motivation – to discard the theological and moral framework of a theodicy while at the same time gesturing ostentatiously towards what he elsewhere calls an aesthetic 'cosmodicy' (Kosmodicee) – which draws him into his exorbitant trope of the world-artist, with human life as the latter's art-work.<sup>41</sup> Far from clarifying the aesthetics of the argument up to this point, then, the aphorism in question creates a riddle. Whether its later occurrence can be said to solve the riddle remains to be seen.

In the space that intervenes between the two occurrences of the aphorism, however, there is much that is germane to the concept of an aesthetic justification of life. *BT* §7, whose main theme (silently and dubiously extrapolated from ch. 4 of Aristotle's *Poetics*)<sup>42</sup> is the putative origin of tragedy in a Dionysian satyr chorus, introduces two relevant claims: the first and more specific of these is that 'every true tragedy' affords its audience a 'metaphysical consolation' in the form of a sense that life itself is indestructibly powerful and joyous; the second, that (seemingly) all art, from the sublime to the comic, blocks our life-denying tendencies (towards either disgust or existential absurdity) by creating images or representations 'with which it is possible to live'.<sup>43</sup> The anti-Schopenhauerian cast of both claims has been much discussed, but the relationship between them is uncertain. Tragedy's 'metaphysical consolation' appears to be an exclusively Dionysian experience (a sublime intimation of the unity of being beneath the illusion of individuation), concentrated in a moment of ecstatic self-forgetting, though Nietzsche is ambiguous about whether it can or cannot last longer than the duration of the temporary Dionysian state itself.<sup>44</sup> Certainly he

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<sup>41</sup> The ironic status of Nietzsche's anti-theodicy also explains the adverb in §5's 'eternally justified' (see n. 10 above); cf. n. 50 below for a parallel in *BT* §16's suggestion that tragedy proclaims 'We believe in eternal life'. For Nietzsche's use of the term 'Cosmodicee/Kosmodicee', see n. 13 above, n. 76 below; he appears to have borrowed it from his friend Erwin Rohde, who had used it in expressing his reaction to *BT* itself: see Rohde's letter to Nietzsche of 6 Feb. 1872 in KGB II.2, 534 (no. 280), with Nietzsche's reply of mid-Feb., KGB II.1, 294 (no. 201).

<sup>42</sup> Somewhat ironically, the one occurrence of Aristotle's name in *BT* §7 (KSA 1, 52.25) is actually a reference to pseudo-Aristotle, *Probl.* 19.48, 922b18-19, for the idea (rejected by Nietzsche) that the tragic chorus represented the ordinary people. This is almost a red herring to distract us from Nietzsche's silent reliance on the *Poetics* (4.1449a20) for the 'satyric' element in the early stages of tragedy. On Nietzsche's radical reimagining of Aristotle's reference to 'the satyric', see the trenchant remarks of Else (1965) 9-10 (cf. 30).

<sup>43</sup> 'Metaphysical consolation': KSA 1, 56.7-8. Images or representations (cf. n. 46 below) 'with which it is possible to live': *ibid.*, 57.23. It is an extension of the second of these things, the Apolline version, which prevails in parts of Nietzsche's later aesthetics: see esp. *The Gay Science*, bk. 2, §107, on how art makes existence 'bearable as an aesthetic phenomenon' ('Als ästhetisches Phänomen ist uns das Dasein immer noch erträglich ...': KSA 3, 464.23-7). I call this an 'extension' from *BT* because Nietzsche here emphasises that art shows us how to make *ourselves* into an aesthetic phenomenon, viewing our own lives creatively in a non-moralising light (and, not least, in a comic spirit): cf. Nussbaum (1991) 101-2, 111 n. 29.

<sup>44</sup> See KSA 1, 56.25 ('während seiner Dauer', referring to the duration of the Dionysian experience) and 57.12 ('Jetzt verfängt kein Trost mehr', referring to the absence of

proceeds to speak of the risk of life-denying revulsion when we emerge from that state, and in consequence he invokes art as a form of ‘healing’ (one of his silent appropriations, incidentally, of a quasi-Aristotelian vocabulary of catharsis)<sup>45</sup> which operates through the generation of those images or ‘representations’ (Vorstellungen), including images both sublime and comic, ‘with which it is possible to live’.<sup>46</sup> It looks, then, as though *BT* §7 points towards two *different* kinds of artistic justification or life-value: one grounded in a powerfully Dionysian experience, the other involving a more general aesthetic of life-enabling and life-validating images of various kinds.

