Nietzsche and the Dionysian Ideal

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I trace and explain the changes in Nietzsche's conception of the Dionysian ideal. I identify five attributes of the Dionysian ideal, and claim that they are constitutive of it. I also claim that Nietzsche's early conception of the Dionysian ideal owes less to his speculations concerning the origin of Greek tragedy than to his encounter with the mature music of Richard Wagner. It was through his encounter with Wagner's music that Nietzsche believed he first discovered the key to Dionysian experience, which key concerned one of the five attributes of the Dionysian ideal: ecstasy. On route to his later conception, Nietzsche excised one of these constitutive attributes and altered the meaning of Dionysian ecstasy. I argue that the later conception of the Dionysian surrenders the psychological complexity of the earlier conception, and diminishes considerably the viability of the Dionysian ideal as a cultural ideal.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans le présent article, j'esquisse et j'explique les changements de conception chez Nietzsche de l'idéal dionysiaque, dont j'identifie cinq attributs constitutifs. J'y affirme que la première conception nietzscheenne de l'idéal dionysiaque découle moins de ses spéculations relatives à l'origine de la tragédie grecque qu'à son expérience de la musique achevée de Richard Wagner. À travers la musique wagnerienne, Nietzsche crut découvrir pour la première fois la clé de l'expérience dionysiaque, à savoir l'extase, soit l'un des cinq attributs constitutifs de l'idéal dionysiaque. Cependant, Nietzsche supprima par la suite l'un de ces attributs constitutifs et modifia le sens de l'extase dionysiaque. Je soutiens que cette conception plus tardive du dionysiaque se dépouille de la complexité psychologique de la première conception et diminue considérablement la viabilité de l'idéal dionysiaque en tant qu'idéal culturel.

We have become accustomed to associating the Dionysian exclusively with Nietzsche — so accustomed, that we tend to forget or ignore the fact that Nietzsche is only the most famous “disciple of the philosopher Dionysus.” Indeed, Nietzsche was so successful at publicly identifying himself with his “philosopher-god,” that credit for the renewal of the ancient Dionysian ideal must seem to go to him alone. Yet the renewal of the Dionysian ideal had

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already been underway almost a century before the appearance in 1872 of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, and it continues to exert considerable influence in philosophy, art, and popular culture. In order properly to understand this ideal it is extremely important to identify not only what Nietzsche inherited from his precursors’ interpretation of the Dionysian, but also to identify what motivated the change of meaning between Nietzsche’s earlier and later interpretations, as well as the consequences which follow from the change.

The renewal of the Dionysian ideal was initiated by the first generation of German romanticism: the generation of Herder, Novalis, Hölderlin, Schelling, and the young Hegel. These theorists’ interest in retrieving the semantic and normative content of the Dionysian myth was motivated by their shared conviction that the Enlightenment had become a self-undermining project, generating political and cultural crises which it could not resolve out of its own cultural and theoretical resources. They believed that a rejuvenated mythology, a “new mythology” that was also a *rational* mythology, could reacquire the character of a culturally unifying public institution, overcoming the narrowness of the Enlightenment’s forms of rationality, subjectivity, and freedom — but without losing what had been gained in each of these dimensions of everyday practice between the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

Looking to the ancient world of the Greek *polis* for normative orientation, the principal exponents of German romanticism found in the period of transition between the Classical and Hellenistic ages, a historical context corresponding to their own. In both periods — the periods of ancient Greek and modern European ‘Enlightenment’ — a culturally corrosive form of rationalism had become authoritative, rendering arbitrary and contingent all existing values and ideals; and in both cases, the nihilistic effects of this ostensibly critical enterprise threatened its own foundations. The myth of Dionysus, and the cult which it inspired, began to flourish in this context of declining confidence in the integrative capacities of political institutions and social practices.

