



Micael Tanner

NIETZSCHE

A Very Short Introduction

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A Very Short Introduction

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To my father and in memory of my mother

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Abbreviations

After the first mention or so of a particular book of Nietzsche's, I have referred to it by initials, as listed below. All quotations are followed by the initial for the book they come from, and then section or chapter numbers. This can be rather inconvenient in the case of books with lengthy sections, but it is meant to enable readers to consult whichever edition they have to hand.

<i>A</i>	<i>The Antichrist</i>
<i>BGE</i>	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>The Case of Wagner</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Doybreak</i>
<i>EH</i>	<i>Ecce Homo</i>
<i>GM</i>	<i>The Genealogy of Morals</i>
<i>GS</i>	<i>The Gay Science</i>
<i>HAH</i>	<i>Human, All Too Human</i>
<i>NCW</i>	<i>Nietzsche Contra Wagner</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>
<i>TSZ</i>	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>
<i>UM</i>	<i>Untimely Meditations</i>
<i>WP</i>	<i>The Will to Power</i>

The Image of Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) was a German philosopher, almost wholly neglected during his sane life, which came to an abrupt end early in 1889. 'Nietzsche' is the figure in whose name people of the most astonishingly discrepant and various views have sought to find justification for them. An excellent study (Aschheim, 1992) devoted to his impact within Germany between 1890 and 1990 lists, among those who have found inspiration in his work, 'anarchists, feminists, Nazis, religious cultists, Socialists, Marxists, vegetarians, avant-garde artists, devotees of physical culture, and archconservatives,' and it certainly does not need to stop there. The front cover sports a bookplate from 1900 of Nietzsche wearing a crown of thorns, the back cover one of him naked, with remarkable musculature, posing on an Alp. Almost no German cultural or artistic figure of the last ninety years has not acknowledged his influence, from Thomas Mann to Jung to Heidegger.

The story in 'Anglosaxony', to use the term in the title of one book about him, which traces his influence in the Western English-speaking world (Bridgwater, 1972), is similar. Wave after wave of Nietzscheanism has broken over it, though there have been periods when he was in abeyance, being seen as the inspirer of German militarism, and so to be vilified by the Allies. He was extensively, and most inaccurately, translated into English, or a language strangely connected with it, in the early years of the century. For all its archaizing grotesqueness, or

partly because of that, it was the only translation of many of Nietzsche's works for almost fifty years.

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Then, when his reputation was at its lowest in England and the United States, Walter Kaufmann, an emigré professor of philosophy at Princeton, began retranslating many of the key works, and launched the enterprise with a book that had, for many years after its first appearance in 1950, a determining influence on the way Nietzsche was viewed (Kaufmann, 1974). Kaufmann presented a philosopher who was a much more traditional thinker than the one who had inspired anarchists, vegetarians, etc. To widespread surprise, and only slightly less widespread agreement, Nietzsche turned out to be a reasonable man, even a rationalist. Kaufmann sought to establish comprehensively his remoteness from the Nazis, from all irrationalist movements that had claimed him as their forebear, and from Romanticism in the arts. It became difficult, on this version, to see what all the fuss had been about. Thus began the academicization of Nietzsche, one philosopher among others, to be compared and contrasted with Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and other leading names in the Western philosophical tradition. Reassured by the breadth of Kaufmann's learning, American philosophers, and then increasingly English ones, took him as a starting-point for their studies of Nietzsche on objectivity, the nature of truth, his relationship to Greek thought, the nature of the self, and other harmless topics, at any rate as treated in their books and articles.

