

## *Superficial—Out of Profundity: Nietzsche's Unwritten Birth of Tragedy*

Here is the Preface for the new edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Given this very meaty Preface which provides so much orientation, you can launch this book once more—it even seems very important to me that this should be done.

—Nietzsche to Fritsch, August 29, 1886<sup>1</sup>

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity*. And is not this precisely what we are again coming back to?

—Nietzsche, “Preface for the second edition  
[of *The Gay Science*],” Fall 1886

Nietzsche never completely disowned the discoveries announced in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). More than fifteen years later, during Nietzsche's last year of literary activity, *Twilight of the Idols* invokes and recommends the portrait of Socrates presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* (TI ii, par. 2) and concludes on this note:

And herewith I again touch that point from which I once went forth: *The Birth of Tragedy* was my first revaluation of all values. Herewith I again stand on the soil out of which my intention, my *ability* grows—I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus—I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence. (TI x, par. 5)<sup>2</sup>

This continuing respect for his first scholarly production is surprising because, as Nehamas observes, *The Birth of Tragedy* seems committed to

“the very contrast between things-in-themselves and appearance” that the mature Nietzsche attacked.<sup>3</sup>

Recent discussion of *The Birth of Tragedy* is no longer dominated by questions of whether Nietzsche’s account of the birth of tragedy is historically and philologically correct.<sup>4</sup> Discussion now centers on whether this early work speaks with the voice of metaphysics—by and large Schopenhauer’s voice—or whether in spite of this being his first book Nietzsche had already moved beyond metaphysics. As I read it, Nietzsche’s text faces both directions. Let Nehamas represent those interpreters who emphasize passages in *The Birth of Tragedy* that seem to identify one of the art deities of tragedy, Dionysus, with the world as it is in itself, the true world behind the apparent world (e.g., *BT* par. 1, p. 37; par. 6, p. 55; par. 8, p. 61; par. 16, p. 100). This is the group who read *The Birth of Tragedy* as a work of traditional metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> Members of the second, antimetaphysical group emphasize those parts of *The Birth of Tragedy* that insist that tragedy cannot reveal the in-itself of the world, but is—like every art—a form of “illusion” (e.g., *BT* par. 18, p. 110; par. 19, p. 118; par. 21, p. 129; par. 25, p. 143). Let deMan represent this group of interpreters. They do not understand *The Birth of Tragedy* to privilege Dionysus and music as against Apollo and language; sometimes they even discover in this early work the first moves of a general overcoming or deconstruction of metaphysics.<sup>6</sup> My own view is that the original 1872 *Birth of Tragedy* invites the kind of interpretation I have associated with Nehamas, but that there is another antimetaphysical version of *The Birth of Tragedy*, an unwritten 1886 edition.

Curiously, Nietzsche’s prefatory “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” which was published with the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886), anticipates both the metaphysical and the antimetaphysical interpretations of that book. This “Self-Criticism” describes and unequivocally denounces the metaphysical elements of his first literary project.<sup>7</sup> So Nietzsche seems to have been the first of his readers to notice that his first book could be criticized from the antimetaphysical standpoint of the author of his later works. Nevertheless, in 1885, at just about the time of these self-critical remarks, that same more mature author could write: “Thinking out the principal problems . . . always brings me back . . . to the same conclusions: they are already there, as veiled and obscure as possible in my *Birth of Tragedy*, and everything I have since learned has become an ingrown part of them.”<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche can help us understand our own divided reflections on his first book, for we can think of his later

work as suggesting a strategy for reading that book against the grain of its sometimes traditional metaphysical vocabulary: a strategy for reading an unwritten book.

