



Reflecting Tragedy: Nietzsche, Lacan, Narcissus¹

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THIS essay is concerned neither with Nietzsche's philosophy nor his life. Rather, its focus is on Nietzsche as the author of fictions that derive from or allude to the myth of Narcissus. To avoid misunderstandings, it must be made clear at the outset that considering *The Birth of Tragedy* in the context of certain narratives that have attached themselves to the mythical figure of Narcissus does not mean belabouring the platitude that Nietzsche had an extremely narcissistic personality.² My intention is, on the contrary, to ascertain whether certain thought-patterns which may be discovered in variants of the Narcissus myth can also be revealed in writing by Nietzsche which raises questions as to what he understood by fictionality.

As far as narcissism as a psychological concept is concerned, the futility of the quest for a single definition is made manifest in an essay by S. O. Hoffmann, whose title translates as: "Not seeing the wood for the trees, or: the conceptual chaos in contemporary theories of narcissism."³ This is not the place to attempt the ordering of such chaos, as the task offers endless scope for quibbling as to definitions. Suffice it to say that cutting any path through this wood is going to leave some jagged branches protruding.

There are two main differences between the various versions of the ancient Narcissus myth and its revival by Freud and his successors: first, the ancient traditions may be termed etiological – that is: treating of origins and causes – but only in a trivial sense, whereas the essence of its modern, psychoanalytic variants is that they are causal and genetic.⁴ Second, the ancient traditions relate a story of the fatal consequences of misperception



and lack any utopian perspective. Against this, the narratives of the loss of that state designated by Freud as “primary narcissism” belong to the topos of the lost paradise. In terms of Freud’s well-known statement, “the development of the Ego consists of a falling away from primal narcissism and of an intense striving to regain this state”.⁵

In Ovid’s version, illusion and subjugation to the imaginary Other initially coincide. In a second phase, this misapprehension gives way to the insights: “iste ego sum [...] uror amore mei” – “this I am [...] I burn with love of myself”, but this in no way lessens the fixation of Narcissus on his reflection. Indeed, it survives both death and the dissolution of the body, so that Narcissus persists even in the underworld in admiring his image in the waters of the Styx: “tum quoque se ... in Stygia spectabat aqua”.⁶ What more recent mythical narratives term “the libidinal cathexis of the self-image” is clearly worked out in Ovid’s version as a dialectic of desire and autonomy.⁷

Jacques Lacan’s significant recasting of the Freudian version of the myth may be seen as bringing it back into greater accord with Ovid’s dynamic in two respects: first, by putting the factor of misapprehension, in the form of a “fonction de méconnaissance”, into the foreground once more; second, by depriving the primal state of the self of its utopian aspect: in Freud’s terms, the enjoyment of “infant omnipotence” in unalloyed bliss. Lacan, by contrast, introduces from the outset the negative aspects of misapprehension and the consequent alienation of self from self. This becomes evident from the fourth thesis in his essay *L’agressivité en psychanalyse*: “This erotic relationship in which the human individuality becomes fixated on an image which alienates it from itself – it is in this nexus that the energy and the form both reside from which that passionate structure that will be termed its *I* takes its origin.”⁸

The main consequence of Lacan’s inversion of the Freudian myth is to render the genesis of the metapsychic model independent of any specific gratifying or traumatic experiences in the life of a child and rather substitute for them a paradigmatic scheme. Since the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, it is common to assign myths paradigmatic and syntagmatic dimensions. In the psychoanalytic tradition before Lacan the trend was to



stress a syntagmatic serialisation of the elements of narcissism, precisely because the prime intention of therapists and writers was to reveal the successive stages of a “repressed” childhood in their correct chronological order.

At the beginning of his essay of 1936 on the “mirror stage” Lacan apparently sets out to relate in a conventionally Freudian mode the “novel” of earliest childhood: “the human infant, at an age when it is still for a while outpaced in respect of physical coordination by a baby chimpanzee, none the less already clearly recognises its own image in the mirror [...]”.⁹ But from Lacan’s later writings it becomes obvious that his real aim has nothing whatsoever to do with a narrative reconstruction of the stages of earliest childhood, but that instead he is intent on bringing to the surface a paradigmatic model which is overlaid by a plurality of narrative pretexts.