If there is a tension in *The Birth of Tragedy* between Dionysian and Apolline versions of the principle of an aesthetic justification of existence, this is in part entangled, I want to claim, with the ‘inverted Platonism’ to which I have already drawn attention in §4 and which reappears in §9’s allusions to the *Republic*’s Cave analogy.<sup>47</sup> In this second passage, Nietzsche compares the Apolline clarity of the language of Sophoclean heroes to ‘a light-image projected on a dark wall’.<sup>48</sup> In terms which additionally resonate with what one might call an Oedipal irony, he interprets such Apolline images as the opposite of a normal optical phenomenon (the appearance of dark spots in the eyes of those who have looked directly at

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consolation *after* the experience) for complementary indications of this point. At 56.9, however, Nietzsche speaks of tragedy’s metaphysical consolation as something with which tragedy ‘leaves’ us (‘mit welchem ... uns jede wahre Tragödie entlässt’); cf. ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’ §7, KSA 1, 469.33-4, where Nietzsche says we ‘return to life’, after the sublime experience of (tragic) art, ‘in a strangely consoled mood’ (‘... kehren wir in seltsam getrösteter Stimmung zum Leben zurück’).

<sup>45</sup> The adjective here (KSA 1, 57.21) is ‘heilkundig’; note its proximity to the idea of ‘discharge’ (‘Entladung’), 57.25-6: for the latter’s connection with the Bernaysian interpretation of catharsis, see the note of 1875, KSA 8, 79, 5[147]; cf. Landfester (1994) 620-22, Most (2009) 60-2, Schmidt (2012) 377. N.b. *BT* §21, KSA 1, 133.30-134.9, for a combination of the vocabulary of healing, discharge and purification. For other cases of tragic ‘healing’, cf. nn. 63, 65 below. Despite Nietzsche’s dismissal of Aristotelian catharsis in *BT* §22 (KSA 1, 142.20-26), he could still speak of catharsis in 1875 as ‘a fundamental law of the nature of the Greeks’: KSA 8, 79.23-4, 5[147]. But he later reverts to dismissing the idea: see esp. *Götzen-Dämmerung*, ‘Was ich den Alten verdanke’ §5 (KSA 6, 160). On Nietzsche’s relation to Aristotelian catharsis, see Ugolini (2002), Most (2009), with Silk and Stern (1983) 273-88 on the relationship of *BT* to Aristotle more generally. Cf. n. 54 below on pity and fear.

<sup>46</sup> The translation of ‘Vorstellungen’ in this passage as ‘representations’, Geuss and Speirs (1999) 40, is surely preferable to ‘notions’, e.g. Kaufmann (2000) 60, Smith (2000) 46, or even ‘ideas’, Tanner and Whiteside (1993) 40.

<sup>47</sup> Reibnitz (1992), Landfester (1994), and Schmidt (2012) make no reference to Plato’s Cave in relation to this passage (or to any other part of *BT*); nor do Silk and Stern (1983). There is a simple reference to the relevant passage of the *Republic* in Geuss and Speirs (1999) 46 n. 68; similarly, Smith (2000) 147 n. 53. The relevant point is well taken by Cattaneo (2016) 286-8.

<sup>48</sup> ‘... das auf eine dunkle Wand geworfene Lichtbild’: KSA 1, 65.7; for ‘Lichtbild’, cf. *BT* §24, KSA 1, 150.14. The Cave-like imagery in this passage is supplemented by the trope of the heroes as the myth’s projection in bright, mirror-like reflections, ‘in diesen hellen Spiegelungen’, KSA 1, 65.9. This belongs with *BT*’s general figuring of art as a matter of (metaphysical) ‘mirroring’. Cf. n. 20 above.

the sun) and pronounces that they are needed to ‘heal’ the mental vision which, in tragedy, is damaged by gazing into the terrible darkness of nature’s underlying truth – ‘luminous spots, as it were, to heal the sight seared by gruesome night’.<sup>49</sup> In Plato’s *Republic*, the images on the wall of the Cave are, of course, no more than flickering shadows; anyone who escapes the Cave will find it difficult at first to accustom their eyes to the real light outside, but in time they can progress philosophically to the supreme vantage-point from which to gaze (symbolically) at the sun itself. Nietzsche does not straightforwardly invert the Platonic scheme of reference; he manipulates it with a subtle sense of irony. Gazing at the ultimate truth, in *BT*, is (or would be) a matter of staring into the bleakest darkness; but this is something with which it is impossible to live. The book’s aesthetic metaphysics makes the bright Apolline illusions of art the necessary remedy, as though art were a new way of overcoming existence *inside* the Cave. Yet those illusions are themselves only light-images on the Cave-like wall of darkness, from which it would seem to follow that escape from the Cave is neither possible nor desirable. Art, for Nietzsche, becomes a way of living in the Cave yet protected against the terror of its darkness.

