

Nietzsche/Dionysus: Ecstasy, Heroism, and the Monstrous

Author(s): Robert Luyster

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# Nietzsche/Dionysus:

## *Ecstasy, Heroism, and the Monstrous*

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ROBERT LUYSTER

“**W**hat is the significance of the tragic myth among the Greeks of the best, the strongest, the most courageous period? And the tremendous phenomenon of the Dionysian—and, born from it, tragedy—what might they signify?” So asks Friedrich Nietzsche in the Preface to the new edition (1886) of his *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).<sup>1</sup> In many respects this tremendous phenomenon, the Dionysian, forms the groundwork of Nietzsche’s whole philosophic enterprise, as he himself frequently insisted. Nor was his relation to the concept one of objective disinterest or academic detachment. Quite the contrary, for he had himself the most intense personal identification with the notion. In the same Preface he asks again, “Indeed, what is Dionysian?—This book contains an answer: one ‘who knows’ is talking, the initiate and disciple of his god” (*BT* 20). He regarded himself as such in many others of his works as well, referring to himself in the *Twilight of the Idols*, for instance, as “I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus.”<sup>2</sup> In his last half-mad months of lucidity, he even signed his letters “Dionysus.” But, again, the Dionysian, for Nietzsche, what exactly did it signify?

Standard responses to the question continue to abide by the guidelines originally formulated by Walter Kaufmann, in which the Dionysian (after *BT*) is a univocal, subjective principle denoting an extreme of life-affirmation and self-overcoming. In Kaufmann’s version, Nietzsche advances two separate versions of the Dionysian: that of *BT*, in which it is played off against the Apollonian, and that in all his later work, which Kaufmann claimed was a synthesis of *BT*’s contrast between Dionysian and Apollonian:

In his early work, Nietzsche tended toward a dualistic metaphysics, and the Dionysian was conceived as a flood of passion to which the Apollonian principle of individuation might give form. In the “dithyrambs” of Zarathustra this opposition of the two gods was repudiated and the will to power was proclaimed as the one and only basic force of the universe. This fundamental principle, which Nietzsche still called “Dionysian,” is actually a union of Dionysus and Apollo: a creative striving which gives form to itself. The

Dionysian man is thus one who gives style to his own character, tolerating his passions because he is strong enough to control them.<sup>3</sup>

Roughly this point of view has been espoused as well by the preponderance of later, authoritative Nietzsche scholars, such as Hollingdale,<sup>4</sup> Schacht,<sup>5</sup> and Deleuze,<sup>6</sup> with very few dissenters,<sup>7</sup> but I wish to argue here that it is basically erroneous. There are, indeed, two—in fact, three—different versions of the Dionysian in Nietzsche, but not at all in the manner generally assumed.

Rather than passing on after *BT* to a version that he would consistently uphold thereafter, versions continued to evolve in Nietzsche's thought to the very end. The result was a consistent and largely unnoticed ambiguity in his account of the significance of the Dionysian throughout his philosophy as a whole. I wish here by means of close, textual analysis to consider the problem, both in itself and in its broader implications. In doing so I shall be referring to the three principal forms of Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian as the ecstatic, the heroic, and—using Nietzsche's own terminology—the “monstrous,” respectively. To which I should add immediately that mention of Nietzsche's “metaphysics” should not mislead: Nietzsche's metaphysics or his aversion to, repudiation of, or transcendence of same is emphatically not the topic of this article, though the word itself may appear occasionally. I am here concerned alone with sorting out what exactly Nietzsche regarded as the essence of the Dionysian, and its relation to what he regarded as the essence of the Apollonian. What lay behind these terms was a fundamental disposition on Nietzsche's part toward his world, and it is this that I have in mind insofar as the notion of Nietzsche's metaphysics is introduced at all.

## INTRODUCTION

It is well known that Nietzsche as a young man read and was strongly attracted to the pessimistic worldview of Schopenhauer. But the attraction was perhaps in some sense too strong, for eventually he seems to have felt compelled to find some stratagem by which to avoid the life-denying consequences of Schopenhauer's conclusions and discover some means to embrace life and living. But upon what basis? Two solutions appear to have presented themselves immediately to the young professor of classics, and those from his own field of specialization. The orgiasticism of the ancient Dionysian festival and the contemplation of the sublime artistic achievement of classical Greece: that is, the ways of the ecstatic and the aesthetic, or, as he was initially to classify them, Dionysus and Apollo.

In his first major work, *BT*, while still strongly under Schopenhauer's sway, he explores each of these possible avenues of life-affirmation. Along with

appearing to sympathize with each individually, furthermore, he also seeks to find some quasi-Hegelian single principle or phenomenon that will serve to unite the two, and it is in this light that he offers his discussion of classical Greek tragedy, as a synthesis of the two modes. In all of his subsequent writings, however, and in the later preface to *BT*, he makes a crucial decision—at least nominally—in favor of Dionysus and the Dionysian, and presents himself and his thought in this light as strongly as possible. Nevertheless, I argue here that upon closer inspection one will find in these writings essentially the same dualism of the Dionysian and an antithetical principle that originally and overtly characterized *BT*.

This is true despite the fact that in all his later work Nietzsche blurred the antagonism between the two concepts, in both his writing and his thinking. The result is a curious and paradoxical vacillation between two strongly disparate sets of moral, anthropological, and cosmological orientations, both defined as the signification of “Dionysian,” while there is later scarcely any attempt to achieve the deliberate reconciliation that Greek tragedy was originally intended to represent. Finally, in the latest works the principle antithetical to that of Dionysus in the *BT* is not only misleadingly identified as itself Dionysian, but in emphasis and character much eclipses the ecstatic element, which was originally identified as such. We are thus left at last with the strange spectacle of a philosophy that could scarcely be less Dionysian (at least in the sense of the ancient Greek god) instead presenting itself as the very essence of the Dionysian.

## I. DIONYSUS AS ECSTATIC: *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*

### THE HEROIC

In *BT* Nietzsche describes the duality and incessant struggle between two “artistic energies which burst forth from nature itself,” whose name he derives from gods of the Greek pantheon, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Despite the “tremendous opposition” between them, they are periodically reconciled, and he proposes that “by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic ‘will’” (*BT* 38) such a reconciliation is to be found in Attic tragedy, whose nature he proposes to explore in this light.

In order to introduce the two principles, Nietzsche suggests that each may be understood with reference to certain archetypal forms of human experience: dreaming and intoxication (or ecstasy: *Rausch*). In the images experienced in dreams we find the prerequisite stuff of all plastic art, of which Apollo is the sponsor and epitome. But Apollo presides not only over all individual forms, but over the very principal of individuation as such, Nietzsche

maintains: he is the divine expression and apotheosis of the *principium individuationis*. Nevertheless, it is to Dionysus and Dionysian mythology that Nietzsche turns for the most apt parable illuminating this fragmentation of nature into separate, individual beings and their subsequent alienation from each other and their source:

In truth, however, the hero of Greek tragedy is the suffering Dionysus of the mysteries, the god experiencing in himself the agonies of individuation, of whom wonderful myths tell that as a boy he was torn to pieces by the Titans and now is worshipped in this state as Zagreus. Thus it is intimated that this dismemberment, the properly Dionysian suffering, is like a transformation into air, water, earth, and fire, that we are therefore to regard the state of individuation as the origin and primal cause of all suffering, as something objectionable in itself. (BT 73)

The BT is replete with poignant references to the “Dionysian suffering” that inheres in existence and claims reliable knowledge about “this foundation of all existence—the Dionysian basic ground of the world” (BT 143). Dionysus is the artistic designation not of individual phenomena, but rather of the “eternal life of this core of existence” from which they derive (BT 62). Because it is rended into separate and alienated beings, the Dionysian denotes “suffering, primal and eternal, the sole ground of the world” (BT 45), and, again, “the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal one” (*das Ur-eine*; BT 55).