Dionysus, so the story goes, was the offspring of Semele, a mortal woman, and Zeus, king of the Greek pantheon. Persecuted by the goddess Hera, Zeus’s wife, the young Dionysus was forced into exile and driven to madness; yet his exile and madness only served to heighten the experience of his absence and the anticipation of his return. As “the god who is coming” [der kommende Gott], Dionysus attracted redemptive hopes: one day he would return from wandering about in North Africa and Asia Minor with his ecstatic band of followers in train. Thus the myth of Dionysus disclosed a horizon of expectation in which the return of the god, liberated from madness and carrying a fund of social solidarity in the ecstatic rituals of his cult, would
bring about a rebirth of culture and public life.

In light of its diagnosis of modernity's need for normative reorientation, German romanticism appropriated what may be regarded as the five essential, interrelated meanings attributed to Dionysus: 1) as the god of ecstasy [Rauschgot] and intoxication [Weingot], Dionysus possessed the power to transform not only our perceptions but our normative framework as well; 2) as the "god who is coming," Dionysus opened up a utopian attitude, or stance, towards the future; 3) as the god of ecstatic rituals of unification, Dionysus could restore solidarity to individuals who had become alienated from themselves and from the natural world; 4) as the "foreign god" [der ausländische Gott], the god "not honoured among the gods," and as the god "who looks like a woman," Dionysus opened up public life to otherness, giving previously marginalized practices and peoples a place of honour at the center of public life; 5) finally, as the "masked god" who remains concealed even as he reveals himself, as the "absent god" who emerges suddenly out of nowhere, Dionysus possessed a reserve of socially subversive power.

Certainly, in this constellation of attributes one can see the normative criteria of the critique of modernity which spans German romanticism, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno and early Frankfurt School critical theory, French poststructuralism, and strains of contemporary postmodernism. All five of these attributes are contained in the early Nietzsche's interpretation of the Dionysian in The Birth of Tragedy, and all but one will be retained in the changed conception of the Dionysian that Nietzsche was later to espouse. But at this time Nietzsche discovered something about the nature of one of these attributes, transformative ecstasy, which allowed him to claim that he was "the first to comprehend the wonderful phenomenon of the Dionysian." What has not been sufficiently appreciated is that Nietzsche's comprehension of the Dionysian "phenomenon" was not in the first instance connected to his analysis of Greek tragedy.

The experience which rendered the "phenomenon of the Dionysian" so perspicuous to the young Nietzsche was provided by something historically and culturally alien to ancient Greek culture: the radically novel chromaticism of Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, particularly the dark, jagged, almost unbearable dissonance of the third act (to which Nietzsche refers in section 22 of The Birth of Tragedy). It was in virtue of his encounter with Wagner's music that Nietzsche found himself able to comprehend the "parable" which clothes Dionysian experience — the experience of "having to see" while at the same time longing "to transcend all seeing," and of "desiring to hear" while at the same time longing "to get beyond all hearing." Only "the wonderful significance of musical dissonance" made directly intelligible, immediately graspable, how the "ugly and discordant, the content of the tragic myth," could "stimulate aesthetic pleasure" — stimulate, that is, the
“aesthetic pleasure peculiar” to the Dionysian phenomenon. (Of course, to endure the intensely painful pleasure of Dionysian dissonance the prophylactic membrane of Apollinian illusion is necessary.)

Now, it was not simply the presence nor the extensive use of dissonance in Wagner’s music that prompted the young Nietzsche’s discovery of how to render the Dionysian phenomenon intelligible and perspicuous. Dissonance is something which is present in varying degree in all music; and in the tradition of western art music, particularly what we now call classical music, or classical tonality, dissonance and its resolution played a structural-formal function wholly unique to this music. More precisely, the polar relation between tonic (consonant) harmony and dominant (dissonant) harmony was regulated by a periodic structure of equally-spaced and equally-lengthed phrases, a structure which enabled, and could withstand, tremendous dramatic development without loss of formal balance. This symmetrical rhythm of consonance and dissonance organized the melodic and harmonic structure of the individual phrase, and the formal structure of the composition as a whole.