Meanwhile in Europe Nietzsche, who had never been in disgrace there, became after World War II a continued object of study and appropriation for existentialists, phenomenologists, and then increasingly, during the 1960s and 1970s, a cynosure for critical theorists, post-structuralists, and deconstructionists. When the latter two movements first gained a foothold in the United States, then took the country over, it was Nietzsche who once more was acknowledged as the major source of their inspiration. Some analytical philosophers, too, found that he was not so remote from their interests as they had

assumed, and, in that reciprocal motion that is so characteristic of academic life, congratulated him on having had, in embryonic fashion, some of their insights, while at the same time reassuring themselves about those insights by invoking his authority. There is now a flourishing Nietzsche industry, and almost certainly more books appear on him each year than on any other thinker, thanks to the appeal he has for so many disparate schools of thought and anti-thought.

It is idle to pretend that he would have been entirely displeased by this phenomenon. During his lifetime (and unless I specify otherwise, I shall always mean by that the one that finished when he eleven years before his death) he was almost completely neglected, and though that did not make him bitter, as hardly anything did, it caused him distress because he believed that he had vital truths to impart to his contemporaries which they were ignoring at a terrible cost – one of his most accurate prophecies. But he would have looked with scorn on almost everything that has been written or done under his aegis, and the successful take-over by the academic world, though it cannot compare in horror with some of the other appropriations he has suffered, would have seemed to him most like a final defeat, because he wanted at all costs not to be assimilated to the world of learning, where everything becomes a matter for discussion and nothing for action.

The Image of Nietzsche

Before we move into an account of his views, it is worth stopping briefly and pondering what it might be about his work that has proved so attractive to such diverse movements and schools of thought. Only later will a clearer answer emerge. But it seems, as a preliminary explanation, that it is precisely the idiosyncrasies of his manner that are first found refreshing. His books, after the early *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and the *Untimely Meditations* (1873–6), are usually composed of short essays, often less than a page-long and verging on the aphoristic, though, as we shall see, crucially different from aphorisms as normally composed and appreciated: that is, one- or two-line encapsulations of

the nature of human experience, demanding acceptance through their lapidary certainty. The number of subjects discussed is vast, including many that it is surprising to find mentioned by a philosopher – such matters as climate, diet, exercise, and Venice. And often his reflections are in no particular order. That means that he is much easier than most philosophers to dip into, and his frequently expressed loathing of systems means that one can do that with a good conscience. Many of his quasi-aphorisms are radical in content, and though one may gain only a vague impression of what he favours, one will certainly find out a great deal about his dislikes, most often expressed in terms that are both witty and extreme. What he seems to dislike is every aspect of contemporary civilization, most particularly that of the Germans, and for the reader that is bracing. His underlying view that if we don't make a drastically new start we are doomed, since we are living in the wreckage of two thousand and more years of fundamentally mistaken ideas about almost everything that matters – in, as it were, the decadence of what was anyway deadly – offers *carte blanche* to people who fancy the idea of a clean break with their whole cultural inheritance. Nietzsche was under no illusions about the impossibility of such a schism.

Even so, the variety of interpretations of his work, which far from diminishing as the decades pass, seems to be multiplying, though in less apocalyptic forms than previously, needs more explanation. It suggests to the outsider that he must have been exceptionally vague, and probably contradictory. There is something in both those charges. But they seem more impressive and damning than they are if one does not realize and continually keep in mind that, in the sixteen years during which he wrote his mature works, from *BT* onwards, he was developing his views at a rate that has no parallel, and that he rarely went to the bother of signposting his changes of mind.

What he more often did was to try to see his earlier works in a new light, surveying his career in a way that suggests he thought one could

not understand his later writings without a knowledge of his previous ones, to see how he had advanced; and thus taking himself to be exemplary of how modern man, immured in the decaying culture of the nineteenth century, might move from acquiescence in it to rebellion and suggestions for radical transformation. In 1886 in particular, when he was on the verge, though he could not have known it, of his last creative phase, he spent a great deal of energy on his previous books, providing new, sometimes harshly critical, introductions to them, and in the case of *The Gay Science* writing a long, new, final book. No doubt this was part of his programme for showing that nothing in one's past should be regretted, that there need be no waste. But many commentators have been led astray by assuming that it gave them licence to treat all his writings as though they had been produced simultaneously.