In doing so, however, he invests too much in the one “stage” or episode, for he persists in narrating divergent versions of it as if they were all the same. The child, for Lacan, has to both recognise and mistake itself in the same instant: greet itself with delight and simultaneously enter into a hostile rivalry with its own image; experience the encounter with its reflection as pleasurable and at the same time resent the superiority of the mirror image; finally, transfer these emotions into aggression against the Other as such. This can be logically possible only on the basis of an incapacity to distinguish between such contrary experiences, for the child has, at the same time, to be *both* afforded gratification and delight *and* deceived and estranged from an image which „alienates it from itself“.¹⁰

If Lacan is indeed mainly interested in working towards a symmetrical, paradigmatic structure for the world of adult experience, the precise succession of events and their respective emotional colouring in the life of the young child is not only ultimately unverifiable but also of no importance. The myth of Narcissus is primarily relevant as an exfoliated structure, which diverts attention from its syntagmatic dimension.

What seems of major importance in Lacan’s recasting of the myth is the explicit extension of that misapprehension present in ancient traditions back to the point where it constitutes a primal principle of fictionality.





Thus we read in Lacan's essay on the "mirror stage": "But the essential point is that this form places the instance of the *self*, prior to any social determination, in a series of fictions which remains forever opaque, hence irreducible, for that same individual".³ It is now time to consider how Nietzsche relates the concept of fictionality to the constitution of the self.

The concept of fictionality was never a neutral one for Nietzsche and represents a recurrent point of uncertainty or discomfort in his writings. It is neither something he consistently rejects, nor does he exempt it from the enormous resentment he directs against the concept of truth, particularly in his later works. For Nietzsche strangely confuses the enjoyment of fictional works with the question of belief. In *Human, All Too Human* he asserts dogmatically of the "artists of all times": "[...] they glorify the religious and philosophical errors of humankind, and they would have been quite unable to do so without a belief in the absolute truth of these" (KSA 2, 180).

Granted, he asserts the opposite in the same work, when he sets up the alternative model of an unbelieving artist whose pleasure in his own creations he describes as a feeling of being at ease: "*The irreligiousness of artists*. – Homer is so much at home among his gods and has, as a poet, such a feeling of ease with them, that he must surely have been deeply irreligious [...]" (KSA 2, 121). This is not merely typical of the fact that Nietzsche could rarely go for long without indulging in self-contradiction, but it also seems to indicate that he unconsciously distinguishes between different kinds of fiction.

In other words, there are for Nietzsche voluntary and involuntary fictions, and this is the determining factor in whether he marks fiction positively or negatively. Thus he permits poets such as Homer to make up fables about entities in whose existence they do not believe, because they are deliberately creating untruths. In these terms he accepts a "delight in lying" as one of those factors "by which art is determined" (KSA 2, 311). In contrast to this, there are those who mistakenly believe in entities whose existence is *only* linguistic and these are the involuntary victims of fictions they do not recognise as such. Philosophers seem even more





prone to fall into such traps than poets: “Words are the seductresses of philosophers – these flap about in the nets of language” (KSA 8, 113). Thus they involuntarily cause those fictions to be fruitful and multiply which tyrannise the human psyche.

If there were for Nietzsche only the alternatives of a Homeric delight in fabulation and the metaphysicians’ subjugation to illusory authorities, then we would have just the simple polarity of the splendid artistic creations of great liars and the misery of those who are seduced and abandoned by abstract concepts and the grammar that orders them. But this neat antithesis is spoiled by the fact that, when Nietzsche began to write at the beginning of the 1870’s, he did so on the basis of a symmetrical structuring of the human self, the cosmos and the work of art. To preserve this symmetry, his concept of fiction becomes skewed from very early on so as to satisfy demands which are at odds with one another. This results from the ironic circumstance that the very symmetry at the core of his thinking is one of those illusions he himself was so adept at tearing to shreds when he found them in the thinking of others. As a consequence, the related concepts of *language* and *metaphor* become blurred or self-contradictory in his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*.

What is in my view the most interesting line which Nietzsche pursues in his relentless quest to expose epistemological errors is one that appears to anticipate Lacan’s “fonction de méconnaissance” – the element of misapprehension in the genesis of the human self. For Nietzsche too – long before Lacan – is highly sceptical as to whether there can ever be such a thing as a simple and accurate self-perception: “It must be stated definitively – we live only through illusions – our consciousness just grazes the surface [...]. There is also no question of a human individual’s *wholly* perceiving himself – of all the laws that determine his existence becoming transparent to him in any given instant [...] (KSA 7, 434f.). In these terms, there are always distorting flaws in one’s self-image, which Nietzsche in other contexts terms a discontinuity or a “displacement” (KSA 12, 114).

Thus we find Nietzsche in his early essay, *On Truth and Falsity in an Extra-Moral Sense*, which remained unpublished in his lifetime, attributing this lacuna or displacement to the function of metaphor in everyday



language: "Thus language deceives us all. We believe we know something of things in themselves [...], but yet all we possess is metaphors of them which do not correspond in the least to the original entities" (KSA 1, 879). At this point he observes perspicaciously: "the origin of language has, in any event, nothing to do with logic", but then tacitly accepts the possibility that it might rather be a consensual, indeed democratic process.