What is of special interest to Nietzsche is the fact that even though the ancient Greeks “knew and felt the terror and horror of existence” (BT 42), they did not succumb to it, to “pessimism,” as it were. In fact, Nietzsche contends, so profound was the Greeks’ sensitivity to life’s suffering that it was precisely in order to survive that their correspondingly intense impulse toward beauty arose. Apollo, the representative of the “primordial pleasure of mere appearance” (BT 49), is regarded by him as the divine sponsor of the “beautiful illusion” that makes life worth living. “The Olympian divine order of joy gradually evolved through the Apollonian impulse toward beauty, just as roses burst from thorny bushes” (BT 42–43). Speaking for himself, furthermore, Nietzsche apparently approves and endorses their aesthetic strategy: “I feel myself impelled to the metaphysical assumption that the truly existent primal unity, eternally suffering and contradictory, needs the rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion, for its continuous redemption” (BT 45).

Furthermore, whereas Dionysus is characterized as the helpless child whose dismemberment is the figure for all human pain, Apollo must be regarded along very opposite lines. It is he alone who, as the prototypical conquering hero, is able to triumph over “Dionysian suffering.” Thus “When we encounter

the 'naïve' in art, we should recognise the highest effect of Apollonian culture—which must first overthrow an empire of Titans and slay monsters, and which must have triumphed over an abysmal and terrifying view of the world and the keenest susceptibility to suffering through recourse to the most forceful and pleasurable illusions" (*BT* 43). This and similar formulations promote the notion of the Apollonian artist as a paradigmatic warrior, a monster-slayer: he defies and overcomes the horrors of existence through the process of aesthetic creation. He is the hero who possesses "the sharp-eyed courage that tempts and attempts, that craves the frightful as the enemy, the worthy enemy, against whom one can test one's strength" (*BT* 18).

The ability of the artist to create the image that annuls suffering, then, depends in turn upon the artist's strength, upon his personal conquest of the primal suffering from which he has emerged. Over and above mere artistic talent, such an ability requires fortitude and virility; Nietzsche repeatedly praises "the splendid ability of the great genius for which even eternal suffering is a slight price, the stern pride of the artist . . . that defies all misfortune" (*BT* 70). Nietzsche's martial imagination even envisions "a coming generation with such intrepidity of vision, with such a heroic penchant for the tremendous; let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-slayers, the proud audacity with which they turn their backs on all the weaklings' doctrines of optimism in order to 'live resolutely' in wholeness and fullness" (*BT* 112–13). In all, the defining characteristics of the Apollonian, therefore, are surprisingly militaristic: heroism, pride, strength, defiance, genius, and contempt for weaklings. With these the artist defeats all that threatens the dissolution of his individual being. For this reason Nietzsche finds perhaps the purest form of the Apollonian in the warlike art of the Dorians: "For to me the Doric state and Doric art are explicable only as a permanent military encampment of the Apollonian. Only incessant resistance to the titanic-barbaric nature of the Dionysian could account for the long survival of an art so defiantly prim and so encompassed with bulwarks, a training so warlike and rigorous, and a political structure so cruel and relentless" (*BT* 47). We will find that that which is "cruel and relentless" will exert a growing influence upon Nietzsche personally, but that by some strange, philosophical alchemy it will become instead the very essence of the Dionysian.

## THE ECSTATIC

If one were prematurely to anticipate Nietzsche's representation of the synthesis of these tendencies of nature as expressed in Greek tragedy, it seems likely from the foregoing that its tragic element would somehow derive from the suffering associated with the dismemberment of the primal Dionysus, while its formal beauty and the pleasure we take in it would stem from the

victory over anguish represented by the Apollonian principle. These intuitions would indeed be in accord with generally received interpretations of the book's significance.

It comes—and, I submit, should come—with some surprise, then, when we also read in *BT* an altogether alternative account not merely of the Dionysian principle, but of ultimate reality itself in a cluster of other passages and proposals, *one whose continued existence in less overtly metaphysical language throughout Nietzsche's philosophy* is seldom acknowledged or commented upon by interpreters of Nietzsche. As a further specification of this reality we may consider that, at another point in the text, in his description of specifically Dionysian art and ritual, we read that “Dionysian art, too, wishes to convince us of the eternal joy of existence: only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind them. We are really for a brief moment primordial being itself, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence. In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the one living being, with whose creative joy we are united” (*BT* 104–5). There is much to ponder in this and similar statements of the kind in *BT*. Nietzsche's earlier “metaphysical assumption that the truly existent primal unity [is] eternally suffering and contradictory” here seems to have been turned on its head, for he now seems inclined to a quite contrary metaphysical assumption: that the primal state of all existing beings is not suffering at all but ecstasy. By means of Dionysian art (most particularly music, especially Wagnerian music), we are enabled to gain access to this aboriginal ecstasy of existence; via its rituals we are enabled to go behind phenomena, to have direct access to their—to our own—metaphysical source. “In [Dionysian] song and dance man . . . feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy” (*BT* 37).

Still, is all of this only what Dionysian art “wishes to convince us of”? What man feels, but what is not necessarily the case? Is Nietzsche himself not so convinced? Is this only the “Dionysian perspective,” not that of Nietzsche, the man, the philosopher? For a variety of reasons, some would like nothing more than to adopt this conclusion, but in all too many passages Nietzsche himself, in the text itself, makes no such qualification. We remember that just as consideration of the dream as phenomenon led to the essence of the Apollonian, Nietzsche founds his analysis of the Dionysian upon the experience of intoxication, for if we examine

the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature, at this collapse of the *principium individuationis*, we steal a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysian, which is brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication. Either under the influence of the narcotic draught, of which the songs of all primitive men and peoples speak, or with the potent coming of spring that penetrates all nature with joy, these Dionysian



emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness. (BT 36)

All too often it is apparent that in Nietzsche's thinking the principle of individuation actually *does* collapse under the appropriate stimulus, that ecstasy is an *authentic* revelation of our innermost metaphysical depths. Dionysian ecstasy cannot be dismissed as merely phenomenal; Nietzsche is repeatedly insistent on the point that it reveals primal being as it is in itself, prior to individuation, behind individuation. All too briefly—but as a fact nonetheless, it seems—we become one with the One and are able to participate in its narcissistic, self-absorbed bliss.

This avoidance of the agonies of worldly individuation not through their Apollonian conquest by means of "pleasurable illusions" about the world, but rather by the return of the individual to the very core of that world, Nietzsche often characterizes in strongly feminine terms. "By the mystical triumphant cry of Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken, and the way lies open to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost heart of things" (BT 99–100). Again, "In Dionysian art and its tragic symbolism . . . nature cries to us with its true undissembled voice: 'Be as I am! Amid the ceaseless flux of phenomena I am the eternally creative primordial mother, eternally impelling to existence, eternally finding satisfaction in this change of phenomena!'" (BT 104). Elsewhere the feminine metaphor remains in implicit form: "The [tragic] myth leads the world of phenomena to its limits, where it denies itself and seeks to fly back again into the womb of the true and only reality" (BT 131).

