*The Birth of Tragedy* (1871) incl. *Attempt at a Self-Criticism* (1886) – Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche’s *Attempt at a Self-Criticism* describes his first book as an attempt to ‘*look at science in the perspective of the artist, but at art in that of life*’ (p19) although early on he notes that he finds *The Birth of Tragedy* poorly written, ponderous, embarrassing and a number of other negative adjectives. Despite this I think the key ideas underlying it largely stood the test of time.

Nietzsche does take a page or so to criticise Christianity for being the polar opposite of the aesthetic interpretation and justification of the world that his book espouses. It is opposed to Nietzsche in the way that it is solely moral in its approach to life and the world. He says that confronted with this unconditional morality, life ‘must continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral’ (p23). Because of this he sees in Christianity, a ‘*hostility to life*’ (p23) and characterises it as being ‘life’s nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in “another” or “better” life’ (p23).

There are two main criticisms of his first book in the *Self-Criticism* and they lie in his feelings for Kant and Schopenhauer and his optimism, or faith, in a future rebirth of tragedy.

He quotes Schopenhauer as saying that ‘the world, …life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is *not worthy* of our affection’ (p24) and that the tragic spirit eventually leads to resignation. Clearly this is far removed from Nietzsche’s approach to tragedy which ultimately affirms life through the suffering and pain.

He also castigates himself as being too hopeful and raving about ‘the German spirit’ as if it was resurging in line with Greek art when it was really transitioning to a ‘leveling mediocrity, democracy, and “modern ideas”!’ (p25)

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche is primarily concerned with exploring Greek tragedy. He asks how it emerged in the first place, exactly what it is and what effect it has on the spectator. The final third is a later addition and is solely concerned with the sorrowful state of contemporary German art, particularly as compared to Greek tragedy and a future rebirth of tragedy.

Nietzsche first identifies two forms of art, the Apollinian and Dionysian, as being ‘artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*’ or ‘art impulses of nature’ (p38) and every artist as therefore being an ‘imitator’ (p38).

The Apollinian art form includes all plastic arts and poetry and he compares it to dreams because the beautiful, illusive nature of the dream worlds match that energy which is the Apollinian. In a delightful Schopenhauerian turn of phrase, he also calls Apollo ‘the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*’ (p36) which reveals this art form’s close tie to the individual.

The Dionysian, being a musical art form, Nietzsche describes with words like ‘ecstasy’, and in opposition to the Apollinian likens this art form to intoxication. The Dionysian is a raw, passionate energy which bridges the gap not just between man and man, but also between man and nature. Keeping up the Schopenhauerisms, Nietzsche describes the ecstasy of the Dionysian as if ‘the veil of *maya* had been torn aside’ and asserts that man is ‘no longer an artist, he has become a work of art’ (p37). He also cautions that the Dionysian festivals of the ‘barbarians’ which were centred in sexual licentiousness’ (p39) were completely different to those of the Greeks. Rather the Greeks used these festivals of world redemption and days of transfiguration to overcome the Apollinian *principium individuationis*, the ‘apotheosis of individuation’ (p46). In particular, it was the Dionysian music and dance which served to evoke these all important effects.

Nietzsche proceeds to wonder about the Olympian gods, including Apollo, which fill up Greek mythology. He correctly states that ‘whoever approaches these Olympians with another religion in his heart, searching among them for moral elevation… for charity and benevolence, will soon be forced to turn his back on them, discouraged and disappointed’ (p41).

So why were their gods so notoriously fickle and poorly behaved? To answer this Nietzsche recounts the myth of King Midas searching for the wise Silenus. When he finally captured him, he asked what the best and most desirable of all things for man was. This is Silenus’ reply; ‘Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is - to die soon.’ (p42) Nietzsche claims the Greeks knew the terror and horror of existence so they placed the (almost literally) superhuman gods between them and life to make it bearable. ‘Thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it - the only satisfactory theodicy!’ (p43) Under their radiant gods, the Apollinian culture vehemently longs for existence. He even calls this intentional Apollinian illusion, in a quote worthy of Schopenhauer, ‘one of those illusions which nature so frequently employs to achieve her own ends. The true goal is veiled by a phantasm: and while we stretch out our hands for the latter, nature attains the former by means of our illusion.’ (p44) This ‘perpetually attained goal of the primal unity, [is] it’s redemption through mere appearance’ (p45).