Another factor that has made for misreadings and shocking distortions is a consequence of the fact that, from 1872 at least but probably before that, Nietzsche must have spent most of his time writing. The tally of published books is impressive enough. But he noted down at least as much as he organized into books, and unfortunately much of this unpublished writing (the *Nachlass*) has survived. It would not be unfortunate if there were a universally accepted methodological principle that what he did not publish should under all circumstances be clearly demarcated from what he did, but almost no one observes that elementary rule. Even those who claim that they will do this usually slip into unattributed quoting from the immense *Nachlass* when it confirms the line that they are taking on him. What makes this a particularly dangerous way of proceeding is that on some central concepts, among which the Will to Power and the Eternal Recurrence are perhaps the most important, his thought remained so undeveloped. Nietzsche was often so sure he had struck philosophical gold that he jotted down very many thoughts, but left them unworked out. This provides a commentator with the possibility of pursuing trains of thought that he is attributing to Nietzsche, unimpeded by

definite statements. Some have even taken the view that the 'real'

Nietzsche is to be found in the notebooks, the published work being a kind of elaborate – very elaborate – set of concealments. That absurd attitude is taken by Heidegger, who is thus enabled to peddle his own philosophy as deriving from and also critical of Nietzsche.

Like all his other commentators, I shall occasionally quote from the *Nachlass*, but I shall indicate when I am doing that. Nietzsche took great pains over the finished form of what he published, and he was the last person to think that style was an optional extra. Since he was a natural stylist, his jottings make more elegant reading than most philosophers' finished products. But when one compares his published thoughts with his draft versions of them, the difference is striking enough to make anyone cautious of taking them as being on a par, one would have thought. I emphasize this point because, as we shall see, the manipulation of what Nietzsche wrote has been a major factor in myth-making about him.

Nietzsche

None of this explains adequately how Nietzsche could come to be portrayed as the Man of Sorrows, or indeed in many other guises. For all his ambiguities and his careful lack of definition of an ideal, one would have thought there were limits to the extent of possible misrepresentations. All I can lamely say here is that evidently there appear to be no limits. If someone develops a reputation as vast as his rapidly became, once he was no longer in a position to do anything about it, it seems that he will be unscrupulously used to give credentials to any movement that needs an icon. Here, as in some other respects, he does with awful irony come to resemble his antipode, the 'Crucified One'. Almost the last words he wrote were, 'I have a duty against which my habits, even more the pride of my instincts, revolt at bottom: *Listen to me! For I am thus and thus. Do not, above all, confound me with what I am not!*' (EH, preface, 1). In the century since he wrote that, few of his readers, fewer still of those who have heard about him, have done anything else.

Tragedy: Birth, Death, Rebirth

Nietzsche was a precocious student, but though he wrote copiously from an early age, his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, or to give the first edition its full title, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, only appeared when he was 27. Its hostile reception in the academic world, where he had received such early advancement as to be appointed Professor of Classical Philology at Basle at the age of 24, should not have surprised him; but apparently it did. It meets no conceivable standards of rigour, let alone those that obtained in the study of the ancient Greeks. A broadside soon appeared over the name of an old enemy from his schooldays, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, who charged him with ignorance, distortion of the facts, and grotesque parallels between Greek culture and the modern world. Erwin Rohde, a staunch friend, replied in terms at least as pugnacious, and the kind of battle familiar in academic circles directed to those who offend against their canons ensued. Nietzsche had gained notoriety, but it was brief, and was the only kind of fame with which he was ever to be acquainted.