As a further consequence and because of the way the underlying symmetry I have mentioned above dominates his thinking, he blithely transposes a model he derives from the external sphere of social behaviour onto the very genesis of the individual psyche.

This has two major effects. First, that discontinuity of which his understanding of metaphor is emblematic becomes primal in his view of the genesis of the human self. Second, the Other as such, because it seems essential to the genesis of language, becomes an implicit aspect of the self – and in distinctly negative terms: on the one hand because, in terms of the unquestioned symmetry, the relation of self to other mirrors that lack of correspondence to the "essence of things" that is the hallmark of language; on the other it leads to the positing of a gap between human consciousness and "primal being", as will become clear from looking at *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Since, in Nietzsche's analogical thought-patterns, the introjection of the Other into the self impairs its unity, the human psyche is reduced to "nothing that has any real effect, but a mere fiction" (KSA 12, 383). Nietzsche's reaction to this devaluation of the self is often violent. As I shall show when looking at *The Birth of Tragedy*, it can manifest itself as a titanism in its efforts to obliterate the Other entirely and to restore a narcissistic perfection which anticipates Freud's – and not Lacan's – version of the myth.

Whether fiction for Nietzsche is incarnated in the brilliant illusions of Homeric poetry or in the wretchedness of imprisonment in a world distorted by language as a "falsification that perpetually heaps displacement upon displacement" (KSA 12, 114), it is always an emotionally charged realm of the unreal: positively as novel but illusory visions, negatively as a distortion of relationships within the self.



What makes the concept of narcissism so complex when we apply it to Nietzsche's writings is his deeply rooted tendency to equate an involuntary distortion in the perception of the self with the conscious inventions of art. For, on the one hand, the element of distortion makes the inner world potentially a region in which the conscious self is subjugated: "The greatest part of our being is unknown to us. Nevertheless we love ourselves, speak as if we wholly knew ourselves on the basis of a trivial amount of memory. We have a *phantom* of the 'self' in our heads, that dictates our thought and behaviour in manifold ways" (KSA 8, 561). On the other hand, we find evidence of many attempts to reverse this relationship, to annihilate the "phantom" of the internalised Other, and this, as I shall show, is undertaken in the medium of fiction itself.

The tension between the self and the inner phantom of the Other becomes strongest in the semantics of the word *lie*. This tension is comparable to those Nietzsche injects into the concepts *metaphor* and *fiction*. For lies often appear in association with misery, as desperate measures taken against the inner dominance of the Other, whilst – in pure contradiction to this – the splendour of the "liberating lie", as an autonomous "mythical feeling", can appear in nostalgic transfiguration: "We grant the epic narrator the freedom to lie, for in this instance there are no negative after effects [...] The great Greek philosophers still live entirely within this justification to tell lies" (KSA 7, 452f.).

The thematics of narcissism in Nietzsche's writing constantly revolve around the ambivalence of fictions. The "mythical feeling of the liberating lie" (KSA 7, 452f.) opens a perspective on the "Homeric delight" in a world of fictions in which there is not the slightest necessity to annihilate the Other or exorcise this "phantom" within the self: the pleasure Nietzsche grants that we may take in fictionality goes hand in hand with a relatively relaxed attitude towards the Other.

The monumental aggrandisement of the self with the purpose of effacing the Other reveals itself, by contrast, as a strategy dictated by insecurity. The self feels its integrity has already been compromised, that the unity of this "fabulous monster" (KSA 7, 832) can be nothing but a pretence. Such aporias in Nietzsche's attitude towards fictionality in his



later works are the lasting legacy of the narcissistic cosmology he devises in *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work we may regard as Nietzsche's most vital and imaginative literary fiction, for all that he seemed convinced he was not writing fiction at the time.

I should now like to try the experiment of reading *The Birth of Tragedy* as literature, as fantasy in the tradition to which Nietzsche assigned the Homeric epics and the "great Greek philosophers" – by whom he meant the Pre-Socratics – a tradition that enjoyed for him the privilege of "justified lying". We shall also read this fantasy as a variant of the myth of Narcissus. In these terms, Nietzsche's version anticipates those of both Freud and Lacan in the sense that the etiological element is central to it. In contrast to Lacan's variant, but once more anticipating Freud's, it shares Freud's predilection for a lost paradisaal state. However, the incidental fact that Nietzsche also shaped his fantasy in the prophetic mode because of his short-lived subservience to Wagner means that he must hold out the prospect of a paradise regained, whilst Freud's situating "infant omnipotence" in linear time with no eschatological overtones means that such a state can only be viewed with nostalgia.