So the Apollinian is the dream, it grants us ‘redemption through illusion’ (p45) but because this is merely a dream (like a real dream hints at a reality beyond itself) it points to a suffering and contradictory primal unity underlying the rapturous illusion. This oneness of man and nature, Nietzsche sometimes adopts Schiller’s term for, calling it ‘naïve’. Nietzsche points out that the world we live in is not this underlying unity and so must be mere appearance but this makes the Apollinian dream a ‘*mere appearance of mere appearance*’ (p45). This art form offers so much pleasure because it is twice removed from the suffering of the primal unity (the ‘will’ in Schopenhauer, which Nietzsche plainly agrees with).

This Apollinian rests on the hidden world of suffering revealed by the Dionysian (as we shall see in a moment). Nietzsche depicts a struggle between the two art forms, the Homeric world developed the Apollinian impulse to beauty, then the Dionysian arose before the Apollinian Doric art overwhelmed it. The final phase lay in the combination of the two to create what Nietzsche calls the Attic tragedy founded on the dithyramb and at the end of the book he expresses it thus; ‘Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus’ (p130).

Nietzsche maintains that Dionysian music is a copy of the primal unity (will) which reveals itself under Apollinian dream inspiration, as a ‘*symbolic dream image*’ (p49). The lyrist ‘interprets music by means of images, he himself rests in the calm sea of Apollinian contemplation, though everything around him that he beholds through the medium of music is in urgent and active motion’ (p55). Language is never able to match music which stands in symbolic relation to the ‘primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the primal unity’ (p55). Elsewhere Nietzsche says ‘it is only through the spirit of music that we can understand the joy involved in the annihilation of the individual’ (p104) and again, ‘music is the real idea of the world, drama is but the reflection of this idea, a single silhouette of it’ (p129).

Nietzsche holds that ‘the Greek man of culture felt himself nullified in the presence of the satiric chorus’ (p59) and this leads to the feeling of unity. Tragedy provides a ‘metaphysical comfort… that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable’ ‘Art saves him, and through art – life’ (p59).

Of course this illusion cannot be maintained and eventually the individual must return to normal consciousness which encounters the world with ‘nausea’ (p60). This leads to a very existentialist quote which Nietzsche purports to be the doctrine of Hamlet; ‘Knowledge kills action [through the nausea produced and the knowledge that action cannot change the eternal nature of things]; action requires the veils of illusion’ (p60). He continues, ‘Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence’ (p60). Nietzsche claims that art saves humanity through the *sublime* which tames the horrible and the *comic* which discharges the nausea of absurdity.

Nietzsche further contrasts the Dionysian with the Apollinian when he observes that in the former ‘the hero, the highest manifestation of the will, is negated for our pleasure, because he is only phenomenon, and because the eternal life of the will is not affected by his annihilation’ (p104) whereas the latter in plastic art is described as ‘Apollo overcomes the suffering of the individual by the radiant glorification of the *eternity of the phenomenon*’ (p104). Yet don’t misunderstand Nietzsche here. The Dionysian also aims for eternal joy only not in phenomena, but behind them as we realise that the struggle, pain, destruction is all necessary in view of the ‘exuberant fertility of the universal will’ (p104) constantly competing for existence.

This fusing of the Apollinian and the Dionysian is the distinguishing hallmark of Attic tragedy because it is both a dream apparition and the objectification of a Dionysian state; the representation through Apollinian forms, not Apollinian redemption through mere appearance but through the shattering of the individual and his fusion with primal being.

He breaks from Schopenhauer here who still sees the aesthetic in terms of subject and object, because for Nietzsche this distinction is irrelevant. The subject is not the origin of art, rather ‘we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author’ (p52) because it is ‘only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*’ (p52).