As a rider to the points just made, it is worth noticing that while *BT* §9 contains no explicit reference to Plato, the philosopher *is* named near the beginning of the following chapter, and for a distinction, glossed by Nietzsche as one between ‘idea’ (ἰδέα) and ‘idol’ (εἰδωλον), which is highly pertinent to the Cave itself as well as to the aesthetics of *Republic* book 10. What is more, Nietzsche boldly and surprisingly asserts that the Platonic distinction in question was deeply embedded in a quintessentially Greek mentality. This assertion goes against the grain of Nietzsche’s attitude to Platonic idealism in many other places, but it seems here to function as an oblique and displaced acknowledgement of his adaptation of the imagery of the Cave in the previous chapter. Although *The Birth of Tragedy* is, among much else, an anti-Platonic rhapsody, a repudiation of any scheme of values which ‘justifies the world’ with a transcendent alignment between truth and goodness (or knowledge and virtue), it also represents a stage of Nietzsche’s thought at which he is drawn, partly via Schopenhauer, to a dualistic metaphysics of reality and appearances that preserves a kind of Platonic scaffolding even in the act of dismantling the edifice behind it.

The tension already highlighted between an Apolline and a Dionysian inflection of *BT*’s master-thought of the aesthetic justification of existence resurfaces, and becomes more acute, in §16. It is here, on the basis of assumptions whose historically flimsy nature he later came to admit, that Nietzsche states most unequivocally that tragedy is impossible without ‘the spirit of music’ – from which it follows, once again, that Homeric epic could never be considered as a vehicle of the tragic. For Nietzsche, the paradox of tragic pleasure, which he couches in terms of delight in the destruction of individuals, can be resolved only if tragedy’s audience is somehow instinctively or unconsciously in possession of the Dionysian wisdom (previously formulated in §7 in particular) that life itself, beneath and beyond the existence of individuals (a mere epiphenomenon of the Will), is eternal and indestructible. “‘We believe in life eternal’”, proclaims tragedy’, as Nietzsche puts it in his most blatant and deliberately

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<sup>49</sup> ‘... leuchtende Flecken zur Heilung des von grausiger Nacht versehrten Blickes’: see KSA 1, 65.11-18, where Nietzsche also equates Apolline light-images to the Apolline phenomenon of the mask (‘das Apollinische der Maske’).

shocking appropriation of Christian vocabulary.<sup>50</sup> If there is an aesthetic justification of existence or the world implied here, it is one for which the value of ‘life’ is irreducibly supra-individual, not one, in the terms of §7, which can provide images ‘to live with’.

Nietzsche could not, in fact, be more explicit about the difference between this Dionysian experience and the life-enabling value of Apolline images which he had affirmed at the outset of the work. At the end of §16, he says that Apolline images (in the plastic arts, but the point must apply to Homeric epic as well) offer a ‘radiant glorification’ of the realm of human appearances as such, but at the same time a kind of concealment by lies (and Nietzsche’s talk of aesthetic ‘lies’ is always part of his inverted Platonism) which allows the impression that beauty can achieve a triumph over suffering.<sup>51</sup> We are thus faced with a seeming incommensurability between Dionysian and Apolline justifications of life, but now in the very place where the union of the Dionysian and Apolline is supposed to occur. The Apolline images of tragedy, on Nietzsche’s definition, cannot be in themselves tragic (otherwise Homeric epic too would be tragic), only a surface of beautiful appearances. But how can their beauty, whose value is embodied in the glorification of individual lives, coexist – even fuse – with a Dionysian delight in the destruction of those same individuals?