Readers ever since have been divided into those who find its rhapsodic style, and the content which necessitates it, intoxicating, and those who respond with bored contempt. Both are readily understandable. It is a whirlwind of a book, swept along by the intensity of its strange set of enthusiasms and its desire to cope with as many topics as possible in

a short space, but masquerading as a historical account of why Greek tragedy lasted for so short a time, and arguing that it had recently been reborn in the mature works of Richard Wagner. Nietzsche had been a fanatical admirer of some of Wagner's dramas since he encountered the score of *Tristan und Isolde*, which he and some friends had played on the piano and quasi-sung when he was sixteen (EH 11. 6; but see also Love, 1963). And he had met the composer and his then mistress Cosima, daughter of Liszt, in 1868, becoming their close friend in 1869, and visiting them often during the years that they lived in Tribtschen on Lake Lucerne. There is no doubt that the whole subject-matter of *BT* had been discussed frequently during those visits, and that Wagner contributed substantially to the development of some of its central theses (Silk and Stem, 1981: ch. 3). But when he and Cosima received their copy of the book they were nevertheless bowled over by it. However much influence Wagner, who adored pseudo-historical speculation, may have had, there was enough that was new to him in the book for him to find it a revelation.

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Generally sympathetic readers of the book have often regretted that its last ten sections are largely devoted to a consideration of Wagner's art as the rebirth of Greek tragedy. Not only does the claim seem to them in itself absurd, but also they feel it detracts and distracts from the unity, such as it is, of the first two-thirds of *BT*. That is almost wholly to miss the point of the book's endeavour, and of what Nietzsche spent his life trying to do. For what makes *BT* the indispensable start to Nietzsche's writing career, for those who want to understand the underlying unity of his concerns, is the manner in which he begins with a set of issues which seem to be remote from the present time, but gradually reveals that his underlying concern is with culture, its perennial conditions, and the enemies of their fulfilment.

BT begins at a spanking pace, and the momentum never lets up. It is a good idea to read it for the first time as fast as one can, ignoring obscurities and apparent diversions from the central argument (that

term being used in a generously broad sense). Such an initial reading certainly involves taking a lot on trust, but to subject it to critical scrutiny the first time through is a recipe for irritation and ennui. It is important to get the sense of flux which the book possesses and which is to some extent also its subject-matter. After the 'Preface to Richard Wagner' which mentions both 'the serious German problem we are dealing with' and the conviction that 'art is the supreme task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life,' Nietzsche begins the book proper with the claim 'We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics when we have succeeded in perceiving directly, and not only through logical reasoning, that art derives its continuous development from the duality of the *Apolline and Dionysiac*.' So within the space of a very few lines Nietzsche has shown that he is going to be advancing on three fronts. The first mentioned is that of the contemporary crisis in German culture, the second an audacious claim about the nature of metaphysics, and the third a concern with 'the science of aesthetics'. (For 'science' Nietzsche uses the word 'Wissenschaft', which covers any systematic investigation, and not what is meant by 'science' in English – this should be remembered throughout his work, or indeed any discussion in German.)

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He rapidly moves on to dealing with the 'opposition' between the Apolline and the Dionysiac, but that should not be taken to mean that they are enemies. As his exposition unfolds, it immediately becomes clear that 'These two very different tendencies walk side by side, usually in violent opposition to one another, inciting one another to ever more powerful births,' until they seem 'at last to beget the work of art that is as Dionysiac as it is Apolline – Attic tragedy.' This kind of opposition which yet contrives to be immensely more fruitful than anything that could be produced by either of the opponents going it alone is characteristic of nineteenth-century German philosophy, its leading exponent being Hegel, a philosopher to whom Nietzsche was in general strongly antagonistic throughout his life, no doubt in part because of his attachment to Schopenhauer, whose loathing of Hegel

was notorious. But in the elaboration of the opposition and its overcoming Nietzsche does not need any of the dialectical apparatus that Hegel encumbers himself with. For he can work out his scheme by means of images and examples, and that is what he does, though the examples are often used tendentiously.