*The Birth of Tragedy* argues that tragedy, and hence tragic knowledge, should be construed as the offspring of the "fraternal union" (*BT* par. 24) of the two art deities: Apollo and Dionysus. Although this book often associates Apollo with appearance and Dionysus with the truth behind the veil of appearance, the mature Nietzsche praised a *Birth of Tragedy* which was not, in this way, metaphysically mired. In this unwritten book, Dionysus anticipates the figure of the death of God, and Apollo anticipates what Nietzsche was to call the great health or the love of fate, *amor fati*. The mature Nietzsche thought of tragedy and tragic knowledge as a way of moving beyond nihilism, of discovering the precious value of what is near (*HH* preface, par. 5), the value of "little things" that had once seemed of no consequence:

My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it . . . but love it. (*EH* ii, par. 10; see *WP* par. 1016 [1888])<sup>9</sup>

Nietzsche's philosophy, no less than Wittgenstein's, "leaves everything as it is."<sup>10</sup> The semipopular view that Nietzsche aims to transcend the ordinary is a mistake.<sup>11</sup>

### (1) Nietzsche's *Seven Prefaces* (1886)

Toward the end of 1885, having finished *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and while working on *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche began to imagine the publication of his collected works (*KSA* 11.669). Dissatisfied with the reception his work had received, and blaming his publisher Schmeitzner, he planned to republish all his books with a new publisher, Fritzsche.<sup>12</sup> Thus he produced, mostly in 1886, a number of prefaces to help orient readers to his work. At times, he even imagined collecting them into a book to be called simply *Seven Prefaces* (*KSA* 12.123–24, 231–32). In the end, Nietzsche published five new prefaces, not as one book but as prefaces to new editions of his early works.<sup>13</sup> Had they been collected they would have amounted to Nietzsche's own "point of view for my work as an author." That he considered them in this light is apparent from a letter to Fritzsche.

Perhaps it would be equally useful to issue now, immediately, also the new edition of *The Birth* (with the “Attempt at a Self-Criticism”). This “Attempt,” together with the “Preface to *Human, All-Too-Human*,” provides genuine enlightenment about me—the very best preparation for my audacious son, Zarathustra.<sup>14</sup>

He described these prefaces as the “new ‘wings’” for the second flight of his literary production, and I will rely on them to frame my reading of the unwritten *Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>15</sup>

The five published prefaces persistently use imagery of sickness and health. Nietzsche describes his writings as the history of a sickness and convalescence [Genesung] (*HH II*, P par. 6). *The Gay Science* itself is called the “gratitude of a convalescent” [Dankbarkeit eines Genesenden], and this seems to refer to another moving “song of thanks of a convalescent” [Dankgesang eines Genesenen], that one by Beethoven, String Quartet Op. 132 (*GS P* par. 1).<sup>16</sup> The most detailed description of Nietzsche’s sickness and recovery appears in the first preface he wrote in 1886, the preface to the first volume of *Human, All-Too-Human*, whose subtitle tells us it is “A Book for Free Spirits.” The anatomy of convalescence is presented as a genealogy of the free spirit in four stages, which I have named “hearth health,” “sickness,” “convalescence,” and finally, “the great health of the free spirit.”<sup>17</sup>

### (i) Hearth Health

Those who will become free spirits do not begin by being sick, but by being healthy. Although they feel healthy, they are in fact bound by “what fetters fastest”: by their dutiful reverence for their elders, their country, their teachers, and for “the holy place where they learned to worship” (*HH I*, P par. 3). They are fettered by all those ideals that warm one on the family hearth. These ideals are normally taken to be of the highest value, and so Nietzsche can write of those who will be free spirits that “their highest moments themselves will fetter them the fastest, lay upon them the most enduring obligations” (*HH I*, P par. 3).

Nietzsche would have associated these fetters with what some philosophers have called metaphysics, with deflating the value of this earthly world and inflating the value of another, heavenly world. Moreover, as he saw it, there was not much difference between Christian and Platonist forms of the will to the otherworldly, so he

announced that “Christianity is Platonism for ‘the people’” (*BGE* P). *Beyond Good and Evil*, published in 1886—the same year Nietzsche was writing this new preface—italicizes what Nietzsche called the “fundamental faith of metaphysicians . . . *the faith in opposite values*” (*BGE* par. 2). This approach to metaphysics elaborates the hearth health from which future free spirits set out.