In contrast to the implications of the militaristic contempt for weaklings and the fortified state with which the Apollonian culminates, the mystical intoxication of the Dionysian points toward a paradise of social and natural equality and harmony:

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man. . . . Now the slave is a free man; now all the rigid hostile barriers that necessity, caprice, or have fixed between man and man are broken. Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbour, but as one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn aside . . . before the mysterious primordial unity. (BT 37)

Gradually, however, in Nietzsche's discussion, this earliest cultic brotherhood of ecstatic revelers resolves into the satyr chorus, and it is at this second, more complex level of Dionysian ritual that Nietzsche offers an analysis more germane to his theme regarding the evolution of Greek tragedy. The birth of tragedy as an art form derived from the rituals of Dionysus and the



stages of that derivation, point by point, from various known aspects of the cult constitute the most memorable novelty of Nietzsche's essay. We are not concerned here to trace the specifics of this evolution or even question its accuracy. For our own purposes it is sufficient merely to verify that the underlying thrust of Nietzsche's interpretation is in accord with the ecstatic character of the Dionysian that we have thus far been concerned to examine. As an illustration of its implications for tragedy, we may take the following as characteristic:

The Greek man of culture felt himself nullified in the presence of the satyric chorus; and this is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and society and, quite generally, the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature. The metaphysical comfort—with which, I am suggesting even now, every true tragedy leaves us—that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable—this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in the chorus of satyrs. (*BT* 59)

We note that the cruel and bellicose nature of the Apollonian warrior and his world is a far cry from the universal peace, harmony, and maternity suggested by the Dionysian, whether primitive or advanced. On a deeper, psychological level the Apollonian may be regarded as an attempt by the ego to resist and overcome by force all that threatens its perpetuation, rather than the willingness to surrender to it in the bliss of perhaps intoxicated passivity. Whereas in the latter the I “succumbed to the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states” (*BT* 46) and “experienced the joy involved in the annihilation of the individual” (*BT* 104), in the first “the Apollonian tears man from his orgiastic self-annihilation” and “lets us find our delight in individuals” (*BT* 128), particularly, we note, in strong, artistic individuals with a bent toward aggression. Indeed, it would not be long, as we shall see, before this very Apollonian notion of the joys of conflict would issue in the doctrine of the Overman, who—paradoxically—would wage war under the banner not of Apollo but his antithesis, the weak, effeminate, and suffering Dionysus. The dynamics of this metamorphosis will be addressed shortly.

As we consider, however, the implications of these conflicting impulses, it becomes increasingly apparent that at this early point in this thinking Nietzsche was decidedly of two minds about the metaphysical status of nature. As over against naive, bourgeois “cheerfulness” and simplistic affirmation of life, he was often in full agreement with his philosophical inspiration, Schopenhauer (as well as his admired father-figure, Richard Wagner, also inspired by Schopenhauer), that being was fundamentally a state of misery, from which art alone could distract—though not deliver—us. On the other hand, through his training as a scholar of antiquity he had come to grasp that

in the ancient cult of Dionysus a radically alternative perception of nature prevailed, and that at the heart of it lay an entire metaphysic—the Dionysian worldview—that was in every sense the denial, possibly even the overcoming, of Schopenhauer's pessimism. In the later Preface to *BT*, he quotes Schopenhauer's remark that "the world, that life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is not worthy of our affection: this constitutes the tragic spirit—it leads to resignation." To which he responds, "How differently Dionysus spoke to me!" (*BT* 24).

What the cult of Dionysus did reveal to Nietzsche and what is therefore starkly original in *BT* is his intuition—at least in those sections of *BT* analyzing the Dionysian—that Schopenhauer's pessimistic analysis may finally apply only to our experience as phenomenal, separate, and thereby conflicting individuals, alienated from each other and our own "innermost depths." Thus while conceding to Schopenhauer "the terror and horror of existence" as conventionally lived, therefore, he nevertheless for the first time envisions a path not merely of aesthetic anesthesia, but of metaphysical release from existential suffering. For in the phenomenology of the cult of Dionysus he seemed to have found concrete evidence that the choice between the sufferings of this world or the pleasurable illusions of art regarding another need not be humanity's final and only option. Through scholarly consideration of the Dionysian festival he had been led to a quite opposite and vastly more positive assessment of "the primal unity" than Schopenhauer: the Dionysian ecstatic becomes "primordial being itself, one with the infinite primordial joy." In the light of this datum perhaps not conflict and pain, but joy lies at the deepest foundation of being, beneath and behind all phenomenal suffering. In the ecstasy of intoxicated revelry many experience their deepest taste of it, and in the Dionysian cultus that experience is broadened and enhanced.

In the Apollonian and Dionysian, therefore, Nietzsche describes two opposing worldviews; in the process he appears himself torn between the two: he seems to vouch for the authenticity of each while describing it, but to be oblivious of the extent to which he is doing so. As a result he gives the appearance of oscillating between them, connecting one to the marker Apollo and the other to the marker Dionysus. This has at least the advantage that we can, as it were, predict which worldview he will personally lean toward by the expository context at the moment. But subsequent to *BT* this heuristic advantage will be lost, and the results will be a systematic obfuscation of the outlines of his genuine philosophical thesis.

In what follows we shall briefly consider the further careers of the Dionysian and Apollonian "energies," as well as their interaction in the philosophy of Nietzsche, but with vastly more difficulty, for henceforth will both respond to the same banner: that of Dionysus. Has all that was characterized as Apollo and the Apollonian been rejected by Nietzsche? Scarcely. Yet from here forward Apollo's exploits will be conducted under an assumed name: that of his

metaphysical antithesis, Dionysus. After *BT* the name “Apollo”—though by no means the notions, values, and attitudes based on conflict that he represented, that is, the heroic negation of the negation of the world itself—is abandoned and Dionysus, at first the epitome of the experience that the innermost depths of the world are ecstatically positive, is alone made to symbolize both contraries in the relation. But this is done *without the overt recognition that we found in BT: that they are contraries*; that the state between them is one, as Nietzsche originally phrased it, of “tremendous opposition.” The cost of this external philosophical consistency (Kaufmann’s “monism of the will to power”), however, was even more serious philosophical ambivalence at the heart of his thinking, which we shall now attempt to address.

Be it noted, furthermore, that while Nietzsche, soon after *BT*, will come to reject the possibility of a Dionysian or any other explicit form of metaphysics, throughout his thought he never comes to doubt the core metaphysical intuition upon which it is based, the deepest essence of the Dionysian experience itself: “that life is [or should be] at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable.” It is this ecstasy, this aboriginal joy at the heart of being, that comes to constitute for Nietzsche the unanswerable objection to Schopenhauer and to all forms of pessimism. What was more problematic was whether that pleasure consisted in (Dionysian) melting into the other, in the joys of human brotherhood and mystical immersion in nature; or, on the contrary, power over the other, as found originally in the aesthetic creations of the artist-hero of *BT* (there dubbed Apollonian), but thereafter in the will-to-power of the genius in various modalities of culture (now, confusingly, also named Dionysian).

## II. DIONYSUS AS HEROIC: *THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA*

### THE ECSTATIC

In his *Ecce Homo* (1888),<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche describes Zarathustra as “this most Yes-saying of all spirits” (*EH* 761), and in terms that are consistently drawn from the Dionysian cult described in *BT*. In strict accordance with the earlier cult of Dionysus and his satyrs, Zarathustra is also a dancer who speaks “the language of the dithyramb,” who is, indeed, in “himself the eternal Yes to all things.” And Nietzsche adds with emphasis, “But that is the concept of Dionysus himself” (*EH* 762).

The same identification is found in the Preface to the new edition of *BT*, where Nietzsche reiterates that not only is he himself “an initiate and disciple of his god” (*BT* 20), but that the prophetic figure whose name he has borrowed for his latest work is in fact his embodiment of Dionysus—“that

Dionysian monster who bears the name of Zarathustra" (*BT* 26; we shall return to the theme of Dionysus as "monster"). He concludes with a brief quotation from *Zarathustra* in order to make the identification doubly clear, and in it, again, "Zarathustra, the dancer" crowns himself with "the crown of laughter" and commands his followers to become "good dancers" and "learn—to laugh" (*BT* 26–27). Written in the mid-1880s, Nietzsche has done his best in *Z* to re-create the values of the antique god: the prophet seeks to affirm life, the earth, and the passions of the body in the most classically accurate sense of the cultic Dionysus, god of nature's fertility and bounty.