The dialectic of desire and autonomy that we saw as characteristic of Ovid's presentation of the myth may also be detected in Nietzsche's recasting of it. To grasp what Nietzsche is doing in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is essential to realise that he is narrating from three different perspectives in turn, but without signalling any change of narrative standpoint. There is firstly the perspective in which Nietzsche writes as belonging to his own times. He does this reluctantly, because at heart he despises the "Culturmensch", the "Man of Culture", the member of the age of decadence into which European civilisation has fallen. None the less, he occasionally apostrophises his few "friends", contemporaries who are equally aware they live in an age of cultural impoverishment, and writes as one of them.

Secondly, he adopts the perspective of "primal being" – "das Ur-Eine" – which uses the human consciousness as a mirror in which it may view its own reflection, and this perspective is free from the constraints of historical time. It is essential to note that this perspective is twofold, since



within it Nietzsche's viewpoint occasionally shifts to that of a *generalised* human consciousness that is *both* the narcissistic object of primal being *and* a subjectivity in which the process of self-mirroring is repeated and doubled. Thirdly, Nietzsche writes from an historical perspective that is not embedded in the decadent present, as is the first, but rather enjoys a sovereign overview that comprehends the whole of humanity in time.

If we wish to unscramble the plot of *The Birth of Tragedy*, then we have to be aware that Nietzsche deploys two protagonists that are incompatible with one another and that compete for the status of hero. The former is named "the development of art"; the latter is termed variously "the one truly existing subject" (KSA 1, 47) or "primal being" – "das Ur-Eine", "das Ur-Sein" or "das Urwesen". Sometimes this being is also identical with the consciousness of "Dionysian man" and, when this is the case, has the explicit goal of a frequent "satisfaction in total bliss" in moments of narcissistic union with itself.

The "development of art" has the disadvantage of being portrayed by Nietzsche as the product of a "duality" (KSA 7, 25), and thus represents for him a "third entity". By contrast, union with "primal being" means precisely the abolition of that duality which consists of the opposition between the "truly existing subject" and its "projection" or "reflection". By these last terms, Nietzsche also understands the human consciousness as object. The progressive movement of "the development of art" guarantees the lasting separation of the "Apollonian" from the "Dionysian" throughout human history once the golden age of tragedy is over, whereas the "destruction of the individual and its becoming one with primal being" (KSA 1, 62) has the opposite effect of "abolishing" or "devouring" not only all dualities but also the third entities that proceed from them (KSA 1, 141).

Nietzsche's version of the Narcissus myth *seems* to portray the incompatible ways of being of both main protagonists as being of equivalent value. For that reason he must also insist on a perfect analogy between action in linear time and the timeless alternation of "primal joy" with its own absence. In this way, the discourse of *The Birth of Tragedy* performs the astonishing feat of at once affirming both progress and





regression. Duality in art, or within the subject, oscillates in and out of existence, rather like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. In moments of “coalescence” or “annihilation” it disappears into the unity that has suddenly come about; when either of the two historical perspectives are dominant in the narrative, it is affirmed as the origin of all things but perforce viewed nostalgically as a lost paradisaal state.

In Nietzsche’s historical plot, more than two thousand uneventful years pass between the destruction of Dionysian drama – “optimistic dialectic expels [...] music from tragedy” (KSA 1, 95) and the first indications of a “rebirth” of tragedy in the music of Richard Wagner (KSA 1, 103). As in Lacan’s version of the myth, this pseudo-historical or developmental perspective is obviously just an obstacle in the way of an optimal portrayal of events within the self – one which is simply made awkward by their compression into a strict linear series. Faced with this dilemma, Nietzsche ultimately opts for the solution of devaluing historicity, by forcing the first protagonist, the “development of art” to put off its disguise and reveal itself as “regression”: “[...] it is just that we experience analogically the great periods of Hellenic being in *reverse order*, as it were, and thus now, for example, seem to be advancing from the Alexandrian age backwards towards the period of genuine tragedy. In doing so the feeling lives within us that the birth of the tragic age means, for the German spirit, merely a return to itself, a blissful rediscovery of itself” (KSA 1, 128). By this he means, of course the new “tragic age” which Wagner’s music will usher in, but at this point he is no longer writing imaginative fiction but Wagnerian propaganda..

This is convoluted enough, but more is to come. For at the inception of that first forward movement in time, which is a necessary precondition for any later regression, there is still an element of alienation present in the parallel dimension of the “truly existing subject”. That both Nietzsche and Lacan put so much emphasis on the primal status of self-alienation enjoins a further comparison of their respective versions of the Narcissus myth.

