

# Divine Illusions

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David Allison says to his readers that Nietzsche writes for you—you and him and me. In his book he tells of what of Nietzsche's thoughts he has, with long years of research and penetrating and generous reflection, made his own. The lucidity of this book enables us to see if these thoughts can also become ours. Nietzsche's thoughts are not only extremely complex but difficult thoughts which we cannot make our own without a struggle. The finest virtue of a philosophical book on Nietzsche is that it provokes this struggle. Here I am only going to recount a little of my struggle with a couple of those thoughts, in the hope that one day David Allison will shed more light on them.

Nietzsche insists on the illusory nature of art. Apollonian art—plastic art, poetry, sculpture, and architecture—is the art of forms, perfect, self-contained, radiant forms. They are created not through observation and technique but out of visions and dreams. Apollonian art is as natural to us as the faculty in our minds that dreams. Apollonian artworks are public dreams. The bliss they produce is the very bliss of dreams: it is that of the hypnagogic state in which the dreamer recognizes that what he sees is a dream, but says: "It is a dream! I will dream on!" The artist willingly cuts himself free from realism and reality, to project himself into dreams, into illusions.

Nietzsche then declares that illusions are the only justification of life. What can this justification then be? Could this be anything but an illusory justification? Allison says that they make "existence itself seem estimable and fully worthy of being lived" (Allison, 124). But one has to live in reality, a reality where there is no remedy for death, where no progress is assured, indeed where, as science will finally show, there are no goals and no purposes. Neither the dreamer who dreams up castles in Spain, nor the artist who creates the radiant images of the Homeric epics and the anthropomorphic deities erected on the Acropolis changes anything in the needy, vulnerable, and mortal life he lives stuck in purposeless reality. They nowise make of the life of the artist himself an artwork. Nietzsche, in *On The Genealogy of Morals*, observes that artists have always shown themselves to be the weakest and most servile of men, readily subjecting their work to serve political, moral, and religious doctrines; "all-too-pliable courtiers of their own followers and patrons, and cunning flatterers of ancient or newly arrived powers" (*GM*, III, sec. 5, p. 102.).

If the Apollonian illusions cannot make right the harsh necessities and inevitabilities of the real world, could they not serve to transfigure pain, loss, vulnerability, oppression, enslavement, and mortality into something grand and thus make the absurd comic, the terrible awesome? Contemplating the destruction of one's own form of life and identity from a distance, illuminated by the Apollonian light, could we not find a certain resignation in our tragic existence? Could we not come to see the ingenious microbes or voracious cancer that destroy us with a certain detached admiration?

Nietzsche had written that the anthropomorphic Greek gods—who embody all human rages, jealousies, aggressions, vindictiveness, lusts, and debaucheries—represent the sole way gods can justify our existence: by living it themselves, in a guiltless and magnified form. But we do not just

contemplate them from here below; through art we project ourselves into them.

Alongside of Apollonian art there is the Dionysian, born of music and dance. Music, which conveys no instruction, and dance, which is pleasure in movement that is not going anywhere, do not detach themselves from the real universe of tragic fatalism or the scientific universe devoid of purpose or goal. Here there is no longer a separation of the artwork from the real artist; music and dance are made with the flesh and body of the artist himself.

Dionysian and Apollonian art culminated in Greek tragedy. Greek tragedy did not teach an explanation of the world. Instead it produced effects; it produced a transformative experience in the participants. The abandon to music and dance produces visions, Apollonian visions. These now are not contemplated apart from the visionary; they possess him and he enacts them. The actor in tragic theater—and every participant was an actor—projects himself entirely into a heroic role; he is someone possessed. He is nothing but a churning excess of vital energies taking on a form, crafting that form to perfection, and then leading it to its death. But this death is not abject, for the actor knows himself capable of creating this hero and this heroic destiny once more another night, knows himself capable of creating innumerable heroes and heroic destinies and leading them to their sublime and glorious deaths. Thus he experiences, beneath the creation and destruction of forms, a fund of vital energies that is capable of creating innumerable forms and is nowise diminished by the destruction of those forms. In this the actor finds himself in deep contact with the world-force itself, which creates innumerable forms and wills none of them to survive. In tragic theater, “while [the] attitude [of the chorus] toward the god is wholly one of service, it is nevertheless the highest, namely the Dionysian expression of *nature* and therefore pronounces in its rapture, as nature does, oracles and wise saying: *sharing his suffering* it also shares something of his *wisdom* and proclaims the truth from the heart of the world” (*BT*, sec. 8). Thus, Nietzsche connects the exultation of the actor with a rapture in nature itself to find in tragic theater a metaphysical consolation—consolation for our pain and our mortality.