In *BT* we were informed that it is of the essence of the Dionysian that it "*penetrates all nature with joy*." But this is an exact formula for Zarathustra's ecstatic mode as well. It is in such a state at one point that he cries out, "Take care! Hot noontide sleeps upon the fields. Soft! The world is perfect" (*Z* 288).<sup>9</sup> Zarathustra is a literary metaphor for those ancient satyrs that in *BT* had sought to awaken in us the realization of the innermost rapture of being. For Zarathustra speaks in the selfsame way: "Life is a fountain of delight" (*Z* 223), he announces, and he is therefore an "advocate of life" (*Z* 158), "one who blesses and one who declares 'Yes' to it" (*Z* 186). He enjoins those around him to "laud all earthly things" (*Z* 140), to "love the earth more for my sake" (*Z* 99), and to "remain true to the earth" (*Z* 42). Indeed, by the end of the book one of his followers insists that he "testify only this much. It is worthwhile to live on earth: one day, one festival with Zarathustra, has taught me to love the earth" (*Z* 326). "To blaspheme the earth is now the most dreadful offence" (*Z* 427).

For one who affirms life, furthermore, "all instincts are holy" (*Z* 102), and sensual pleasure is "free to free hearts, the earth's garden-joy, an overflowing of thanks," the "wine of wines" (*Z* 207). An initiate, therefore, "laughs at all tragedies" (*Z* 68); he and his band declare that Zarathustra has "spread out laughter itself above us like a motley canopy" (*Z* 158). The more they learn, the more they "find titles and honours for the body and the earth" (*Z* 60), unaffected by all phenomenal misfortune and mischance. For Zarathustra instructs them to love the earth—again implicitly female—with all the erotic ardor of the sun itself:

For already it is coming, the glowing sun—its love of the earth is coming! All sun-love is innocence and creative desire! Just look how it comes impatiently over the sea! Do you not feel the thirst and the hot breath of its love? It wants to suck at the sea and drink the sea's depths up to its height: now the sea's desire rises with a thousand breasts. It wants to be kissed and sucked by the sun's thirst; it wants to become air and height and light's footpath and light itself! Truly, like the sun do I love life and all deep seas. (*Z* 146)

The implication of this ecstatic joy in the natural world is that humanity is no longer in need of "metaphysical comfort" in the form of the beautiful

illusions of art in order to distract them from nature's nightmare. On the contrary, the gospel of Zarathustra is that the world just as it exists is "perfect," and we are encouraged to embrace it with the intensity of the sun; when experienced through the senses it is properly an occasion for dancing, singing, laughter, loving. Still less, by implication, do we stand in need of Christianity's otherworldly promises of heavenly reward and escape. Most significantly, it appears that we have at this point even dispensed with the traditional apparatus of the Dionysian cult itself—intoxication, drama, mass hysteria—for all of these are evidently superfluous for those of genuinely Dionysian inspiration. There is indeed occasional reference to these and to a festival over which Zarathustra presides, but they appear to be accessory: the ecstasies of life punctuate its own eternal self-celebration.

Indeed, it should not go without remark that if anything the ecstatic element in *Z*—the authentically Dionysian element there according to *BT* and the ancient cult itself—is even more extreme than that portrayed in *BT*, for in the latter Dionysian joy was only available "at the bottom of things," "behind phenomena," in nature's "inner depths" to which we must "fly back," "not as individuals." The significance of the Dionysian cultus in *BT* for Nietzsche was that through its ritual songs and dances we were able to do so. But in *Z* world-and-life affirmation extends not only to nature's "primal unity," behind and beyond this life of ours, but to its phenomenal manifestation as well, as witnessed in the passages above. Zarathustra has no need of withdrawal, intoxication, or ritual in order to praise and love the earth, or find occasion to dance, laugh, and sing its praises. Indeed, it is difficult in world literature to select a more burning or ecstatic affirmation of the natural world just as it is and of natural desire and pleasure than that to be found in—selected passages from—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

## THE HEROIC

Given the repeated emphasis in *Z* upon the ecstatic affirmation of life just sketched, once again I propose that it should come as extraordinary when we encounter a vein of thinking in the same work that seems very much its antithesis: a worldview, indeed, that in *BT* was explicitly identified as its opposite, was pronounced "Apollonian" (and which I there termed "heroic"), but which is here run warp and woof into the very fabric of *Z*, without indication or apparent awareness of its systematic incongruity. One of the first intimations of its presence is the remarkable—in the face the radical endorsement of world and life just surveyed—observation by Zarathustra at one point that "as deeply as man looks into life, so deeply does he look also into suffering" (*Z* 177). In fact, as in this instance and without prelude or warning, Zarathustra's mood often darkens, and the manic, life-affirming Zarathustra

plunges into depression; he then becomes “the advocate of suffering” (Z 233). He refuses to capitulate to it, however, for he has discovered a remedy: “creation . . . is the great redemption from suffering and life’s easement” (Z 111).

In alternative sections of the text we would not have supposed that the ecstasis of life sensuously lived and experienced would stand in need of “redemption,” but such is now the claim. We go on to discover that for the heroic epiphany of Zarathustra creation functions very much as art had in the *BT*: it is the essential feature of man’s own triumphant self-redemption. Additionally and crucially, within the act of creation Nietzsche identifies the central principle that gives shape to this alternative metaphysic: the will. “The will is a creator” (Z 162); to create is above all else to will: “Willing liberates; for willing is creating; thus I teach” (Z 223). In this context nature is by no means any longer that feminine receptivity, ardent to be embraced, with which one longs to be merged, but a painful morass from which we should wholly extricate ourselves. The centrality of the will consists in the fact that it is the faculty which enables us to do so: “Will—that is what the liberator and bringer of joy is called” (Z 161). Zarathustra cannot heap praises enough upon the will: “Nothing more gladdening grows on earth . . . than an exalted, robust will: it is the earth’s fairest growth” (Z 29).

But the will is not merely the dominant principle in man; it is in Z advanced as the constitutive principle of being as such. No longer a fountain of delight, from the heroic standpoint nature is again presented (as in the heroic elements of *BT*) as endless and tortured self-opposition, an incessant struggle to attain a goal beyond itself: “because it needs height, it needs steps and conflict between steps and those who climb them! Life want to climb and in climbing overcome itself” (Z 125). This incessant inner struggle and turmoil is the most direct expression of nature in its essence, of the “will itself, the will to power, the unexhausted, procreating life-will” (Z 137). All living beings in one form or another are constituted by it: “Where I found a living creature, there I found the will to power; and even in the will of the servant I found the will to be master” (Z 137). Life must progress, must climb, but it cannot do so without self-contradiction and struggle: “And life itself told me this secret: “Behold,” it said, “I am that which must overcome itself again and again. . . . I have to be struggle and becoming and goal and conflict of goals. . . . Whatever I create and however much I love it—soon I have to oppose it and my love: thus will my will have it” (Z 138). As a result, whereas the ecstatic Zarathustra celebrates the holiness of the earth and sings of the bliss of man’s erotic immersion in it, heroic Zarathustra displays an altogether different spirit, in which the tables are turned: now the ego is placed above and apart from the earth, as its antagonist and ruler—“This creating, willing, evaluating Ego, which is the measure and value of all things . . . which creates meaning for the earth” (Z 60). On this view the self has replaced the earth as the final object of love’s significance and direction; it is thus only



proper that "One must learn to love oneself with a sound and holy love" (Z 211). Even in its more extreme expressions, such as human "lust for power," Zarathustra declares emphatically that "Truly, there is no sickness . . . in such a longing," nor in the "glorified selfishness, the sound, healthy selfishness that issues from a mighty soul" (Z 208).