For neither of them places much value on that utopian simplicity which appears in Freud’s version as the untrammelled enjoyment of the state of infant omnipotence.





For Lacan, misapprehension of the self characterises the “mirror stage”, while Nietzsche’s “truly existing subject” may indeed experience its moments of “satisfaction in total bliss”, but yet no primal state of perfect peace.¹² Rather, Nietzsche’s preferred protagonist is subject to conflict from the outset, is both prey to suffering and division: “Thus I feel all the more strongly compelled to make the metaphysical assumption that the truly existing and primal being, as eternally suffering and riven by contradictions, [...] needs the pleasure of deceptive appearances so as to achieve its lasting redemption [...]” (KSA 1, 38f.).

That one of the most aggressive atheists ever to set pen to paper should here feel prompted to have recourse to a very Christian-sounding concept of “redemption” is doubtless due to the fact that this is a recurrent theme in Wagner’s works from *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* to *Parsifal*. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is still a long way from emerging from Wagner’s shadow. Making allowance for this, the fact remains that the flaw that makes the “subject” for Nietzsche “eternally suffering and contradictory” and implants in it a desire for redemption that is present in the original state of “primal being” and motivates its first action, namely the mirroring of itself.

The fatal flaw, which makes the “original subject” one that is “eternally suffering and riven by contradictions”, thus producing a yearning for “redemption” or release, is thus already present in this initial act of self-reflection on the part of “das Ur-Eine”. It signifies the opposite of narcissistic fulfilment and is termed frequently by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* “Ur-Schmerz” – primal agony (KSA 1, 38f.). What Nietzsche there designates as “the world torn apart and shattered into individuals” is very clearly a projection of that flaw subjectivity as such bears within itself from the outset and which appears elsewhere in his work as a fatal displacement or distortion in the process of self-perception.

Looked at from another perspective, this “primal agony” is equally clearly grounded in the failure of the “original subject” to withhold itself from the process of historical development, for it is this which produces that fundamental self-estrangement that occurs when the Other is introjected into the self. The unfolding of the subjectivity in linear time



is consonant with that desire for “redemption” which can in principle never be satisfied – otherwise any merging of the self with its own image or, as Nietzsche terms it in *The Birth of Tragedy*, any “annihilation of mere appearances” would at once terminate the process.¹³

It is necessary to stress again at this point that the semantics of *lying* represent a crossroads in Nietzsche’s thinking. The one way leads in the direction of “the mythical feeling of the liberating lie”; the other takes him to where lying brings down punishment, designates a flaw or lack in the given context or connotes involuntary renunciation, hence impoverishment. In the syntagmatic dimension of *The Birth of Tragedy*, that is: in the fictional narrative that unfolds in the text, Nietzsche experiments with the former direction, whereas in the paradigmatic dimension of the text, that is: its ultimate conceptual assignment of values, he has from the outset decided for the latter. For there is in that dimension a correlation of the ‘imprisoning lie’ with the superior might of both the Other and of history that remains quite fixed. This is another way of explaining the phenomenon frequently commented upon by readers of *The Birth of Tragedy* that the text is somehow written against itself.¹⁴

The reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* I have offered here has tried to show what underlies the superficial plot, which is a fanciful account of the rise and fall of Ancient Greek culture, as defined by its crowning achievements, the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and its destruction, first seen in the works of Euripides and then fully accomplished by the rationality of Socrates. The flowering of Greek culture is made possible by a complementary interaction of the principles embodied by the gods Apollo and Dionysos. Apollo represents the world of pleasing appearances, the principle of individuation, art-forms such as sculpture and in general the clear structural principles that shape and restrain the anarchical tendencies of the Dionysian (KSA1, 39f).

This equivalence is not really valid, because the Dionysian is much more vital and sustains the whole: “Apollo could not live without Dionysus!” (KSA 1, 40). It is in his fantasies about the role of the “chorus of satyrs” in the best of Greek tragedy that Nietzsche develops those patterns of thought from which I have derived his theory of narcissism.



For the chorus in the early phase of tragedy is defined by Nietzsche as “the self-mirroring of Dionysian humanity” (KSA 1, 60). Moreover, he postulates an identification of the spectators with the chorus as “the primal dramatic phenomenon: to see oneself transformed before one’s own eyes and now to act as if one had really entered into another body and into another character. [...] here there already occurs a surrender of individuality by venturing into an alien nature” (KSA 1, 61).