The idea is that the Apolline is the art of appearance, indeed *is* appearance. Nietzsche invokes dreams to make his point, that at its most representative Apolline art has extraordinary clarity, giving hard edges to what it depicts, exemplifying the *principium individuationis* (the principle of individuation) which Schopenhauer had located as the major error that we suffer from epistemologically – we perceive and conceive of the world in terms of separate objects, including separate persons. As beings with sense organs and conceptual apparatus, we cannot avoid this fundamentally erroneous way of viewing the world; and for Schopenhauer it is responsible for many of our most painful illusions and experiences, though it is unclear that overcoming it should lead to our lives being any less frightful.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche traded, in *BT*, on the confusions in Schopenhauer's thought – it is nowhere evident that he was any more aware of them than Schopenhauer himself – to produce his own, somewhat independent, 'artists' metaphysics', as he contemptuously refers to his procedure in the 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism', the magnificent introduction that he wrote to the third edition of the book in 1886, the year of self-reckoning. By that phrase 'artists' metaphysics' he meant partly a metaphysics tailor-made to give art an importance that he later came to regard as preposterous; and partly the use of artistic or pseudo-artistic methods to produce metaphysical views, testing them by their beauty rather than for their truth. One way of looking at *BT* is as a transcendental argument, in Kant's sense. What that comes to in general is the following pattern: x is the case – the datum. What else must be the case in order for that (x) to be possible? Nietzsche's datum is very unlike that found in any other philosopher, since it gives

primacy to our aesthetic experience, normally low on the list of philosophical priorities, when it figures at all. He takes the experiences we have of Apolline art (sculpture, painting, above all the epic) and Dionysiac art (music, tragedy) as his data, and asks how the world must be in order for these experiences to be vouchsafed us. We have seen that he compares Apolline art to dreams; Dionysiac art is aligned rather, as a first indication of its nature, with intoxication, the low way in which the principle of individuation is felt to be overcome, the loss of clarity, and the merging of individualities.

Why do we need them both, once we have grasped that one is the representation of beautiful appearance, while the other enables us to experience reality so far as we can without being destroyed by it? Because we are so constructed that doses of reality must be reserved for special occasions, as the Greeks realized: for festivals (the first Bayreuth Festival was being planned while Nietzsche wrote, though it would not materialize until 1876). But there is more to it than that. There is nothing wrong with appearances, so long as we realize that that is what they are (this will always be a leading motif in Nietzsche's work). As we saw, the Greek epic is an Apolline art form, and its proudest manifestation is of course the *Iliad*, a work that delights us with its lucidity and its hard edges. The Greeks who lived it were happy to make for themselves fictions of a realm of gods enjoying themselves at their expense – 'the only satisfactory form of theodicy', Nietzsche remarks memorably (BT 3). And at this level the formula which occurs twice in the first edition, and is repeated approvingly in the 'Attempt at a Self-Criticism', operates: 'Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world justified' (the formulations vary slightly). Since for the Greeks of the Homeric age existence on its barest terms would have been intolerable, they showed a heroic artistic instinct in turning their battle-bound lives into a spectacle. That is why they needed gods; not to console themselves with the thought of a better life hereafter, which has been the usual motivation for postulating another world, but to mark the distinction between any life they could lead and the

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immortal lives of the gods, who just because they were immortal could be as reckless and irresponsible as Homer shockingly, to us, shows them being. 'Anyone who approaches these Olympians with a different religion in his heart, seeking elevated morals, even sanctity, ethereal spirituality, charity and mercy, will quickly be forced to turn his back on them, discouraged and disappointed' (BT 3).

Nietzsche

If we can give a sense, any longer, to the concept of the heroic – something about which Nietzsche had lifelong doubts – it is surely in getting an imaginative grasp on such a vision. This is Nietzsche's first attempt to give force to a phrase that he became addicted to in his later work, 'a pessimism of strength'. He was never callow enough to be an optimist, to think that life would ever become, in a way that a non-hero could appreciate it, wonderful. We, as non-heroes, can only concern ourselves with improving 'the quality of life' (one wishes Nietzsche were around to give what would be the only adequate comment on that appalling phrase). If we feel that it cannot be improved, we become pessimists, but sentimental, or as Nietzsche came to call it 'Romantic' ones, lamenting the miseries of life, and perhaps putting our laments into suitably emollient poetic form.