The more specific term Zarathustra employs for this mighty soul that glories in its own power is the Overman or Superman (*Übermensch*). In its essential features, however, we have here but a more exalted expression of the artist-genius or dragon-slayer of the *BT*, whose affirmation depends upon being equally defiant and triumphant toward all that opposes him. The superiority of the Overman consists in the fact that he is the most forceful and unalloyed human expression of nature's primal will, which through the clash of conflict at every level drives the world into ever higher forms of individual organization. In consequence, we have Zarathustra's claim that "The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The Superman shall be the meaning of the earth!" (Z 42). And "Once you said 'God' when you gazed upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say 'Superman'" (Z 109). When the ecstatic Zarathustra/Nietzsche speaks, he encourages us to love, praise, and remain true to the earth. The meaning of the earth is the earth itself, furthermore, which Zarathustra will instruct us in adoring. But when Nietzsche's warrior fit seizes him, the meaning of the earth is the Overman, or at least the meaning assigned to it by the Overman, and far from being eternal delight it is hellish, incessant combat, but one in which the Overman will ultimately prevail.

On Nietzsche's heroic version of *Z*, life's ability to ascend depends upon the conflict and opposition of those at its higher and lower stages: more specifically, the powerful must employ their power to ensure that those who are naturally beneath them remain so socially as well. Those of lower nature are by definition weak, uncreative, dependent, and envious of their superiors. To teach that we should love or even pity or feel compassion for the weak would obstruct life's necessity to eliminate its unsuccessful expressions. We have already seen that in *BT* the fulfillment of the Dionysian finally necessitated the collapse of the social and political barriers that separate men; everyone is united and fused with his neighbor; the slave is a free man; all are restored to their primal state of joy and brotherhood. Nietzsche's claim that Zarathustra is simply Dionysus *de nouveau* is refuted, among other points, by the fact that instead of liberating slaves this supposed prophet of Dionysus characteristically spits at and seeks to repress them—"he declares the Ego healthy and holy and selfishness glorious. . . . It spits at slaves of all kinds, this glorious selfishness" (Z 209). His worldly ethic is in fact antithetical to the Dionysus of the *BT* and far more closely resembles the heroic ethos of Apollo in that earlier work.

Finally, whereas in the context of the orgiastic Dionysian, woman is associated in *Z* with the blissful intercourse of elemental powers, suddenly we



are now instructed that “woman is base” and “woman’s nature is surface” (Z 92). “Are you visiting women?” asks Zarathustra. “Do not forget your whip!” (Z 93). Women now represent scarcely more than a standing temptation to the hardened heart of the warrior to the soft life, particularly the natural pleasures of the senses. While that would be an occasion to be celebrated from the ecstatic viewpoint, it is here denounced, and women must thus be assiduously subdued and kept in their place. “This is how I would have man and woman: the one fit for war, the other fit for bearing children” (Z 227). Furthermore, while there may again be those who wish on Nietzsche’s behalf to unite or integrate the heroic and ecstatic dimensions of Zarathustra into a single totality, Nietzsche himself appears to regard them as mutually exclusive:

Alas, I have known noble men who lost their highest hope. And henceforth they slandered all high hopes. Henceforth they lived impudently in brief pleasures, and they had hardly an aim beyond the day. “Spirit is also sensual pleasure”—thus they spoke. . . . Once they thought of becoming heroes: now they are sensualists. The hero is to them an affliction and a terror. But, by my love and hope I entreat you: do not reject the hero in your soul! Keep holy your highest hope! (Z 71)

We discovered above that the worldly affirmation of Zarathustra as ecstatic was more authentically and radically Dionysian than the escapist form offered in *BT*. We now observe that the same applies to Zarathustra as heroic: the affirmation of heroic strength in *Z* is more authentically and radically Apollonian—given Nietzsche’s sense of that term—than that of Apollo in the *BT*. Whereas in *BT* the strength of the artistic dragon-slayer is no more than an expedient in the creation of an enchanting, alternative dream-world, in *Z* the creative faculties of the genius mirror the creative processes of life itself: the artist’s delight in his own artistic power is a result of his individual participation in the will-to-power of being itself. The struggle and conflict that was described in *BT* as the result of the dismembering of the primal ontological unity is now elevated to the rank of the *Ur-Eine* itself; will-to-power, individually and collectively, lies at the very heart of nature. As a result, Zarathustra’s virile, new gospel—to will, to struggle, to engage in conflict, to be at war whether on the battlefield or through music or history—all this should be experienced not as suffering (as was conceded to Schopenhauer in *BT*), but as the height of living and eternal joy! For in this struggle the heroic genius may yet in fact prevail: his creativity is the means whereby he succeeds in overcoming all that opposes his will.

To review, Nietzsche characterizes Zarathustra as the “most Yes-saying of all spirits,” “the eternal Yes to all things,” the absolute prototype of Dionysian Affirmation. But affirmation of what? Nature? The earth? If the earth, then we are prepared to contemplate the possibility that suffering must be overcome because it is based on our own inability to take pleasure in that which

is intrinsically pleasurable, “indestructibly pleasurable,” ecstatically pleasurable. We must accordingly be prepared to surrender that which separates us from the earth, the inner principle which objectifies and seeks ever to rise above it, to master it—that is, the individual ego. We must be ready to experience (in *BT*’s terms) “the joy involved in the annihilation of the individual.” Or is it the other way around? Is the world as it is to be negated in order that the self that it threatens may be affirmed? If the latter, then we should indeed prepare, on the contrary, to “find our delight in individuals,” to tear ourselves from “orgiastic self-annihilation,” to become powerful selves, over-selves that find their chief satisfaction in the exertion of dominance, in which act alone can they realize their innate will-to-power. But, again, these two views appear to be antithetical, a fact that was conceded in *BT*.

The two Zarathustras—polar extremes in their evaluation of the world, life, the senses, the self, even the feminine—manifest in even more extreme and dissociated form the opposition already present in *BT* between the ecstatic and heroic worldviews (there sharply distinguished and dubbed Dionysian and Apollonian, respectively). Rather than Nietzsche’s finding a means to resolve or integrate them, in *Z* their opposition appears to be intensifying and growing, even while the line between them is increasingly blurred. This widening rift appears to mirror an increasing dissociation in Nietzsche himself, both intellectually and emotionally at this time. In the last year of his authorship (1888), and, indeed, of his sanity, that rift in consciousness would lead to a major collapse; at least, various biographers and critics have sought to describe it in such terms. Lea’s characterization is perhaps harsh, but telling: “Far from marking the end of his inward division, Nietzsche’s last works reflect it *in extremis*: so helplessly, indeed, that the ultimate shattering of his personality follows like a logical *finale*.”<sup>10</sup> To this may be compared Bernstein’s discussion of the analysis by Thomas Mann (and many others) of Nietzsche as “a mind at war with itself, and frequently induced to give most vivid expression to its worst half.”<sup>11</sup> To this “worst half” we now turn in connection with Nietzsche’s admiration for the “monstrous” and his final identification of it as the essential “Dionysian.”

### III. DIONYSUS AS MONSTER: THE LAST WORKS

When the Apollonian is identified in *BT*, we are informed that it is epitomized in the powerful and warlike artist-hero; only through contemplation of his transcendent aesthetic creations can life’s horrors be surmounted. We have surveyed the importance of heroic creation in *Z* as well, although a significant change has occurred, for now such an individual, bearing such bellicose propensities, Nietzsche regards as prototypically Dionysian instead. We shall

address the further evolution of Dionysian hero into Dionysus “monster” below. Let us first, however, briefly confirm the continued existence—albeit much reduced in emphasis—of the ecstatic conception of Dionysus in Nietzsche’s last period of composition.

## THE ECSTATIC

In his last works Nietzsche by no means abandons his earliest views regarding sensual delight in the natural as an essential element the Dionysian. *The Twilight of the Idols* (1888) concludes with his tribute to “that element out of which Dionysian art grows—the orgiastic” and analyses “the psychology of the orgiastic as an overflowing feeling of life.” It alone represents “the triumphant Yes to life beyond all death and change . . . through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality” (*TI* 109–10).