This forms the basis for the admixture of the Other in the original narcissistic unity. But Nietzsche then goes on to daringly posit a direct line from the experience of tragedy to the internal dramas being acted out within the underworld of “primal being”. Thus the audience of Greek tragedy comes to experience “the breaking apart of the individuality and its becoming one with primal being [dem Ursein]” (KSA 1, 62). Because Nietzsche’s analogical thinking constantly translates one level of experience or mode of existence into another, Dionysos, not as a god, but as a figure on stage, becomes identified both with primal being and with its suffering from its own imperfection: “Greek tragedy in its oldest form had no other subject than the sufferings of Dionysos and Dionysos was for a long time the sole hero of a tragic action” (KSA 1, 71).

Thus ‘we’ – as imaginary spectators of such a tragedy – also become assimilated into “primal being”: “For fleeting moments, we are truly primal being [das Urwesen] itself and feel its voracious desire for existence and pleasure in existence; the conflict, the agony, the annihilation of mere appearances now seems necessary to us [...] no longer as individuals, but as the *one* living entity with whose joy in procreation we have now merged” (KSA 1, 109). Nietzsche’s ideal audience surely got a lot for the price of admission.

All of this is too good to last, and so Ancient Greek tragedy dies: “it died by self-murder, as the result of an unresolvable conflict, thus tragically”, whilst other ancient literary forms just fade gracefully away. It is at this point that Nietzsche’s surface plot loses credibility and coherence. For he arbitrarily dumps the whole blame for the death of tragedy, first on Euripides and then on Socrates: “Even Euripides himself was in this sense only a mask: the god who spoke through him was not Dionysos,



nor Apollo either, but an entirely newborn demon named *Socrates*" (KSA 1, 83). Socrates becomes the "single turning point [...] in so called world history" and plunges humanity into a state of decadence which lasts until the thought of Schopenhauer inspires Wagner, and Wagner sets about recreating "Dionysian music" and thus the basis for a "rebirth of tragedy" (KSA 1, 103).

Clearly the death of tragedy lacks at this point of the text an adequate explanation – even in terms of Nietzsche's quicksilver concepts. In denigrating Euripides, Nietzsche simply follows a prejudice that arose in the writings of the Early German Romantics, August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, in the closing years of the 18th century and was then accepted and propagated as dogma by Schelling, Hegel and other 19th century German theorists of tragedy. Earlier, the German classicists, Goethe and Schiller, had expressed the greatest admiration for Euripides. Schiller saw in Euripides' *Medea* the archetype of tragic passion, and Goethe, who lived till 1832, regarded the fashionable contempt for Euripides on the part of theorists who could produce no tragedies themselves, as sheer foolishness.

Half a century later, Nietzsche seems quite unaware that in the *Bacchae* Euripides had produced a tragedy that glorifies Dionysos and revolves around the punishment of Pentheus, who has shown disrespect to the god: he is torn apart by a crowd of women, including his own mother and aunt, in a Dionysian frenzy. Furthermore, Socrates, in Nietzsche's version, embodies so many of the principles that he has previously attributed to Apollo, that it makes no sense that Greek culture had flourished under the aegis of Apollo before Dionysos appeared on the scene, but yet, once Socratic clear-thinking appeared, slid into a decadence which – in the form of European civilisation – persists for two millennia before Wagner arrived to regenerate things.

Furthermore, whilst Apollo was the Ancient Greek god of music, Nietzsche is obliged to invent a "Dionysian music" – for which there is no historical evidence at all – to effect the immersion of the audience for genuine Greek tragedy in "primal being". But "Dionysian music" is also a necessary fiction in another sense: it has to have existed so Wagner can revive it.



This mass of implausibilities clearly points to the fact that the real plot is unfolding on another level of the text. There the flaw in the self-mirroring of primal being can produce the tragic suffering that envelops both stage and audience and makes them one with the Dionysian basis of all existence for only so long before the inexorable progress of linear time – “so called world history” – dissolves the precarious synthesis that has made great tragedy possible. Nietzsche has set a trap for himself by positing the development of Greek literature as an evolutionary process: the “naïve” age of the Homeric epics and of early lyric poetry is purely Apollonian. Dionysos, the new god from Asia, then arrives and, in a further evolutionary stage, achieves a synthesis with Apollo – and the miracle of great tragedy is the result. In this phase of the story, Nietzsche then largely abandons the level of narrative progression to explore the timeless realm of “primal being” and discover both its essential narcissism and the flaw within it that gives rise to the “primal agony”, which is then portrayed on stage as the sufferings of Dionysos. Because in this realm each level of existence is a perfect analogy of all others and because they may all merge with each other, the extraordinary myth he creates also serves as an account of the genesis of the human self.