Between Mozart and Wagner, the integrity of classical tonality was progressively weakened as composers — e.g., Ludwig van Beethoven in his later compositions, Frédéric Chopin, Robert Schumann, and Franz Liszt — made greater and greater use of new modulatory techniques which, in turn, made more and more ambiguous the formerly clear difference between tonic and dominant harmony, between consonance and dissonance. Because this difference had functioned as a structural-formal principle, the exploitation of the possibilities of harmonic ambiguity in the music of the mid-to-late 19th century raised challenging questions about the intelligibility and tonal stability of western art music, questions which were to preoccupy composers and music theorists for the next century or more.

These possibilities were nowhere more radically developed than in Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde. In this work, written in 1857, ambiguity is not only pervasive, it has itself become the principle of musical organization. For perhaps the first time, one can hear “the emancipation of the dissonance,” a term of art which Arnold Schoenberg coined to account for the transition between tonal and atonal (and subsequently twelve-tone) music. And so it was the encounter with the emancipated dissonance of Wagner’s Tristan which helped Nietzsche to decipher the previously obscured secret of the Dionysian. Dissonance, emancipated from the formal and structural demand to resolve in a fixed and relatively stable key, rather than dissonance per se, made possible music which could induce the ambiguous intermingling of pleasure and pain comprising the “aesthetic pleasure” peculiar to, and revelatory of, the Dionysian.

What has been suggested thus far is that the construal of ecstatic which Nietzsche developed in his first interpretation of the Dionysian ideal was not
only linked inseparably to his experience of Wagner’s chromaticism, it was altogether indebted to it. Like Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal*, which appeared in the same year and with which it shares the deepest affinity, Wagner’s *Tristan* opened up a completely new terrain of aesthetic experience. Although it would be historically inaccurate to claim that this was the first time in the history of western art that one could encounter the distinctive tension between pleasure and pain Nietzsche believed to be the essence of the Dionysian, it would not be inaccurate to claim that it was the first time that this tension achieved such overwhelming ambiguity, and the first time that such overwhelming ambiguity was successfully employed as a structural-formal principle organizing large-scale works of art.

One can well understand the obvious excitement and delight with which the young Nietzsche pronounced that he had discovered the key to the nature of Dionysian ecstasis; from his first conception of the Dionysian ideal to his last, Nietzsche’s fundamental concern was with the nature of the ecstasis proper to it. Whereas early German romanticism concentrated on spelling out the normative content of the Dionysian ideal in terms of a more rational, less unhealthy form of life than the one which issued from the Enlightenment, it was the ecstatic state of being outside oneself, a state in which one encounters oneself and others in a potentially transformative way, which remained primary in Nietzsche’s account of the Dionysian. Nevertheless, all five attributes of German romanticism’s interpretation of the Dionysian ideal — the ecstatic, utopian, solidarity-restoring, other-affirming, and subversive attributes — are more or less equally present in the interpretation espoused by the early Nietzsche. The later Nietzsche, however, altered his conception of the Dionysian in two extremely significant respects: he stripped the solidarity-restoring meaning attributed to the Dionysian from his later conception, and he turned his earlier construal of transformative ecstasis into the very *antithesis* of Dionysian ecstasis. Both the solidarity-restoring attribute of the Dionysian ideal and the earlier construal of Dionysian ecstasis fell victim to the later Nietzsche’s genealogical critique of modernity.