A clue to the conceptual problems with which Nietzsche is grappling in *BT* §16 may be provided by the statement, early in the following section, that the tragic audience’s joy is experienced ‘despite pity and fear’.<sup>52</sup> This remark comes as a somewhat disconcertingly abrupt concession to a quasi-Aristotelian account of the status of tragic emotions, though Nietzsche had in fact referred to the canonical combination of pity and fear earlier in the book as well, when contrasting the artifice of Euripides’ prologues with the way in which Aeschylus and Sophocles prompt their audiences to feel pity and sympathetic fear (‘Mitleiden und Mitfürchten’) for their characters.<sup>53</sup> Later on, Nietzsche will show little respect for Aristotle as the figurehead of a long tradition of explaining tragedy in what he calls moral-pathological terms, i.e. with reference to emotional catharsis, rather than as a truly aesthetic phenomenon. But at the start of §17 it is as if he momentarily accepts Aristotle’s terms of reference as a way of characterising the *surface* psychology of tragedy’s audience – but only its surface psychology.<sup>54</sup> That implication is then extended, however, by a remarkable admission. While Nietzsche stands by his twin theses of the birth of tragedy from the spirit of

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<sup>50</sup> “‘Wir glauben an das ewige Leben”, so ruft die Tragödie’: KSA 1, 108.22-3; for ‘das ewige Leben’, cf. *BT* §8, KSA 1, 59.3-4, *BT* §18, KSA 1, 115.30.

<sup>51</sup> *BT* §16, KSA 1, 108.24-29, with the very rare verb ‘hinweggelogen’, lit. ‘removed by lies’.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Trotz Furcht und Mitleid’: *BT* §17, KSA 1, 109.19-20.

<sup>53</sup> *BT* §12, KSA 1, 86.8.

<sup>54</sup> Note also the double reference to compassion or pity (Mitleid) in connection with Wagner’s *Tristan* at *BT* §21, KSA 1, 136.34-137.1, 137.12, where the emotion is clearly attached to the work’s Apolline elements. *BT* §22 demotes concern with tragic emotions and catharsis to a sub-aesthetic level; cf. the same point, with a slightly more concessive tone, at *BT* §24, KSA 1, 152.5. Nietzsche had still considered pity fundamental to tragedy in ‘Das griechische Musikdrama’ (delivered 18 Jan. 1870): see KSA 1, 528.29. On *BT*’s treatment of pity and fear, cf. Silk and Stern (1983) 325-6; see n. 45 above on catharsis.

music and the primary significance of the chorus, he suddenly declares: ‘the meaning of tragic myth so far put forward never became conceptually clear and transparent to the Greek poets, still less to the Greek philosophers’.<sup>55</sup>

That statement is not always sufficiently appreciated for what it is: an astonishing declaration, at an advanced stage of *The Birth of Tragedy*, that the Greeks themselves did not understand the tragic art-form which their culture had created.<sup>56</sup> Although Nietzsche tries to qualify and soften the point by saying that the full force of Greek tragedy cannot be gauged from its language alone and involved a holistic experience, including its music, which we can now scarcely reconstruct,<sup>57</sup> this only accentuates a degree of discomfort in his position. His fundamental stance remains piquant: he purports to understand the Greeks, and above all the deepest wisdom of their culture, better than they could understand themselves,<sup>58</sup> and he correspondingly falls back on the idea, adapted from the words of the Egyptian priest to Solon in Plato’s *Timaeus*, that the Greeks were eternal children. Although that last idea had widespread currency in German philhellenism and can be traced in, among others, both Jacob Burckhardt and Karl Marx,<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche is struggling here with the fact that some of his most important premises – above all, the notion of a Dionysian sense of the indestructibility of ‘eternal life’ – have little or no anchorage in the texts of the surviving tragedies or in the conceptions of tragedy found in our main classical sources, Gorgias, Plato and Aristotle: sources with which Nietzsche is submerged, as well as intermittently explicit, dialogue.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *BT* §17, KSA 1, 109.28-31.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. KSA 8, 60, [5]70, for a related statement that the Greeks did not understand their own genius.

<sup>57</sup> Note Nietzsche’s passing and near-comical remark – so uncharacteristic of his stance in *BT* as a whole – that we *almost* require scholarship to reconstruct the nature of Greek music! (KSA 1, 110.17-18). In this same context, his reference to the ‘entire development’ of Greek music (‘die ganze Entfaltung der griechischen Musik’, *ibid.* 110.22, mistranslated in Geuss and Speirs [1999] 81 as ‘fully evolved Greek music’, with the additional distortion of ‘when we listen to’: Nietzsche is talking about *imagining* a kind of music which has been lost!) remains partly opaque: following Plato as well as Aristophanes, he clearly takes the ‘new dithyramb’ to have involved musical degeneration into the merely imitative, but he does not indicate, here or elsewhere, the basis for his attribution of Dionysian power to the earlier music of Greek tragedy.