Nietzsche now turns to the origin of Greek tragedy. Tradition maintained that tragedy arose from the tragic chorus and there were two main reasons for thinking this, both of which Nietzsche disagrees with. The first was that the chorus represented the people in contrast with the aristocracy. Nietzsche points out that the whole politico-social sphere was excluded from the purely religious origins of tragedy. The second was the notion of the chorus as the ‘ideal spectator.’ Nietzsche denies this because the ideal spectator must always remain aware that he is viewing a work of art, not an empirical reality, but the chorus is necessarily completely absorbed in the events taking place on stage, treating them as real. Nietzsche observes that ‘The spectator without the spectacle is an absurd notion’ (p57).

Nietzsche ultimately agrees with Schiller who asserted that the chorus was the defining event that led to tragedy because it created a ‘living wall’ (p58) around itself to preserve an ideal domain raised high above the lives of mortals.

The chorus also led to the origin of tragedy because the viewing public at an Attic tragedy found itself not merely watching but also *in* the chorus. The chorus is the ‘mirror image in which the Dionysian man contemplates himself’ just as ‘the world of the stage, in turn, is a vision of this satyr chorus’ (p63). The spectator was uniquely able to ‘see [him]self transformed before [his] own eyes and to begin to act as if [he] had actually entered into another body, another character’ (p64). ‘In this magic transformation the Dionysian reveller sees himself as a satyr, *and as a satyr, in turn, he sees the god*, which means that in his metamorphosis he beholds another vision outside himself, as the Apollinian complement of his own state’ (p64). This represents another aspect of the surrender of individuality Nietzsche continually points out as being central to the Dionysian.

Nietzsche stresses that opposite to what we are used to these days, the Greek chorus, as the Dionysian and the only *reality*, precedes and is more important than the actual action on stage which is nothing more than illusion or the corresponding vision of the chorus; ‘the chorus is the only “reality” and generates the vision’ (p65). In the more authentic, older tragedy, i.e. not yet drama, Dionysus, the star of the show, was never present but merely imagined and it fell to the chorus the task of exciting the mood of the audience so that when the hero appeared on stage, rather than seeing an individual Apollinian form, the audience saw the divine Dionysus.

Nietzsche now turns to the concept of ‘Greek cheerfulness’ which he introduces through the ‘bright’ image projections of the Apollinian aspect of the mask which cover the ‘terrors of nature’ (p67) which are the Dionysian truths on stage before us. This form of cheerfulness is something of a metaphysical comfort that perceives the underlying, seething, chaotic, Dionysian unity of existence through the shock absorbing, individual, beautiful form of the Apollinian.

Nietzsche asserts that the ‘noble human being does not sin’ (p68) because even though he may break all moral laws ‘his actions also produce a higher magical circle of effects which found a new world on the ruins of the old one that has been overthrown’ (p68). In testimony to this Nietzsche recalls Oedipus who murdered his father, married his mother and solved the riddle of the Sphinx. Oedipus overcame the Sphinx thereby solving the riddle of nature only as a result of his breaking the most sacred natural orders of family. This hearkens back to an old belief in Persia that a wise magus can only be born from incest, i.e. the only way to transcend the law of individuation and present and future (nature) is through resisting nature in some other area.

Likewise the Prometheus myth reflects the predicament that arose from the realisation that fire, the most essential possession, is obtained by sacrilege because it is not received from heaven, as a lightning bolt or the sun’s rays. Because of this there are sufferings and sorrows to be endured. The Dionysian aspect of Prometheus is the striving will which seeks to conquer and tame fire for the betterment of all mankind, while the Apollinian is revealed in the demand for justice where individuation and boundaries are central.

Of course all the characters of Greek tragedy – Prometheus, Oedipus, etc – are all masks for the true hero, Dionysus. It is only thanks to the dream-interpreter Apollo, that Dionysus can appear through this symbolic appearance. Nietzsche tells another story about Dionysus being torn to pieces by the Titans and the suffering which he underwent is an analogy for the state of individuation as the origin and cause of all suffering.