Nietzsche's celebration of Homer and the heroes to whom he gave his version of immortality by writing the *Iliad* is enough to show that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with Apolline art. But it connives in an illusion, and so is inherently unstable, liable to lapse into something less worthy. As the Greeks became more aware of their relationship to the gods, the age of the epic, which refuses to probe where trouble is likely to be the outcome, gave rise to the age of the tragic. There are many ways in which Nietzsche expresses this momentous transition, most of them influenced by his passionate but short-lived discipleship of Schopenhauer. At the end of section 1 of *BT* he writes: 'Man is no longer an artist [as he had been in creating the gods], he has become a work of art: the artistic power of the whole of nature reveals itself to the supreme gratification of the primal Oneness amidst the paroxysms

of intoxication.' At this still early point in *BT* we have the feeling, thrilled or exasperated according to our temperament, that Nietzsche is making it all up as he goes along. He has had a large number of profound and moving artistic experiences, not very many of other kinds, and he is trying to make sense of them in the only way a great critic, at least since the collapse of the Classical tradition in criticism, can do: by composing a work which seems, in its essential movement, to duplicate the strength and richness of those experiences.

In such a mode of procedure, words and phrases come first, then you think what you use all his writing life, but would soon realize was not fitted to the mode of expression typical of a monograph with the appurtenances of an academic treatise. The passage that I quoted immediately above is a good example of that. Having characterized the Homeric Greeks as artists, thanks to their creative capacities with respect to inventing capricious deities (capacities that they had to have to endure life) he moves on to the idea that they become works of art themselves, but the movement is in the first place on the level of playing with words for a serious purpose. Then he has to justify it, having first explained what it means. The Schopenhauerian notion (which provided the framework in which his thinking could be done) that underlying all individual appearances is a single, fundamentally unchanging Oneness comes to his rescue, and he celebrates the tragedy-producing Greeks for making men into works of art, or in his alternative formulation, 'artists of life'. They realize that to confront reality instead of loving beautiful appearances they must cope with the fact that life is *au fond* eternally destructive of the individual, and allow themselves to abandon their separateness, delighting in the Dionysiac art which was their stronghold against the Dionysiac festivals of the barbarians, at the centre of which 'was an extravagant want of sexual discipline, whose waves engulfed all the venerable rules of family life. The most savage beasts of nature were here unleashed, even that repellent mixture of love and cruelty that I have always held to be a "witches' brew" ' (*BT* 2).

Tragedy

Art, that is, always, even at its most Dionysiac, possesses form, and thus up to a point falsifies its subject-matter, which is a formless swirl of pain-cum-pleasure, with pain predominating. But it needs to perform this falsification, for otherwise we would find it unendurable. Thus much later in the book when he is discussing Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Nietzsche claims that it has to be a drama, because in dramas there are characters, i.e. individuals, which means that Apollo is playing his part. In Act III of the drama, Tristan the character interposes between us and Wagner's music; Tristan mediates the experience which causes him to die, and we survive, having come as close as possible to direct contact with the primal reality. So tragic heroes are sacrificial victims, and we achieve 'redemption', a favourite term of Wagner's as well as of Christians, which Nietzsche was shortly to regret having used, though in other contexts it went on serving his purpose.