In fact, in seeking at the last limits of the destructive an aesthetic justification, Nietzsche sought a justification for all events in the world. “*What* does joy not want!” exults Zarathustra. “... It wants love, it wants hatred, it is superabundant, it gives, throws away, begs for someone to take it, thanks him who takes, it would like to be hated; so rich is joy that it thirsts for woe, for Hell, for hatred, for shame, for the lame, for the *world*—for it knows, oh it knows this world!” (*Z*, p. 332).

But can we feel the surge of the universe-creating and -destroying forms function as a justification of and consolation for the oncoming destruction of our life, that is, of the fund of life-forces in us that contract and transform forms? Does not Nietzsche’s vision of the eternal return, that new version of the Dionysian ontology, announced in *The Gay Science*, indicate that the earlier solution was unsatisfactory?

Nietzsche will now propose that in fact all the forms that are destroyed—including the form of our lives—will be recreated. While the force of the universe is immense and the number of forms it creates is countless, still, Nietzsche argues, they are not infinite. But since time is infinite, the universe can only recycle the forms it creates, and our lives with them. This

doctrine satisfied Nietzsche in that it abolishes all finality and purposes in the universe, and thus he recognizes it to be scientific. But since now nothing is destroyed, does it not also abolish the tragic as such?

*The Gay Science* presents this doctrine as a vision, an Apollonian vision born in a moment of ecstasy. It would indeed justify each moment of this terrestrial life we have to live as having an infinite depth and infinite worth. But Nietzsche also convinced himself that it was true; it was his most scientific doctrine. But if it is an illusion, as Allison thinks (Allison, 123), then is it not an illusory justification?

In his discussion of *The Gay Science*, Allison especially elaborates upon Nietzschean atheism. The death of faith, the death of God, merits celebration and not mourning, for God had functioned to inflict shame on human life and render human beings servile. Fear, our fear, Nietzsche declares, produced God. The fearless heroes of the present age set fire to Walhalla, making themselves divine. In the ashes God is found to be nothing. But the unicity of God was in fact an illusion, a pretension, of the God of monotheism. There have been many gods arising before human beings in the course of their long history. Let us only consider two of them, the ones Nietzsche did not cease to revere: Apollo and Dionysos.

Apollo is "this deep consciousness of nature, healing and helping in sleep and dreams" (*BT*, sec. 1). Nietzsche makes the power to dream in us a divine force. The power to see what is not there is not a power of the conscious ego and is not launched by any act of our own will. It is instead the force of Nature in our nature.

The subject, the willing individual that furthers his own egoistic ends, can be conceived of only as the antagonist, not as the origin of art. Insofar as the subject is the artist, however, he has already been released from his individual will, and has become, as it were, the medium through which the one truly existent subject celebrates his release in appearance (*BT*, sec. 5).

Similarly, neither music, which conveys no instruction, nor dance, where music launches the body into a movement without term, is the initiator of conscious intentions. They are instances in us of the periodicity of Nature: "'O Zarathustra,' said the animals then, 'all things themselves dance for such as think as we'" (*Z*, p. 234). Indeed, the Dionysian force "seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness" (*BT*, sec. 2).

One can certainly say that the anthropomorphic forms these forces of nature assume are produced by human beings—and Allison traces the successive guises that they took on until in the climax period of Greek antiquity they acquired the names and anthropomorphic forms of Apollo and Dionysos. But can we say that these forms were fabricated by human contrivance, as Allison, following the explanations in *The Gay Science* and *On The Genealogy of Morals*, says of the Judaeo-Christian God? Should we not rather say that these figures were themselves Apollonian forms, apparitions produced by the creative force of Nature in which we participate when we dream and when we are possessed by music and dance?

Nietzsche's declamation "God is dead" can indeed be taken as the simple formulation of an atheist positivism, and no doubt Nietzsche's polemic often induced him to formulate it in that sense. But it seems to me that instead

of taking it as simply equivalent to "God does not exist," or "God is a mendacious fiction fabricated by servile human beings," we should be attentive to the term "dead." This figure of supreme life was, Nietzsche argues, the hypostasized image of death. God dead on the cross functioned to mortify the instincts and drives and sensuality that are the very substance of human life. God is the form that death took on in human history. But beneath that form is a reality: the force of death itself. God—this Judaeo-Christian god, this moral and punitive god—then is not simply a fiction created by fear to be dissipated by the critical mind; he is to be combated. The combat with the Judaeo-Christian god participates in, is driven by, a force greater than any divinized human, any fearless Siegfried, a force at loose in Nature, and which force is Dionysos. "Have I been understood?—*Dionysos against the Crucified*," Nietzsche wrote in the days of his final collapse (*EH*, p. 134).

Is not Nietzsche himself one of the places where this combat breaks out, because he finds in himself, quite despite himself, the compulsions of Dionysos, but also those of the Crucified?

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