Nietzsche talks more about the role of myth towards the end of the book where he reveals that tragedy places the myth between the raw, individual-extinguishing, universal validity of Dionysian music and the listener in order to deceive the listener that the music is merely the best way of bringing the world of myth to life. The myth protects us against the music and the music grants a convincing and intense metaphysical significance to the myth. The tragic myth and the tragic hero become symbols of the universal revealed by the Dionysian and it is thanks to the Apollinian that the ‘almost shattered individual’ receives the ‘healing balm of blissful illusion’ (p127). Nietzsche expresses this idea beautifully, ‘Thus the Apollinian tears us out of the Dionysian universality and lets us find delight in individuals’ (p128) and again, ‘the Apollinian tears man from his orgiastic self-annihilation and blinds him to the universality of the Dionysian process, deluding him into the belief that he is seeing a single image of the world’ (p128). One last Nietzschean quote on myth, ‘without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity’ (p135).

At the end of the book, Nietzsche asks how the ugly and disharmonic tragic myth can stimulate aesthetic pleasure. He answers that ‘existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon’ (p141). The tragic myth reveals the ugly and the disharmonic are just part of an artistic game that the will is playing with itself, ‘the playful construction and destruction of the individual world as the overflow of a primordial delight’ (p142). In this sense we ‘wish to see tragedy and at the same time… long to get beyond all seeing’, ‘we desire to hear and at the same time long to get beyond all hearing’ (p141).

Nietzsche now embarks on an insightful foray into the death of religions (by which he is referring to the vibrant, evolving, changing religious tragedy of the Greeks, not Christianity). He claims that ‘it is the fate of every myth to creep by degrees into the narrow limits of some alleged historical reality’ (p75) at which point the ‘mythical premises of a religion are systematised as a sum total of historical events; one begins apprehensively to defend the credibility of the myths, while at the same time one opposes any continuation of their natural vitality and growth’ (p75).

Nietzsche sees the Greek tragedy coming to a close in this way with Euripides who only managed copied, masked music and copied, masked myth in the mid 4th century BC. The best he could do though is what Nietzsche called *New Attic Comedy* and later *New Attic Dithyramb*. The so-called New Comedy employed plot and character taken from contemporary life, the substitution of humour for wit and the introduction of romantic love as a theme. Music is also degraded to a supporting role. Speaking of the New Dithyramb Nietzsche disparages its imitative nature which forces us to seek external analogies because it reduces us to a ‘frame of mind which makes impossible any reception of the mythical; for the myth wants to be experienced vividly as a unique example of a universality and truth’ (p107). The New Attic Comedy also emphasised character representation and psychological refinement which prevented the character from being expanded into an eternal type, the very heart of the Dionysian universal.

Nietzsche points out that ‘Euripides brought the *spectator* onto the stage’ (p77) and this meant that people could no longer see ‘grand and bold traits’, rather they were subjected to a ‘painful fidelity that conscientiously reproduces even the botched outlines of nature’ (p77). The New Comedy offered an easy enjoyment and a ‘womanish flight from seriousness and terror’ (p78).

It might be countered that Euripides ‘brought the spectator onto the stage and thus qualified him to pass judgement on the drama’ and in doing so, produced a ‘proper relation between art and the public’ (p79) but Nietzsche isn’t having any of that. He looks scornfully on the notion of the ‘public’ as possessing nothing more than strength in numbers and if the artist is a true artist why should he be subject to the whims of the many just because they are the many? Nietzsche also points out that Aeschylus and Sophocles were both popular and so didn’t produce a ‘false relation between art and the public’ (p79).

So, prior to Euripides the spectator was satisfied; why then did Euripides oppose this satisfaction of the public ostensibly *for* them. Nietzsche claims that Euripides felt himself, as a poet, superior to the masses except for two spectators. He brought the masses onto the stage only at the behest of these two spectators whom he revered above all others.