<sup>58</sup> Nietzsche will later turn the point into a positive claim about his own philosophy (that he was the person who ‘discovered’ the true meaning of the tragic for the first time: *Ecce Homo*, ‘Die Geburt der Tragödie’ §3, ‘Inwiefern ich ebendamit den Begriff “tragisch” ... gefunden habe ...’, KSA 6, 312).

<sup>59</sup> The allusion to Plato *Tim.* 22b is at *BT* §17, KSA 1, 110.25-29. For other Nietzschean references to the Greeks as childlike, see the notebook entries for the abortive *Wir Philologen*, KSA 8, 60, 5[70] (where we also find the idea that the Greeks were ‘unconscious’ of their own genius) and 63, 5[84]. Burckhardt (1977) I 28 similarly refers to Plato *Tim.* 22b; cf. *ibid.* 44 (‘die Jugendlichkeit des hellenischen Bewußtseins’). For Marx’s view of Greek antiquity as the ‘childhood’ of humanity, see von Staden (1975) 130-33, (1976) 83-4 (with 88 on Nietzsche).

<sup>60</sup> For a different case-study in Nietzsche’s (largely silent) engagement with ancient sources on tragedy, see Halliwell (2003).



This places Nietzsche's views on a plane of anthropological meta-theory whose hermeneutics require inordinate faith in the theorist's own intuitive-creative powers of insight. Even so, it does not invalidate his theory as a whole. It just makes it an extreme case of a kind of theorising which a great deal of intellectual and cultural history, self-consciously or otherwise, finds it hard to avoid altogether.

We need to bear that point in mind when returning once more to the issue of an aesthetic justification of the world. It is my contention, in brief, that if we look for Greek analogues to such a view, they are to be located chiefly in the Apolline realm – above all, in the powerful early Greek idea that human suffering can be transmuted into a beauty of song that is fit even for a divine audience.<sup>61</sup> But while Nietzsche was aware of this point, he had his own cultural reasons at the date of *BT* for overlaying that awareness with a Dionysian tragic aesthetic whose Greek roots are highly obscure and which accordingly prompts his anomalous statement that the Greeks did not understand their own tragic art-form.<sup>62</sup> The larger upshot is a lingering equivocation about the relationship between Apolline and Dionysian templates for Nietzsche's idea of aesthetic 'justification'.

That equivocation can be sensed again in connection with *BT* §19's definition of 'the highest task of art', which Nietzsche defines, in imagery reminiscent of a passage from §9 quoted above, as being 'to release the eye from gazing into the horrors of night and save the individual subject, by the healing balsam of appearances, from the convulsive stirrings of the Will'.<sup>63</sup> If this definition fits Nietzsche's conception of the role of Apolline illusions in the context of tragedy, that is only because it fits his conception of Apolline art *tout court*. In other words, the highest task of art – an echo of the phrase Nietzsche had employed in the work's Foreword to Wagner when speaking of art as itself 'the highest task' of life (see n. 11 above) – can be accomplished in a variety of art-forms and has no intrinsic link with tragedy. Moreover, it seems deeply counterintuitive to suppose that tragedy, of all genres, with its typical emphasis on the unredeemable nature of extreme suffering, could itself be the

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<sup>61</sup> A conception of human life as tragic yet fit for 'divine' song is implicit at the very start of the *Iliad* and is spelt out in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 188-93; see Halliwell (2014). Nietzsche's awareness of this conception is attested in *Wir Philologen*, KSA 8, 72, 5[121] (cf. my text at n. 64 below). Tanner (1993) xvi takes *BT* to intimate that the lives of Homeric heroes are 'justified by the pleasure that the gods derived from watching them'; but to reductively equate this pleasure with 'entertainment' drains the point of its deep significance. Geuss (1999) xxiv takes *BT* §5 itself to refer to the Homeric motif of human life as a spectacle for the Olympians, but that is by no means certain.

<sup>62</sup> It is likely, though hardly demonstrable, that Nietzsche's tragic aesthetic was influenced by the fact that in Euripides' *Bacchae* the god Dionysus himself takes delight in the destruction of (certain) individuals. But if so, Nietzsche is guilty of translating this into a generic feature which makes little or no (Greek) sense in terms of the experience of tragedy's human audiences.