But there is a fatal dichotomy between this dimension of the tale, which is immune to history – firstly because “primal being” is timeless; secondly because the same process is repeated in the psyche of every new human individual – and the other, prior phase of the plot, which has as its protagonist “the development of art”. Since in the dimension of Nietzsche’s fiction in which the greatest Greek tragedy is seen as just such a development, there is no escaping a further historical phase in which it gives way to something else, namely Socratic decadence. Because Nietzsche’s discourse has moved so freely between the two dimensions which, in their understanding of time, are quite incompatible with one another, he becomes sorely embarrassed when he has to account for the death of tragedy.

The blustering tirades against Euripides and Socrates are the result. This was only one aspect of *The Birth of Tragedy* which scandalised Nietzsche’s fellow philologists. Not only his teacher Ritschl thought





the scholarly aspect of the book nonsense, but a younger colleague, von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, wrote a pamphlet demolishing in detail its claims to accuracy.¹³ But even later generations of readers, who care nothing for the book's philological deficiencies, have been troubled by the apparent incoherence of the fictional narrative. As I have tried to show, this is due to the fact that Nietzsche is writing one fiction against another.

The latter sections of the book continue even today to attract the most criticism. This is because Nietzsche has, in the earlier parts, created a succession of extreme fictional tensions which demand a resolution. But since Nietzsche claims *not* to be writing fiction, indeed expresses contempt for fiction, there can be no adequate fictional ending, since this would involve further metaphorical transpositions and metaphors are intrinsically fictional.

Thus Nietzsche must have recourse to breaking out of the imaginary world he has created and taking the fatal step into the contemporary German present. Sadly, Nietzsche then indulges in those glorifications of Wagner that were soon to be so painful for him to acknowledge. He even goes so far as to represent the Franco-Prussian war as the newly reawoken German Spirit purifying itself of alien elements: "Perhaps many of us are of the view that this Spirit must begin its struggle with the expulsion of what is of Romance origin: we may perceive an external preparation for this and an encouragement of it in the victorious bravery and bloody splendour of the recent war [...] And if Germans are hesitantly looking about for a leader who will take them back into their long-lost homeland [...] they need do no more than listen to the blissfully tempting call of the Dionysian bird that hovers over them and wants to show them the way to it." (KSA 1, 149)

The way led, of course, to Bayreuth, and the leader was Wagner. Interestingly, Nietzsche here revives the belief invented by the Early Romantics at the beginning of the 19th century that there was a special affinity between the Ancient Greeks and the German Spirit, so that, by streaming to Bayreuth, Germans were – in Nietzsche's imagination – revisiting the world of Aeschylus and Sophocles. It was a sad irony that by the time Wagner's masterwork was complete and ready for performance,





Nietzsche had become sufficiently disillusioned with the Master that he himself fled Bayreuth to escape the premiere of the *Ring*-cycle.¹⁶

If one takes a detached view of the literary form of *The Birth of Tragedy*, then it reveals itself to be essentially a series of dialogues and shows clear affinities to the *agon* or dispute in the Attic comedy – a genre on which Nietzsche heaps contempt in his own text as he classes it as a “degenerate form of tragedy” (KSA 1, 76).¹⁷ The three narrative perspectives create three different voices, one of which – that of Nietzsche as “Man of Culture” – fulfils the function of the chorus as commentator and, occasionally, referee. Of the two antagonists, the former “the one truly existing subject” still years for the ideal of narcissistic perfection in the mythical realm, whereas the latter, “the development of art” cannot but acknowledge linear time and insist on the fate that awaits all myths, namely “to creep into the confines of an allegedly historical reality and to be treated by some later age or other as a unique historical episode [...] For this is the way in which religions are prone to die out” (KSA 1, 74).

The “subject” desires narcissistic fulfilment in the rhythmic alternation of “fusions” and “annihilations”; its antagonist keeps reminding it that precisely this dualism is the flaw that has forced it out of its mythic paradise and given rise to the processuality of time, so that desire must henceforth seek its fulfilment in this dimension and that, as a result, all “blissful satisfaction” has been postponed indefinitely. At this point Nietzsche, as the “Man of Culture”, intervenes, puts a stop to the fictional *agon* and delegates the outcome to Richard Wagner and the “German Myth” (KSA 1, 147). Historicity gives up the contest, converts to a belief in regression, and, when the curtain comes down, more “blissful satisfaction” is promised in the “temple of both divinities”, which has now conveniently been erected in Bayreuth – but who is convinced? Certainly not Nietzsche himself for very long.

After one has discarded all the spurious philology and all the embarrassing subservience to Wagner that was to plague Nietzsche himself till his final descent into madness, what remains of prime interest in *The Birth of Tragedy*? Surely is the underlying theory of narcissism that anticipates so much of what Lacan was – almost a century later and with



no conscious reference to Nietzsche – to integrate into his retelling of the myth of Narcissus in terms of the primacy of the distortion of self-perception, the “fonction de méconnaissance”, and the subjugation of the self to the Symbolic Order.