Nietzsche I have vaulted over the intervening chapters of *BT* in order to show how Nietzsche tries to establish a continuity between Greek tragedy and Wagnerian music drama. The latter is bound, he thinks, to mean more to us than the former can because the music to which the Greek tragedies were performed has been lost, so we can only infer their effects from accounts of how their audiences responded to them: they were put into a state of *Rausch* (intoxication) which is only now once more available to us. This state is impossible except to a community of spectators, whose sense of loss of identity is an upmarket version of that felt by a contemporary football crowd. But we have to concentrate on the way that *Rausch* is produced, otherwise there will be no qualitative distinction between a football crowd and the audience at a tragedy. Before long Nietzsche came to feel, for complex reasons, that there was no significant distinction between an audience of Wagnerians and his equivalent of a band of lager louts. But that thought lay in the painful future. For the present he was intent on the regeneration of the spirit of community thanks to its members being united in a common ecstasy. That is 'the seriously German problem

that we are dealing with', Nietzsche at this stage taking it that the Germans were the possessors of a sensitivity to ultimate truths and values which other nations are denied, thanks in large part to the richness of the Germans' musical inheritance.

In between his opening statements about the duality of Apollo and Dionysus and the extraordinarily involved dialectic in which they fertilize one another in the closing sections of the book we get Nietzsche's highly, not to say grotesquely, schematized version of the peaks (Aeschylus and Sophocles) and decline (Euripides) of Greek tragedy. His central thesis is that in the peaks the chorus predominates, so that the audience sees on stage its own reflection, raised to overpowering heights of suffering and transfiguration. But when Euripides, whose plays unfortunately survive in far greater numbers than those of his superior predecessors, arrives on the scene he manifests an interest in individuals, in psychology, and worst of all in the beneficial effects of rationality, or as Nietzsche tends to call it, 'dialectic'. Nietzsche has no doubts that the corrupting influence on him was Socrates, fully deserving his hemlock not for his power over the youth of Athens, but over what might have been its continuing tragic greatness. 'Euripides became the poet of aesthetic Socratism' (BT 12).

Tragedy

The characteristic that makes Socrates so radically anti-tragic a figure is his belief in the omnipotence of reason – though one might point out that in the dialogues of Plato which scholars regard as most likely to be accounts of Socrates' own views, not much progress is made, except of a negative kind. But Nietzsche's portrayal of him survives this point:

In this quite abnormal character, instinctive wisdom appears only to hinder conscious knowledge at certain points. While in all productive people instinct is the power of creativity and affirmation, and consciousness assumes a critical and dissuasive role, in Socrates instinct

(BT 13)

The image of Socrates was never to let Nietzsche free; as with all the leading characters in his pantheon and anti-pantheon, his relationship with him remains one of tortured ambivalence. For Nietzsche did not think that the relationship between instinct and consciousness was as simple as he here pretends to. What he was sure of was

the optimistic element in dialectic, which rejoices at each conclusion and can breathe only in cool clarity and consciousness: that optimistic element which, once it had invaded tragedy, gradually overgrew its Dionysiac regions and forced itself into self-destruction - its death-leap into bourgeois theatre. We need only consider the Socratic maxims: 'Virtue is knowledge, all sins arise from ignorance, the virtuous man is the happy man.' In these three basic optimistic formulae lies the death of tragedy.

(BT 14)

Nietzsche

It is a brilliant indictment, even if it has very little to do with Euripides. For it can be no accident that the great tradition of rationalism in Western philosophy has gone with an amazing uniformity of optimism, nor that we have to wait until Schopenhauer to encounter a philosopher who is a pessimist, and going with that an anti-rationalist, believing in the primacy of an irrational Will. The Western tradition has been inimical to tragedy, thanks to the co-operation of Platonism and Christianity, and its great tragedies, above all those of Shakespeare and Racine, are either removed from a theological context or in uneasy relationship to it. Not that Nietzsche is able to countenance Shakespeare as a fully-fledged tragedian, because of the absence of music. This puts him in an awkward position, which he deals with by almost total evasion. The one briefly sustained passage on Shakespeare in BT is brilliantly perceptive on Hamlet, as being a man who, having

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