<sup>63</sup> KSA 1, 126.5-8 ('... die höchste ... Aufgabe der Kunst – das Auge vom Blick in's Grauen der Nacht zu erlösen und das Subject durch den heilenden Balsam des Scheins aus dem Krampfe der Willenregungen zu retten ...'); for 'healing balsam' as Apolline, see *BT* §21, KSA 1, 136.16-18, and cf. n. 65 below. On the related passage in *BT* §9, see n. 49 above.

paradigm of an aesthetic which releases the eye from gazing into the horrors of a metaphysical night. Why, then, should we not infer that the highest task of art is fundamentally Apolline (and all the more Greek for being so), and that it is the Apolline not the Dionysian which explains, if anything can, what Nietzsche means by his mantra of an aesthetic justification of the world? It is certainly possible to show that this is a view which Nietzsche sometimes expresses elsewhere. In, for instance, the notes for his projected critique of classical scholarship, *Wir Philologen*, in 1875, he ascribes to Greek culture a general tendency to ‘veil’ intellectual pessimism with the ‘lies’ of art, thereby converting suffering into a source of aesthetic delight; and when he adds ‘*vide tragoediam*’, tragedy has the status of a clinching illustration, not a unique case which calls for additional metaphysical assumptions.<sup>64</sup> Equally, in notebook entries from the early 1870s, tragedy exemplifies the (Apolline) capacity of art in general to make life possible.<sup>65</sup> Yet in *The Birth of Tragedy* itself, this patently cannot be Nietzsche’s final position, since it would make reference to the Dionysian totally redundant.

The issue at stake here leaps out at us if we juxtapose §19’s Apolline definition of ‘the highest task of art’ with the claim in §21 that it is only when, in the final analysis, Apollo speaks the language of Dionysus that ‘the highest goal of tragedy and of art *in general*’ (my emphasis) is achieved.<sup>66</sup> While this is self-evidently in keeping with the book’s aim of giving an account of tragedy in which the Dionysian and the Apolline enter into a unique symbiosis, it nonetheless exposes a faultline in the foundations of Nietzsche’s aesthetics. For much of the work, as in a great deal of his later writings, Nietzsche associates the quintessential aesthetic experience with artistic illusionism, which is itself, as I have tried to show, aligned with his inverted Platonism; and he sometimes goes further, identifying ‘art’ *tout court* with the Apolline.<sup>67</sup> Yet the Dionysian demands to be given a special, metaphysical ranking in Nietzsche’s aesthetic evaluations, and in §21 this leads to an ostensible contradiction of what is said or suggested in a number of earlier passages.

It is only at a late stage in *The Birth of Tragedy* that Nietzsche comes close to admitting that aesthetic justification of the world must take separate forms in accordance with the polarity of the Apolline and the Dionysian. In §22, he speaks explicitly of Apolline art’s ‘justification of the world of individuation’, a justification experienced through pure, will-less aesthetic contemplation, as though the spectators of Apolline art were themselves god-like

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<sup>64</sup> KSA 8, 72, [5]121; cf. n. 61 above.

<sup>65</sup> See e.g. KSA 7, 69, 3[32] (tragedy as natural healing ‘against the Dionysian’ and as making life possible), 3[33] (tragedy as ‘saving us from the truth through beauty’ and as a form of ‘healing’); cf. *ibid.*, 76, 3[60], for art *tout court* as ‘the only possibility of life’ (‘Einzige Möglichkeit des Lebens’), 77, 3[62] (the Greeks as ‘artists of life’).

<sup>66</sup> KSA 1, 140.2-4: ‘Dionysus redet die Sprache des Apollo, Apollo aber schliesslich die Sprache des Dionysus: womit das höchste Ziel der Tragödie und der Kunst überhaupt erreicht ist’.

<sup>67</sup> See e.g. *BT* §18, KSA 1, 115.28-19, where the Apolline ‘veil of beauty’ (Schönheitsschleier) is the property of ‘Kunst’ *simpliciter* and categorised separately from the Dionysian consolation of the indestructibility of ‘eternal life’ (*ibid.* 115.29-31).

observers of the human scene;<sup>68</sup> and in the final section (25), he returns to his initial formulation of Apolline art as making existence ‘worth living’.<sup>69</sup> Yet when he reintroduces his full proposition of an aesthetic justification of existence and the world in §24, before underlining it in §25 by remarking that music and tragic myth ‘justify even the worst of all worlds’, it is unambiguously attached to his account of the Dionysian experience of tragedy.<sup>70</sup> Nor can we conclude that tragedy simply adds the Dionysian to the Apolline: on the contrary, Nietzsche states that the Apolline cannot achieve its full aesthetic effect (of pure, will-less contemplation) in the context of tragedy, and even that the Dionysian ultimately ‘negates’ the Apolline delight in aesthetic semblance or illusion.<sup>71</sup>