In his early Schopenhauerian phase, Nietzsche had linked Dionysian ecstasis to the transcendence of the “principle of individuation.” By transcending this essentially self-alienating principle, human beings could recover their lost solidarity with each other and with nature. But later Nietzsche overcame his Schopenhauerian aversion to individuation. *Individual autonomy*, the goal of becoming what one is, eventually displaced the solidarity-restoring attribute. Evidently, Nietzsche had lost his earlier faith in the regenerative power of any existing public institutions and shared practices — including the institutions of art and the theatre. The genealogical approach of the later Nietzsche unmasked the unavoidably repressive and coercive character of processes of socialization, and of all forms of human
association and community. It seemed that otherness, an attribute of the Dionysian Nietzsche was not prepared to relinquish, could not be preserved in the midst of being with others. Therefore, the transformative effects of Dionysian ecstasy had to be redirected from restoring solidarity to making possible individuals, individuals who could achieve a unity of self without sacrificing their own otherness. 9

The change in the meaning of Dionysian ecstasy which the later Nietzsche introduced was accompanied by a distinction which the early Nietzsche did not have at his disposal, a distinction between healthy (Dionysian) and pathological forms of ecstasy. The early conception of ecstasy which Nietzsche owed to his experience of Wagner's Tristan came to represent pathological rather than Dionysian ecstasy. In the later conception, Dionysian ecstasy is explicated "in terms of an excess of force" 10 — which is to say, in terms of "an overflowing of feeling and strength." 11 Consistent with the romantic interpretation of the Dionysian, this "excess of force" has a utopian orientation, an orientation to what might be otherwise; at the same time, it is motivated by the healthy desire to affirm the otherness of the future, to affirm "becoming." In contrast, the ecstasy induced by Wagner's music, the clearest case of "modern" ecstasy, is characterized by an "impoverishment of life" and by the desire to negate life; indeed, to negate the future of life. 12 The signs of impoverishment and negation are identical with narcosis, addiction, and self-torture. Dionysian ecstasy, on the other hand, is produced by a non-addictive, non-enervating intoxicant: the "will to life." However, Nietzsche draws his distinction between healthy and unhealthy ecstasis so sharply that it becomes question-begging. His examples of healthy ecstasis support an opposition between 'classicism' and 'modernism' which looks suspiciously arbitrary and willful.

In his later writings on Wagner, Nietzsche goes to great lengths to show that the very features of Wagner's musical language which he once identified with Dionysian ecstasy actually express the ecstasy proper to the ascetic ideal, a pathological ecstasy that feeds off the "physiological contradictions" of modernity. The ambiguous blending of pain and pleasure turns out to be a symptom of degenerating life, drained of the will to life by a fascination with "sickness" and the "voluptuousness of hell"; 13 the novel chromaticism of Wagner's Tristan turns out to be nothing more than an invitation to roll about in "the mud of the most contrary harmonies" 14 and what was once the key to the content of the Dionysian myth, the aesthetic pleasure generated by the ugly and the discordant, is now the expression of a hysterical and histrionic, typically 'romantic,' taste.

More than the work of any other artist, Nietzsche claims, Wagner's music sums up modernity: "one has almost completed an account of the value of what is modern once one has gained clarity about what is good and evil in
Wagner.15 It may well be the case, then, that one can estimate the value of Nietzsche’s critique of modernity once one has gained clarity about the strengths and weaknesses of Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner. And that is because Wagner’s music was the constant (but not the only) reference point for the development of his own views of art and modernity, and for the development of his conception of the Dionysian ideal. Nietzsche remained the disciple of Dionysus throughout his life because he remained convinced that modernity was in need of a new ideal. Nonetheless, the content of this ideal changed considerably as Nietzsche struggled to redefine himself in relation to his precursors and to his own time. The distinction between healthy and pathological forms of ecstasy allowed him to distance himself from romanticism; it also allowed him to develop a conception of the Dionysian ideal independent of any empirical connection to Wagner or to aesthetic modernity as a whole — a conception he could call his own, and one which was consistent with his critique of modernity. But this independence was gained at some cost to the Dionysian ideal itself.