In *The Will to Power* (1883–88),<sup>12</sup> Nietzsche praises artists, for “they have not lost the scent of life, they have loved the things of this world—they have loved their senses” (*WP* 820). Desensualization, on the contrary, he describes as a form of illness; it is therefore “a sign that one has turned out well when, like Goethe, one clings with ever greater pleasure and warmth to ‘the things of this world.’” Consistent with intoxication as a primary indicator of the Dionysian in *BT*, we read in the following passage that art is in its very essence affirmation; as a result the artist comes to love for their own sake those means that reveal a condition of intoxication, and the effect of his creations is as well “to excite the state that creates art—intoxication” (1888; *WP* 821). Also reminiscent of *BT* is the insistence to the last that “The word ‘Dionysian’ means: an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality, the everyday, society . . . ; an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness” (1888; *WP* 1050). Another note from 1888 suggesting the same orientation is dedicated to “Dionysus of the Greeks: the religious affirmation of life, life whole and not denied or in part (typical—that the sexual act arouses profundity, mystery, reverence)” (*WP* 1052).

## THE HEROIC

A passage from Nietzsche’s last year of authorship reads that “there are two kinds of sufferers: those who suffer from overfulness of life and want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic insight and outlook on life—and then those who suffer from the impoverishment of life and demand of art and philosophy, calm, stillness, smooth seas, or, on the other hand, intoxication [*Rausch*],

convulsion, and anesthesia.”<sup>13</sup> As Danto appropriately comments, “A striking feature of this late utterance (1888) from *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* is the separation of Dionysianism from *Rausch*, which had, in the first formulations, been virtually its criterion.”<sup>14</sup> While he is correct, what he fails to observe, however, is that even in Nietzsche’s last formulations of the Dionysian, *Rausch* is still periodically—as cited immediately above—presented by Nietzsche as its criterion. For behind the separation lies Nietzsche’s personal and radical fluctuation between the orgiastic and the heroic which we have emphasized in our discussion of the Dionysian from the outset.

What distinguishes the appearance of the heroic in Nietzsche’s last period from that witnessed in *BT* and throughout *Z* is more a matter of stress and tone than a substantial shift in content; its character is roughly similar, but in its sounding it is more frequent, extreme, even expressly brutal. Thus, the power of the higher man was expressed in *BT* by his creativity in the shaping of aesthetic works and then in *Z* of the fundamental values of cultural and historic growth; he was the principal instrument by which life evolved, configured and confirmed itself (Napoleon as a favored example throughout Nietzsche’s writings). But in the latest works the will to power of the heroic individual expresses itself less through a penchant for creation than the hunger for destruction—indeed, destruction wrought with such evident enthusiasm that at last one is inclined to regard its perpetrator as rather a sadist—or, to borrow Nietzsche’s own epithet, a “monster” [*unmensch*]. Additionally, while earlier the superior man was especially the means by which nature’s will to power realized and transfigured itself, toward the end he increasingly becomes for Nietzsche rather a goal in himself, detached from his cosmic context and justification. More striking than ever, finally, is the irony that his rampages are practiced under the aegis of Dionysus, that archetypal figure who Nietzsche elsewhere intends to essentialize the burning embrace of life just as it is, ecstatic affirmation of the totality of its being.

The impact of this change in emphasis upon Nietzsche’s understanding of the Dionysian may be detected in assertions such as those in *Ecce Homo* (1888) in which we read that those who are truly Dionysian “tackle the greatest of all tasks, the attempt to raise humanity higher, including the relentless destruction of everything that was degenerating and parasitical” (*EH* 730). In his retrospective remarks in the same work on the prophet of Dionysus, Zarathustra, we now find that “among the conditions for a Dionysian task are, in a decisive way, the hardness of the hammer, the joy even in destroying. The imperative, ‘become hard!’ the most fundamental certainty that all creators are hard, is the distinctive mark of a Dionysian nature” (*EH* 765). In that Zarathustra was in the original work repeatedly described as one who loves the earth, who “kisses and sucks” at it, and such behaviors normally express a condition of softness or receptivity, we may again be startled by observations of this kind. They are reinforced, however, by other Dionysian

characterizations at this period. *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) contains many further reminders of this dark, new, and violent Dionysus: it concludes with the observation that even “Dionysus is a philosopher, and that gods, too, thus do philosophy.” Dionysus then proceeds to summarize his philosophy to Ariadne with the remark, “I often reflect how I might yet advance him [man] and make him stronger, more evil . . . than he is” (*BGE* 235–36).<sup>15</sup>

This more evil man finds expression in Nietzsche’s latest portrait of the noble or higher man. As in the heroic sections of *Z*, we again find the admonition that “A declaration of war on the masses by higher men is needed!” (*WP* 861). We expect and often find the usual praise of power struggles, justified because they lead to the creation of new forms of social and political organization, or new dimensions of inner resolve and determination. Yet increasingly in *WP* stress shifts to the purely negative effects of conflict. In a passage labeled “Dionysian wisdom,” he concludes: “I found new sources of strength for individuals. We have to be destroyers!” (*WP* 417). Nor does it appear that this destruction is merely metaphoric or abstract. The ultimate test of such world-masters is not merely the launching of war upon their inferiors, but their very extermination, and finally not even that, but that done with total absence of remorse. “To gain that tremendous energy of greatness in order to shape the man of the future through breeding and, on the other hand, the annihilation of millions of failures, and not to perish of the suffering one creates, though nothing like it has ever existed!” he exclaims in admiration (*WP* 964).

License to commit moral mayhem on the part of the such “monsters” is implied in the very title of perhaps the most forthright of Nietzsche’s works along these lines, *Beyond Good and Evil*, where again he emphasizes that “at the risk of displeasing innocent ears I propose: egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul—I mean that unshakeable faith that to a being such as other beings must be subordinate by nature and have to sacrifice themselves. The noble soul accepts this fact of its egoism without any question mark, also without any feeling that it might contain hardness, constraint, or caprice, rather as something that may be founded in the primordial law of things” (*BGE* 215). To which we may compare elsewhere wry recommendations such as those in *The Anti-Christ* (1888) that “the weak and ill-constituted shall perish: first principle of our philanthropy. And one shall help them to do so” (*A* 116).<sup>16</sup> Whereas earlier, in his ecstatic guise, Zarathustra had characteristically encouraged us to join him in becoming lovers of the earth, throughout *WP* we are exhorted instead to aspire to become “masters of the earth.”

Nietzsche’s portrait of the heroic form of Dionysus, in its final, virtually sadistic form, confronts us, therefore, not merely with egoism as the fundamental and proper determinant of human conduct, but egoism in its most radical and ruinous form, involving not merely the extermination of masses of “inferior” beings, but complete absence of regret at the human cost.

The essential characteristic of a good and healthy aristocracy is that it . . . accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, for its sake, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments. Their fundamental faith simply has to be that society must not exist for society's sake, but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of being. (*BGE* 202)

There are, indeed, those who teach the "refraining mutually from injury, violence, and exploitation," but all such are deniers of life as it is, for "life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker, suppression, hardness, . . . and at least, at its mildest, exploitation" (*BGE* 203). We may note, incidentally, that the denier of life as practiced via this radical version of heroism and the antipode of the brutality espoused in the last works is no longer thought of as the ecstatic, but now the Christian. In the last works we find repeatedly that Christ and the Christian teaching of love and nonviolence is that which most opposes (especially this monstrous conception of) Dionysus, who is now, therefore, represented most prominently as the Anti-Christ: "Dionysus versus the 'Crucified': there you have the antithesis" (1888; *WP* 1052).