If the Dionysian, then, offers a ‘justification’ different from the life-enabling illusions of the Apolline, it remains puzzling what that can amount to. Certainly it involves seeing or feeling something which lies beyond the images of tragic suffering. That chimes with Nietzsche’s striking statement in §22 that the Dionysian spectator of tragedy experiences a kind of omniscience which penetrates beneath the surfaces of the myth, yet at the same time shuddering with horror and wishing to escape from what he understands – or, as Nietzsche unforgettably encapsulates it (with a double echo of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*): ‘he looks more and deeper than ever before, yet wishes he were blind’.<sup>72</sup> But the congruence is only partial: ‘omniscience’ may underpin a sense of justification, but hardly a wish to be blind. A crucial further step of thought takes place in §24, precisely in the context of the second appearance of the dictum about aesthetic justification. At the first occurrence of this claim in §5, human beings were emphatically described as unaware of their passive status as elements in a cosmic artwork. Now, however, they are permitted, through tragedy, to adopt a privileged identification with the perspective of the world-artist in the form of a Dionysian recognition that the world of appearances is nothing less than an ‘artistic game’ of perpetual creation and destruction that the Will plays with itself.<sup>73</sup>

To support this model of Dionysian awareness, Nietzsche invokes his favourite presocratic philosopher, Heraclitus, ascribing to him a comparison between ‘the world-forming power’ of reality and ‘a child who plays a game moving pieces forwards and

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<sup>68</sup> KSA 1, 140.26-8.

<sup>69</sup> *BT* §25, KSA 1, 155.8-12; for the ‘lebenswerth’ motif, cf. n. 16 above.

<sup>70</sup> *BT* §24, KSA 1, 152.19-20 (quoted in n. 10 above), *BT* §25, KSA 1, 154.30-32 (‘beide rechtfertigen ... die Existenz selbst der “schlechtesten Welt”’).

<sup>71</sup> For these two points, see respectively *BT* §24, KSA 1, 150.14-20, 151.8-11.

<sup>72</sup> *BT* §22, KSA 1, 141.4-5: ‘Er schaut mehr und tiefer als je und wünscht sich doch erblindet’. The remark resonates with the experience not only of Oedipus himself (though his insight at Soph. *OT* 1329-35 is, ironically from a Nietzschean point of view, into the agency of Apollo) but also of the chorus of Theban elders, who both do and do not want to gaze at the blinded king (*OT* 1303-6). Nietzsche subsequently adjusts the remark by speaking of a desire to look and yet to go beyond looking: *BT* §24, KSA 1, 153.4-5.

<sup>73</sup> See *BT* §24, KSA 1, 152.17-24, for the recurrence of the motif of aesthetic justification followed immediately by the idea of an artistic game (‘ein künstlerisches Spiel’) played by the Will: that same phrase is connected to Heraclitus in a notebook entry of 1872, ‘Das künstlerische Spiel des Kosmos. Heraclit.’, KSA 1, 421, 19[18].

backwards and builds piles of sand only to knock them down again'.<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche is here silently assimilating the Stoicising interpretation of Heraclitus developed by Jacob Bernays, an interpretation which incorporates a questionable fusion of two different images: one, Heraclitus's metaphor of time (αἰών: in fact, probably to be understood as 'lifetime') as a child playing a boardgame; the other, a Homeric simile at *Iliad* 15.362-4 which famously compares Apollo (no less!), in the act of destroying the Achaean wall, to a child building and destroying sandcastles on the sea-shore.<sup>75</sup> But if Nietzsche borrows something from Bernays' interpretation, he puts it to his own use by converting it into a heavily aestheticised metaphysics. Evidence outside *BT* attests to Nietzsche's conviction that Heraclitus's worldview was an artistic 'cosmodicy' ('Cosmodicee der Kunst'). Since such a cosmodicy or world-validation is here an alternative to, or replacement for, a theodicy, this means that, in its Dionysian guise, *BT*'s notion of an apparent justification of existence as an aesthetic phenomenon invites us to read it as a would-be piece of Heraclitean philosophy.<sup>76</sup> Here, then,

<sup>74</sup> '... wie wenn von Heraklit dem Dunklen die weltbildende Kraft einem Kinde verglichen wird, das spielend Steine hin und her setzt und Sandhaufen aufbaut und wieder einwirft', *BT* 24, KSA 1, 153.15-17: Nietzsche's reference to Heraclitus's image of moving (stone) pieces in a boardgame (n. 75 below) is sometimes misconstrued in English translations as though it referred to simply moving stones around, e.g. 'arranging and scattering stones here and there', Smith (2000) 129, or 'sets down stones here, there, and the next place', Geuss and Speirs (1999) 114.