The first is Euripides as a thinker, not as a poet. Euripides, when he watched the plays of his predecessors was unable to understand them. He couldn’t embrace the Dionysian in them and was trying to evaluate and make sense of them intellectually. The second spectator suffered in the same way and turns out to be Socrates, which Nietzsche introduces as a new deity, a demon, speaking through the mask of Euripides. Euripides sucked the Dionysian out of tragedy and replaced it with Socratism.

Nietzsche talks about ‘*aesthetic Socratism*’ which states, ‘To be beautiful everything must be intelligible’ as the counterpart to Socrates’ ‘Knowledge is virtue” (p83-84). Knowledge, consciousness, reason were all features soon to be very highly esteemed. Nietzsche draws a parallel here with the way Socrates questioned the various ‘celebrities’ of Athens (statesmen, orators, poets, etc) and was shocked to find that they practiced their respective arts without knowledge of how to best do them, i.e. they acted ‘only by instinct’. To denigrate something by saying it came from instinct was insane but was further endorsed by Socrates when he declared that he had a *daimon* (something like an instinctual wisdom) which kicked in only to dissuade him from some action. It is again shocking to Nietzsche that instinct is twisted by Socrates into something which only acts negatively when in all productive men it is the creative-affirmative force. The natural order has been reversed in Socrates to the point where the instinct becomes the critic and consciousness the creator. Elsewhere Nietzsche remarks on conscious creativity by saying that Sophocles once remarked of Aeschylus that he ‘did what was right, though he did it unconsciously’ (p85) (Plato also placed artistic creativity beyond consciousness) whereas the Euripidean composer demands the exact opposite for creativity.

Socrates ushered in the age of dialectic and arguments and counterarguments, which loses tragic pity because it is full of optimism which celebrates a triumph with each conclusion. Nietzsche sums up the three forms of optimism which killed tragedy, ‘Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy’ (p91). Towards the end of this section Nietzsche flirts with the idea of an ‘artistic Socrates’ when he considers how Socrates, after being sentenced to death, revealed that he had heard a dream apparition saying ‘practice music’ and he finally composes a few lines of verse in jail. Perhaps, Nietzsche wonders, Socrates conceded there may be a sense in which art is important in a way that science can’t be.

All in all the New Comedy lacked both Apollinian and Dionysian features so needed new stimulants which it found in cool, paradoxical thoughts replacing Apollinian contemplation and fiery affects to replace Dionysian ecstasies. These thoughts and affects are copied very realistically from real life and so lose any artistic expression.

As an example, Nietzsche points to the Euripidean prologue which reveals the entire plot thereby removing all suspense from the drama; the reason for doing this is the whole performance aims for pathos and if a spectator was trying to reason out what was happening, he or she was unable to be completely absorbed in the play. Euripides often also ‘guaranteed’ his plot at the end with the *deus ex machina* which reassured the public as to the future of the heroes. Through music the Old Tragedy provided metaphysical comfort but now with this music gone the only source of comfort can come from earthly resolutions of the tragic dissonance and so the hero endures suffering but then receives his reward through ‘getting the girl’ or receiving divine favour.

Nietzsche returns to his analysis of Socrates, the ‘*theoretical man*’ (p94) who finds satisfaction only in the ‘uncovering’; the gaining of knowledge, in contrast to the artist who finds enjoyment from gazing on the as yet uncovered without a desperate need to ‘know’ or ‘understand’. Nietzsche quotes approvingly of Lessing who announced that he ‘cared more for the search after truth than for truth itself’ (p95).

Nietzsche calls it the ‘profound *illusion*’ of Socrates which believes it can unlock all the mysteries of being through thought because ultimately this line of enquiry takes thought to its limit where ‘it must turn into *art*’ (p96). Science’s mission is to ‘make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified’; the problem is that ‘reasons do not suffice’ so ‘*myth* has to come to their aid in the end’ (p96). Nietzsche idly wonders whether this will lead to the ‘*Socrates who practices music?*’ (p98).