Metaphysicians want to understand the origins or essences of things, that is, what makes anything the kind of thing that it is: what makes stones stones, illusions illusions, the good good, and the nasty nasty. As Nietzsche sees it, metaphysicians think they know where the nasty comes from; it originates in our embarrassingly human urges. But then where can the true, the good, and the beautiful come from? Not from this (nasty, illusory, changing) human world. Hence, the metaphysician's quest for what makes the good good faces a decision: *either* there is no metaphysical accounting for the goodness of the good *or* we will find ourselves inventing a second world, a world designed to possess just those features that we require of metaphysical explanations.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche puts the following words in the mouth of a metaphysician:

The things of the highest value must have another, *peculiar* [*eigenen*] origin—they cannot be derived from this transitory, seductive, deceptive, paltry world, from this turmoil of delusion and lust. Rather from the lap of Being, the intransitory, the hidden god, the “thing-in-itself”—there must be their basis, and nowhere else. (*BGE* par. 2)

The good is wholly different from the evil, and the origin of evil is in this world; so the origin of good must be in another world, in the other-worldly. Hegel presented a perfect example of the metaphysician's faith in opposite values when he wrote: “the means should correspond to the dignity of the end, and [hence] not appearance and deception but only the truth can create the truth.”<sup>19</sup> The fundamental faith of the metaphysician is that opposite values must have opposite genealogies. The value of the true, the good, and the beautiful must therefore be grounded not on the details of this world but on those of another world, revealed to us in our “highest moments” (*HH* I, P par. 3). And the obligations revealed to us in these moments fetter us fastest.

I have called this stage “hearth health” to indicate that the warmth of this health derives from the artificial heat of the family's fireplace. It will contrast with the natural warmth of the great health.

## (ii) Sickness

Nietzsche refers to the stage of sickness as the “great liberation,” and the German expression (*die grosse Loslösung*) has some of the force of the great separation (*HHI*, P par. 3). This great liberation comes “suddenly” and tears us away—with nearly suicidal consequences—from the hearth virtues that had been granted the highest value. “Better to die than to go on living *here*—thus responds the imperious voice and temptation: and this ‘here,’ this ‘at home’ is everything it had hitherto loved” (*HHI*, P par. 3). This is a “sickness that can destroy the man who has it” (*HHI*, P par. 3). The symptoms of this sickness include a suspicion and contempt of all that once was loved, a “hatred of love” itself, and a “wicked laugh” that accompanies the demonstration that the things of highest value are of no value (*HHI*, P par. 3).

Nietzsche reports that persons suffering from this sickness may praise those things that were formerly considered evil, but he cautions that this simple inversion<sup>20</sup> of received values manifests a lack of courage for “the question mark of a more perilous curiosity”:

Can *all* values not be turned round? and is good perhaps evil? and God only an invention and finesse of the Devil? Is everything perhaps in the last resort false? And if we are deceived, are we not for that very reason also deceivers? *must* we not be deceivers? (*HHI*, P par. 3)

The more perilous thought is that nothing is of any value at all, not what was formerly considered good, but neither what was formerly considered evil. Is everything perhaps in the last resort false? This skeptical thought is the one Nietzsche came to call nihilism: “that there is no truth, that there is no absolute nature of things nor a ‘thing-in-itself.’ This, too, is merely nihilism—even the most extreme nihilism” (*WP* par. 13: 1887). Nietzsche understood the genesis of nihilism in terms of the first two stages of the genealogy of the free spirit: “one interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered *the* interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain” (*WP* par. 55: 1887).

If we think of this one interpretation as theocentric—God, too, nothing—then this skeptical nihilism recalls one place where Nietzsche speaks of God’s death:

Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there

still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we hear nothing as yet of the grave diggers who are burying God? . . . God is dead. God remains dead. (GS par. 125: 1882)

The thought that God is dead, that we are wandering through an infinite nothing, neatly fits the potentially fatal sickness that Nietzsche describes in this preface: Nietzsche's sickness unto death (*HH II*, P par. 3).