<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche's lecture notes on the Presocratics, probably dating from 1872, indicate his indebtedness to Bernays for this point: see KGW II.4, 273-4, with Bernays (1850) 108-12 = Bernays (1885) I 56-60. Bernays dubiously treats Heraclitus's αἰών as a cosmic force equivalent to Zeus (see e.g. Marcovich [1967] 490-5, Kahn [1979] 227-9 for the preferable translation 'lifetime'; cf. Šćepanović [2015]) and uses Plut. *Mor.* 393e-f, where the simile at Hom. *Il.* 15.362-4 is alluded to in a critique of Stoic belief in periodic ecpyrosis, to support his own Stoicising interpretation of Heraclitus. Nietzsche, following Bernays' article, relies for Heraclitus's image of the boardgame-playing child on Lucian *Vit. auct.* 14 (παῖς παίζων, πεσσεύων – answering the question τί γὰρ ὁ αἰών ἐστίν;), since Heraclitus B52 DK (αἰών παῖς ἐστίν παίζων, πεσσεύων), found in the *Refutation of All Heresies* (eventually, though not definitively, attributed to Hippolytus), was not published till after Bernays' original article; see the addendum in Bernays (1885) I 57 n. 1, with *ibid.* 74-101 and 102-6 for Bernays' engagement with the new Heraclitean material. On the relationship of Nietzsche's view of Heraclitus to Bernays', see Borsche (1985) 72-6, Reibnitz (1992) 171-2, Schmidt (2012) 406-7, and now Reschke (2017), with overviews of the importance of Heraclitus to Nietzsche in Hölscher (1979) and Müller (2005) 141-50, as well as, copiously, in Wohlfart (1991). But Nietzsche's acceptance of the merging of Heraclitus's image with the Iliadic Apollo simile goes unmentioned in e.g. Landfester (1994) 625, Geuss and Speirs (1999) 114, Young (2013) 181; Whitlock (2006) 207 seems unaware of the merging. Nietzsche reemploys the fused Homeric-Heraclitean image in his *Philosophy in the tragic age of the Greeks*, §7, KSA 1, 830.23-831.1; in the same work, §6, he speaks of Heraclitus's view of the world as the *game/play* of Zeus ('Die Welt ist das *Spiel* des Zeus', KSA 1, 828.5).

<sup>76</sup> Heraclitus's artistic 'cosmodicy' (for other uses of the term, see nn. 13, 41 above) is formulated in a notebook entry of 1872-3, 'Heraclit. Cosmodicee der Kunst', KSA 7, 526.26, 21[15], and in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, §5, KSA 1, 825.26

is a final twist in the threads of thought I have been attempting to follow closely through the fabric of *BT*. Having allowed the idea of aesthetic justification to be associated for much of the work with a paradigm of life-enabling Apolline semblances (including the ‘deification’ of human life in the form of the Olympian gods, themselves a projection of artistic imagination), Nietzsche tries to tie together the multiple strands of his aesthetic, including the concept of Dionysian insight into the workings of the (metaphorical) world-artist, with a gesture towards the riddling Heraclitus and his supposed view of reality as an amoral but artistic process of perpetual creation and destruction. By doing so, however, Nietzsche leaves us with a riddle of his own, since we know from other evidence that he actually regarded Heraclitus as an anti-Dionysian thinker committed to Apolline values of semblance and play.<sup>77</sup> This is a riddle to which Nietzsche must have known that even he himself did not possess the solution.

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(spelling ‘Kosmodicee’), the latter alluding to the equation of strife and justice in Heraclitus B80.

<sup>77</sup> That Nietzsche took Heraclitus to have an antipathy to the Dionysian (on the implicit though inadequate basis of Heraclitus B15 DK) and a correspondingly Apolline nature, is attested by KSA 7, 438, 19[61] and 540-1, 23[8-9].

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