The "Dionysian world" in its final formulation, far from being a garden of delight, Nietzsche finally characterizes as a very "monster of energy" (1888; *WP* 1067). Zarathustra, the prophet and epitome of Dionysus for Nietzsche, is himself now (in the later introduction to *BT*) described as a "Dionysian monster" (*BT* 26). It appears that the figure of the conquering hero, who began in *BT* by slaying life's monsters, has discovered that in order to succeed altogether in this he must himself become "more evil," must finally himself become monstrous. The ubiquitous Napoleon is increasingly presented for our admiration in just this light, the living proof that in order to become perfectly human we must seek to become supremely "inhuman": "in him the problem of the noble ideal as such made flesh—one might well ponder what kind of problem it is: Napoleon, this synthesis of the inhuman and the superhuman" (*GM* 54).<sup>17</sup> To Napoleon may now be compared, as well, Cesare Borgia, for most observers a moral abomination, but for Nietzsche at this point "the healthiest of all tropical monsters" (*BGE* 109). Still, these ideal men only demonstrate a deeper, "harder" more universal truth: that "Man himself is beast and superbeast; the higher man is inhuman and superhuman: these belong together. With every increase of greatness and height in man, he also becomes deeper and more terrible: one ought not to desire the one without the other" (*WP* 1027).

Higher men, the inhuman monsters of the latest period, are, he contends, uniformly and necessarily *furchtbar* (terrible, awful, dreadful): "Napoleon: insight that the higher and the terrible man necessarily belong together" (*WP*



1026). "Terribleness is part of greatness: let us not deceive ourselves" (*WP* 1028). Such higher men are no longer able to be overwhelmed by what is dreadful in life, for they are quite as dreadful themselves. These human monsters are more than a match for the universal "monster of energy" that we call the world. In the end it is just this ability of a Napoleon, a Caesar, a Borgia, to terrify and destroy those around them (rather than uniting with them in intoxicated revelry, as in *BT*) that has become the hallmark of the Dionysian, which is now "a sympathetic feeling for the horrible and the questionable because one is oneself, among other things, horrible and questionable: the Dionysian in will, spirit, taste" (*WP* 1020).

Now, though Nietzsche warns us that even "truth is hard," among the hardest of those that he promulgates is the growing insistence that every superior culture on earth has emerged from and depends upon this human capacity for bestiality: "Let us admit to ourselves . . . how every higher culture on earth has begun. Human beings whose nature was still natural, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, men of prey who were still in possession of . . . lust for power, hurled themselves upon weaker races. . . . In the beginning the noble caste was always the barbarian caste: . . . they were more whole human beings (which also means, at every level, 'more whole beasts'" (*BGE* 201–2). Similarly, Nietzsche elsewhere repeats that every superior culture rests on the intellectualization and deepening of cruelty. As a result, he adds, conventionalized "fear of the 'savage, cruel beast'" in human nature is merely "superstitious"; rather than denigrating we should encourage and express all that is cruel, inhuman, and terrifying within us (*BGE* 158).

In sum, to the very end Nietzsche's writings bear witness to his desire to remain true to his earliest convictions regarding the centrality of Dionysian world-affirmation in living. And from the first through the last of his writings Dionysus continues to signify—at least nominally—this fervent embrace of the totality of life, "life whole and not denied or in part." But, from the very first pages of *BT*, an alter ego, at first heroic but increasingly megalomaniac, almost rabid, emerges, in which Nietzsche/Dionysus rages against such holistic, often intoxicated or erotic embrace, and is drawn toward increasingly violent forms of life-negation, extermination, and purgation. These in no way involve acceptance of the masses of men and the totality of nature, but only of their "higher" levels, as determined by that measure of all things, the Overman. The parasitical remainder must be the subject of "relentless destruction," even though it involves "the annihilation of millions of failures." For in the last period of composition, over and above conquering himself, the principal object that "Dionysian man" seeks to conquer—and finally destroy—is not his own passions but people: all those about him who are lower, who are "alien and weaker."

Finally, and curiously, while praises of cruelty abound in the latest period,



Nietzsche at the same time appears personally at the furthest remove from their obvious systematic or literal implications. In the Preface to his *Ecce Homo*, he makes a point of insisting that “I am, for example, by no means a bogey or a moralistic monster” (EH 217). And in the very last days of borderline sanity, in a letter of December 29, 1888, Nietzsche writes that “Georg Brandes is going to St. Petersburg again this winter, to give lectures on the savage beast Nietzsche.”<sup>18</sup> The formulation not only suggests an ironic denial of his own bestiality, but to some extent even creates uncertainty as to the interpretation of the notion itself. It certainly does not reflect the highly enthusiastic stance toward brutality that he takes in his formal writing of the period. Even more puzzling are related remarks in a letter of some two months earlier to Peter Gast regarding the work he was at that time in the midst of composing, *Ecce Homo*: “To be sure, I talk about myself with all possible psychological ‘cunning’ and gay detachment—I do not want to present myself to people as a prophet, savage beast, or moral horror. In this sense, too, the book could be salutary—it will perhaps prevent people from confusing me with my opposite.”<sup>19</sup>

Questions abound at this point. For who in world literature appears to work more diligently to present himself as just that “prophet, savage beast, or moral horror” that he here repudiates as not only not his self, but its opposite? Is his private letter to Gast a deliberate misrepresentation, a “mask”? Is the beast that emerges in his writings a “mask”? Or is Nietzsche being torn into disparate beings by forces beyond his control? The genuine inapplicability toward his own being of all that which is “hard,” “cruel,” and “monstrous”—despite its increasing prominence in his writings toward the end—is further borne out by statements by those who knew him personally. From his knowledge of Nietzsche through 1881–86, one writes: “What first therefore struck me about Nietzsche was his humaneness, his amiability. . . . The thinker who seemed to be conjuring up a new century in apocalyptic pronouncements, and proclaimed in his teaching to be interested only in strong-willed people and unusual life-tasks, seemed in personal association to be just a harmless scholar.”<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, based on her acquaintance with Nietzsche in 1886, a woman berates his “relentless” *soi-disant* followers,

vaunting their power, mimicking power-figures such as Nietzsche glorified; when they impiously trampled on what others honored, and could not outdo themselves in bravado, then I who had known their reverential, sensitive leader, had to say to myself: those who call themselves his followers would have rejected him! He would have sent them far from him and again have felt painfully how misunderstood he was.

The inner struggle with his pathologically delicate soul, overflowing with pity, was what led him to preach, “Be hard!,” and to look up with admiration at those Renaissance men of violence who had walked stolidly over corpses to their goal.<sup>21</sup>

We are led yet again to the situation to which we have already alluded, that in which the profound inner division that characterized Nietzsche's understanding of the Dionysian seems finally but the conceptual reflex of a deeper bifurcation within the man himself.<sup>22</sup> Michael Hamburger, commenting on "the war between his self and his anti-self" in Nietzsche, endorses the hostility toward "Nietzscheans" of the testimony cited just above: "The Nietzschean . . . is any reader of Nietzsche who ignorantly, slavishly or dishonestly takes Nietzsche's anti-self for the whole man, or its manic utterances for the whole of Nietzsche's doctrine."<sup>23</sup> What is less clear are the ramifications of these contradictions not only for our understanding of Nietzsche personally, but for the status of his teachings on Dionysus. Were his inner persons so radically disconnected that glaring contradictions were inevitable—in a madman, and thus not worth serious consideration? Was he simply carried away by his own lurid rhetoric, writing as he was, without audience, merely to suit himself, in a series of literary flourishes? Was he writing honestly but metaphorically, making claims that he never intended to be taken at face value—as, for instance, serious invitations to genocide? Numerous other possibilities suggest themselves, but none can remain more than conjecture.