The independence of Nietzsche’s later conception was gained at the cost of sacrificing the psychological richness and complexity characteristic of the earlier construal of Dionysian ecstasis. Of course, Nietzsche might have attempted to combine the psychological features of both the early and the later construals — but that would have meant continued indebtedness to Wagner and rethinking the distinction between healthy and unhealthy ecstasis. Further treatment of the psychological phenomenon first opened up by Wagner and Nietzsche would have to await the publication of Freud’s seminal essay, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, an essay published a half-century after The Birth of Tragedy and in which the exploration of the blending of pleasure and pain is carried out without mention of either Nietzsche or Wagner.16 More significantly, the independence of Nietzsche’s later conception of the Dionysian was gained at the cost of losing an empirical connection to some current practice which could function as a bridge to an alternative future. The earlier conception was empirically connected to the promise of a regenerated public institution, the theatre, and to the practice of music. Nietzsche’s genealogical critique of modernity failed to recognize any palpable traces in the present — besides its own critical activity — that might suggest an alternative horizon of possibility out of which a new ideal might emerge.

Such a new ideal would have to emerge from collectively shared and endorsed experience, from collectively shared and endorsed practices. Any new ideals in terms of which current practices and self-understandings might be transformed, cannot become broadly-based agents of historical change when they lack the experience and practices of solidarity. Without the attribute of solidarity, the new Dionysian ideal is rendered vulnerable to a vanguard mentality which it did not originally possess.17 As if to grant this
very point, Nietzsche's later position on the Dionysian succumbs to a state of resignation and pessimism. Thus, in the final pages of *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche is forced to conclude: "Nothing... can cure music *in* what counts, *from* what counts, from the fatality of being an expression of the physiological contradiction — of being *modern*." This fatality is such that "no god can save music."18 No god can save music? Not even Dionysus? Nietzsche does not answer this question, but he was well aware that his conclusion is not easily reconcilable with the Dionysian attitude towards the future, with the affirmation of the future as a horizon of possible difference. If his conclusion is correct, it removes entirely the point of the question he could not stop asking: "what would a music have to be like that would no longer be of romantic origin... but Dionysian?"19 As has been suggested, there is more at stake here than the future of music — about which, in any case, Nietzsche's fatalism proved to be misplaced. So long as Nietzsche's critique of modernity could not recognize anything within modernity capable of serving as a bridge to a future different from the past, the Dionysian ideal would have to be projected, perhaps needlessly, into the remotest outpost of the future, awaiting the arrival of more determinate, solidarity-generating content.
Notes

1 Comprehensive and elaborate treatment of the issues raised in this essay can be found in the chapter on Nietzsche in my forthcoming book, Crisis and Transformation: The Aesthetic Critique of Modernity from Hegel to Habermas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).


3 For an extremely valuable investigation of the Romantic renewal of the Dionysian myth, see Manfred Frank, Der kommende Gott (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982).

4 Ibid., p. 728.


6 Ibid.


10 Ibid., p. 560.

11 Ibid., p. 562.


13 Ecce Homo, p. 796.


15 Ibid., p. 612.

16 In the conclusion of this essay, Freud reiterates the early Nietzsche’s central psychological claim about the nature of Dionysian experience, drawing on the same insight to overcome the limitations of his earlier view of ego development and the mechanisms of repression: “Our consciousness communicates to us feelings from within not only of pleasure and unpleasure but also of a peculiar tension which in its turn can

17 In her finely nuanced account of Nietzsche’s changing views of truth, Maudemarie Clark is quite right to emphasize that ultimately the cogency of Nietzsche’s critique of the “ascetic ideal” depends on the possibility — and viability — of a new ideal. This ideal, whatever it might be, remains to be invented. However, if we cannot freely and reflectively endorse it as a better ideal, such an ideal would be nothing more than a philosopher’s “invention.” See, Maudemarie Clark, Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 205-286.

18 The Case of Wagner, p. 644.

19 The Birth of Tragedy, p. 25.