If one looks for an explanation for these similarities, then we may find it in the fact that both thinkers were deeply influenced by both Hegel and Rousseau. Lacan’s dependence on Hegelian thought, as transmitted via the writings of Kojève, is well documented as are the Rousseauistic elements in his thinking. Nietzsche rejected Hegel and abhorred Rousseau, but the influence of both on his thought seems much greater than he was ever willing to admit.

Finally, what remains the most lasting and imaginative achievement of Nietzsche’s first published work is to have opened a perspective, through all its veils of analogy, onto the genesis of the modern self as an ineluctably tragic event. He can do so only by relating fictions which purport to be about something else. But is it from the collapse of these fantasies about “Dionysian music” or the advent of Socrates as the turning-point of human history that a coherent narrative of the tragic division within modern individuality emerges.

Notes

- 1 All translations in the following are by the author, and references to Nietzsche’s works are to the following edition: Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (eds.), Berlin/New York 1980 (Abbreviation: KSA 2, 121) etc.
- 2 For a description of Nietzsche’s “limitless self-love” see Helmut Pfotenhauer, *Die Kunst als Physiologie*, Stuttgart 1985, p. 67: “The perspective of the possible psychological variants in the field of tension between a limitless self-love and the strategies to combat woundings of it is constantly maintained throughout Nietzsche’s life [...] That apotheosis of himself in the guise of Dionysos, for example, always represents an attempt on Nietzsche’s part, to implant an image of his idolised self in the minds of others.”
- 3 S.O. Hoffmann, “Vor lauter Bäumen sieht man den Wald nicht. Oder: Das konzeptuelle Chaos in der zeitgenössischen Narzißmustheorie”, *Freiburger literatur-psychologische Gespräche* 2, J. Cremerius (ed.), Bern/Frankfurt am Main 1982, pp. 213-235.
- 4 See Pierre Hadot, “Le mythe de Narcisse et son interprétation par Plotin”, *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 13, 1976, p. 90.
- 5 Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. X, London 1943, p. 167.
- 6 See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Liber III, lines 463f. and 504f.
- 7 Heinz Henseler, *Die Theorie des Narzißmus*, *Die Psychologie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, vol II: Freud und die Folgen, Dieter Ecke (ed.), Zürich 1976, p. 462.

- 8 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris 1966, p. 113.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 113 and p. 97; on the concept of "transitivism" see *ibid.*, p. 180f.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 12 For Lacan's view of disharmony in the "mirror stage", see *op. cit.*, p. 113 and 94.
- 13 To appreciate the remarkable parallel between Nietzsche's vision and Lacan's theory of narcissism, see Anthony Wilden, "Lacan and the Discourse of the Other", Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self. The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, Baltimore 1968, p. 190f.: "It is in the sense that desire ultimately seeks the annihilation of the Other as an independent subject (or of oneself) that Lacan seeks to show [...] the impossibility of any fundamental satisfaction of desire [...]. At the same time the Hegelian view of desire [...] is supplemented by the more primordial notion of the lack of object which provides for the genesis of desire itself [...]; the implication seems to be that the Imaginary death struggle between egos is how things are, rather than how they have to be, whereas the subject's profoundest desire to be 'One' again (to control the other to whom he becomes subjected) is totally and absolutely irreducible. It is this desire for what is really annihilation (non-difference) which makes human beings human."
- 14 See Rainer Maria Rilke, *Marginalia on Nietzsche, Sämtliche Werke*, Ernst Zinn (ed.), vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main 1966, p. 1174: "It appears to me that the happenstance that was Wagner is to blame for the fact that Nietzsche attached his insights and his hopes – which have really so little in common with Wagner's brand of German chauvinism – to what was happening in Bayreuth, simply because it was close (far too close!) and convenient. This causes a sharp decline in the quality of the last third of the book." Rilke's penetrating comments were written in 1900, but not published till 1966. See also Walter Gebhard, *Nietzsches Totalismus. Philosophie der Natur zwischen Verklärung und Verhängnis*, Berlin/New York 1983, Berlin/New York 1983, p. 36f.; Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*, New Haven/London 1979, p. 98f.; Helmut Pfotenhauer, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
- 15 See Werner Ross, *Der ängstliche Adler. Friedrich Nietzsches Leben*, Stuttgart 1980, pp. 292-307.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 465-469.
- 17 See the article on "Komödie" in *Der Kleine Pauly. Lexicon der Antike*, Munich 1979, vol. 3, pp. 283-285.