## CONCLUSION

The "Dionysian" perspective so ardently espoused by Nietzsche throughout his philosophy is, in the standard interpretation, identified essentially with that which is here referred to as the heroic Dionysian: it is characterized as an affirmation of life that is grounded in the discipline of the individual will-to-power, "passion controlled." This—originally Kaufmann's—view of the significance of the Dionysian in Nietzsche has become commonplace among Nietzsche critics and commentators. Nevertheless, insofar as it neglects the very different versions of Dionysus found most notably (though not exclusively) in the earliest period (intoxicated, sensual, lover of slaves and women, nature romantic) and the last (inhuman monster, sadist, egomaniac), it is inadequate. It fails, as well, to address the continuing, unresolved, and possibly unresolvable dualism at the core of Nietzsche's thought to its very conclusion as regards the essence of the Dionysian.<sup>24</sup>

We have tried rather to provide textual support for the claim that throughout Nietzsche's philosophy, under the same rubric, two—and finally three—distinctively different conceptions of the Dionysian alternate. The first, Dionysus as representative of immediate and sensuous embrace of and joy in the flux of phenomena, which we termed the ecstatic Dionysian, is properly Dionysian in the Greek-historical sense, and may in that sense with the

most justice be called Dionysian. The second, Dionysus as the individual ego with the strength to impose its own form upon that flux, which we described as the heroic Dionysian, is properly not Dionysian at all (at least, according to the classical, and Nietzsche's earliest understanding of, Dionysus), but, on Nietzsche's own terms in *BT*, Apollonian. The third and last, Dionysus as savage scourge of nature, whose chief pleasure consists in the pitiless slaughter of countless "failures," while identified under the same name is very much the antipode of his original version of Dionysus. The conflict or connection between the three and, it appears, the appeal of each to Nietzsche personally, he was never in any significant way able to settle or resolve, although in his last years of sanity delight in the brutalization of the masses—the monstrous epiphany of Dionysus—became a hypnotically attractive image.

At last, it is not easy to assess with any confidence the implications of Nietzsche's fluctuations regarding Dionysus, most especially of the monstrous epiphany of the latter, for his philosophy as a whole. Writing some years ago (1957), F. A. Lea deemed the "lust for destruction" and cruelty of the last period "diseased": "a perversion," in which Nietzsche "betrayed both himself and his God [Dionysus]."<sup>25</sup> More recently (1984), with greater argumentation, Ofelia Schutte makes roughly the same claim, for despite Nietzsche's continued use of the Dionysian metaphor, she also sees in Nietzsche's growing (if only literary) cruelty "a decision on his part to repress his own Dionysian instincts. These were the instincts to transgress all boundaries, to let his passions and his spirits overflow, to allow himself continuity with the flow of existence. . . . This concern already shows that the Dionysian perspective has been abandoned."<sup>26</sup> It will be noted that the claim that in his later descriptions of Dionysus Nietzsche abandoned the Dionysian depends upon a strategy in which his earliest version of Dionysus is regarded as alone legitimate. While accurate enough from the perspective of classical scholarship, as a philosophical judgment it is finally arbitrary; we regard it as more helpful—as we have sought to do here—to seek simply to distinguish and clarify Nietzsche's evolving understandings of the Dionysian and sort them in developmental sequence.

Perhaps the most sophisticated effort to identify and plumb the deepest source of these fault-lines in Nietzsche's philosophy may be found in Henry Staten's *Nietzsche's Voice*. Staten treats with special interest and acuity the strange dissociation between the outrageous cruelty so prominent in the later texts and the early Dionysian quest for ecstatic fusion with others (see especially his discussion in chapter 5, "Power and Pleasure"). Convincingly and with considerable textual support, he traces back the various strands of the Dionysian to their origins within the tectonic pressures of Nietzsche's own personal being, some of which we noted above, concluding that "as Nietzsche recoils from the expansiveness of the Dionysian his pity becomes nausea, fear of contamination and violation of his being by the touch of those same

masses of humanity whose suffering he feels so deeply; and he seeks to fortify himself by an affirmation of ascendant life that tends to become a celebration of isolation, cruelty, and appropriateness."<sup>27</sup>

The most nuanced and illuminating examination of the implications of Nietzsche's growing enthusiasm for Dionysian brutality for his philosophy as a whole may be found in Bernstein's *Nietzsche's Moral Philosophy*, in which it is related "root and branch," without exculpation or condemnation, to the glorification of power and quest for the feeling of power (*Machtgefühl*) from the outset of his thinking.<sup>28</sup> But this is to reinforce what we have claimed all along: that from the beginnings of Nietzsche's philosophy a profound ambivalence regarding pleasure and power, eroticism and heroism, masks an even deeper and titanic struggle within Nietzsche himself regarding his own identity and destiny. Given his identification with the figure of Dionysus, the result was an incessant, torturous, and elaborate conjugation of the significance of the Dionysian that would continue for the duration of his lifetime. When the dissociation between his opposing personae ("masks," if one wishes, although that assumes an intentionality on Nietzsche's part which may be questioned), rather than being bridged and reconciled, widened into a permanent and agonizing chasm, we submit that it would be inadequate to conclude that Nietzsche thereby either betrayed or abandoned his god. Rather—and surely for Nietzsche this was part of the intuitive attractiveness of that particular divine icon from the earliest period—did he confront his ineluctable and tragic mythic fate: in the concluding Dionysian *sparagmos*, the god meets his inevitable end by being dismembered and destroyed. As Nietzsche/Dionysus himself stumbled, fell, and his mind was torn asunder on the dark streets of Turin in January 1889, did his mad faith—"Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life: it will . . . return again from destruction" (June 1888: WP 543)—inwardly require it as the precondition for his own subsequent rebirth in glory?

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Connecticut*

## NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 18. References to page numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *BT*.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968). References to page numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *TI*.

3. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 245.

4. R. J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 109ff.
5. Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 227.
6. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 10–12.
7. Cf. James I. Porter, “The Invention of Dionysus and the Platonic Midwife: Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (July 1995): 467–97, which also argues the need for a fresh interpretation of *BT*. Like myself, Porter wishes to soften the contrast between *BT* and Nietzsche’s subsequent writings; but whereas he reads *BT* in the light of Nietzsche’s later thinking, I argue here for the reverse: that the dualism of *BT* continues to inform Nietzsche’s thought as a whole.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). References to page numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *EH*.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961). References to page numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *Z*.
10. F. A. Lea, *The Tragic Philosopher* (London: Methuen, 1957), 317.
11. John Andrew Bernstein, *Nietzsche’s Moral Philosophy* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1987), 152.
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968). References to section numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *WP*.
13. *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), 669–70.
14. Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 65.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966). References to page numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *BGE*.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968). References to page numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *A*.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). References to page numbers inserted in text, hereafter cited as *GM*.
18. Christopher Middleton, ed. and trans., *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 343.
19. *Ibid.*, 320.
20. Sander L. Gilman, ed., *Conversations with Nietzsche*, trans. David J. Parent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 178.
21. *Ibid.*, 192.
22. Cf. Michael Tanner, who also finds a “rending cleavage in his work, all the more so in that must reflect crises that experienced in trying to cope with his horribly painful life. And it can be seen, too, as an extrapolation from Apollo and Dionysus in *BT*”: Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66; cf. 66–68.
23. Quoted in *Selected Letters*, n. 193, 320.
24. Cf. Porter’s (note 6) warning: “Nor does it follow . . . that by subsuming two principles into one Nietzsche has stepped clear of the ‘dualistic metaphysics’ towards which his early work ‘tended’ (Kaufmann). At most, if the claim about an eventual conflation of Dionysus and Apollo were right, Nietzsche would be guilty later on of having masked a dualism by concealing it with a monistic principle” (470)—the claim of this article.
25. Lea, *The Tragic Philosopher*, 320.
26. Ofelia Schutte, *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche Without Masks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 145.
27. Henry Staten, *Nietzsche’s Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 103.
28. Bernstein, *Nietzsche’s Moral Philosophy*, chaps. 7–8.