With all of this, Socrates has ushered in a new era of science and a new perverted definition of ‘Greek cheerfulness’ which affirms existence optimistically; the antithesis of Greek tragedy and the annihilation of myth.

In this later section, Nietzsche is concerned with looking for what he calls the ‘rebirth of tragedy’. To this end, he goes on to praise Richard Wagner who esteems that music must be valued differently from the plastic arts and rejects the music which arouses nothing more than ‘*delight in beautiful forms*’ (p100) which is merely the goal of plastic art.

Nietzsche also quotes a long section from Schopenhauer here in which Schopenhauer praises music as another expression of the phenomenal world, or nature, which is related to the universality of concepts except without becoming more abstract. Schopenhauer draws a distinct boundary between *expressive* music which links the universal language of music to the stirrings of the will, and *imitative* music which merely copies the phenomena by means of concepts.

Turning to culture, Nietzsche identifies three types of culture. The first is the *Socratic* (or Alexandrian), being one that loves knowledge and hopes through that to ‘heal the eternal wound of existence’ (p109). The second is the *artistic* (or Hellenic) and this one is caught up in the ‘seductive veil of beauty’ (p109) before it. The third is the *tragic* (or Buddhistic) and is characterised by the metaphysical comfort of an eternal life found beneath the phenomena. Nietzsche sees his time as being caught up in the first, the Socratic.

Next, Nietzsche attacks opera as the innermost content of this Socratic culture. He pours scorn on the *stilo rappresentativo* (representational style) where the speech is at times half sung and at other times wholly sung calling it ‘unnatural’ and ‘contradictory both to the Apollinian and Dionysian artistic impulses’ (p115) ultimately calling it ‘nonaesthetic’ (p115). He also attacks it for demanding that the words be understood thereby creating a form of music in which ‘text-word lords it over counterpoint like master over servant’ (p116). Opera ultimately offers nothing more than a cheerful, idyllic reality which one can imagine as real for a time being but anyone who recalls the true nature of existence will be ‘impelled to call out, nauseated: Away with the phantom!’ (p118).

Nietzsche feels that this type of culture is bound to self-destruct because the insatiable optimism that powers this culture will eventually run aground demanding earthly happiness. He also notes that this Alexandrian culture needs a slave class but its optimistic view of life denies this need. When phrases like, ‘dignity of man’ and ‘dignity of labour’, are no longer effective this slave class will rear up and destroy the culture.

He saw Kant and Schopenhauer as providing the first victory over this optimism when they showed that science only serves to elevate the mere phenomena leaving untouched the thing-in-itself. This is the rebirth of the tragic and in that holds wisdom, as a view of the world which seeks to understand the eternal suffering with ‘sympathetic feelings of love’ (p112), in more esteem than science.

The modern Socratic culture has been weakened in two ways. One, by beginning to fear that it cannot reach the ultimate goal it had formerly sought and two, because it has begun to lost faith in its foundations.

Nietzsche also credits the rebirth of tragedy to the upsurge of German music, regarding which he praises Bach to Beethoven to Wagner. He also sees the efforts of Goethe, Schiller and Winckelmann as deserving or merit although they weren’t able to take us all the way.

Along with the rebirth of tragedy Nietzsche anticipates the rebirth of the aesthetic *listener* who takes the place of the modern critic. When Nietzsche uses the term ‘critic’ he is not talking about professional ‘critique writers’ but rather the public prevailing in modern times who have been ‘prepared by education and newspapers for this kind of perception of works of art’ (p133) and he describes as having ‘half moral and half scholarly pretensions’ (p133). To handle such a public, Nietzsche says artists aim to present some political or social events in such a vivid fashion that the critical public ends up forgetting their critical attitude and abandoning themselves to emotions, but this is nothing to do with true art. Nietzsche includes in this category the attempt to morally educate the public through drama.

Nietzsche offers a simple test to see how close one is to a true aesthetic listener or a Socratic-critical listener. Simply examine how one feels about miracles represented on stage. To reject them as being far-fetched or impossible is not a good sign.