### (iii) Convalescence, in Two Phases

Nietzsche notes that between the sickness and the great health there is what he calls a "midway condition," "long years of convalescence" [*Genesung*] (*HH I*, P par. 4). I follow Nietzsche in distinguishing two phases of this convalescence, one colder and one warmer: two phases in the coming to health of those suffering from skepticism, from nihilism.

*The first, colder phase of convalescence.* The sickness, itself, was characterized by a hatred of what was formerly loved, including love itself. During this first phase of convalescence, "one lives no longer in the fetters of love and hatred, without yes, without no" (*HH I*, P par. 4). In this phase one neither hates nor loves, but looks on all values with a certain coolness and a certain distance. The great liberation proceeds further. One is so disengaged from what one formerly loved that it can be viewed without hatred, contempt, and suspicion. Or the contempt is tempered. It becomes tender (*HH I*, P par. 4). Nietzsche tells us that this phase of convalescence has three elements, that it

is characterized by [1] a pale, subtle happiness of light and sunshine, [2] a feeling of bird-like freedom, bird-like altitude [*Vogel-Umblick*], bird-like exuberance, and a third thing in which curiosity is united with a tender contempt. (*HH I*, P par. 4)

Like a bird, this convalescent can soar high above what was troubling the sick spirit. Nothing that seemed valuable on the family hearth seems so now. But this is no longer the source of a feverish hatred. What others trouble [*bekümmern*] themselves about is no longer of any concern to the colder convalescent (*HH I*, P par. 4). Like a bird, the colder convalescent has "seen a tremendous number of things *beneath* him" (*HH I*, P par. 4). The convalescent looks down on what others worry about,

with tender contempt, with cosmic irony. The convalescent is just as confident as the feverish had been that everything is in the last resort false, but the convalescent is no longer frightened by that thought. The convalescent smiles gently at what others take so seriously.

At this height, everything is far away. Everything is small.<sup>21</sup> Everything is flat. Nothing matters. This is the mood equally of a scientist sure that ours is a world of valueless facts and of those literary characters who float through a world from which they have been estranged and which they look on with a species of tender contempt.<sup>22</sup>

*The second, warmer phase of convalescence.* Although enjoying a sunny happiness [Sonnenglück], the temperature of the first phase of convalescence is not quite warming; it is “cool” (HH I, P, par. 4). This is the paradoxically cool sunshine of the higher altitudes. The second phase of convalescence brings the patient back to the earth<sup>23</sup> where the sun warms.

It again grows warmer around him, yellower, as it were; feeling and feeling for others acquire depth, warm breezes of all kinds blow across him. It seems to him as if his eyes are only now open to what is *near* [Nahe]. He is astonished [verwundert] and sits silent: where *had* he been? These near and nearest [nahe und nächsten] things: how changed they seem! what bloom and magic [Flaum und Zauber] they have acquired! (HH I, P par. 5)

Where *had* he been? He had never seen these near, nearest things. He hadn't seen them in the colder phase of convalescence when he had looked down on all things from his birdlike altitude that shrinks everything, so that nothing is worthy either of love or hate. Certainly he had overlooked them when—in his sickness—he had steamed with a feverish hatred of the theological values and the metaphysics of the family hearth.

But it is essential to an understanding of Nietzsche that these nearest things were also veiled from him before his sickness, and by the very things that, in his sickness, he had reacted so contemptuously *against*. On the family hearth, before his sickness, he had absorbed the fundamental faith of metaphysicians in opposite values, and there is no need to infer *from* this hearth health *to* the veiling of the things that are nearest. To open one's eyes to the heavenly metaphysical world just *is* to close one's eyes to things that are nearest. Only in the warmer phase of con-



valescence are the near, nearest things disclosed at all. Here they are disclosed for the first time, but they are disclosed as having been there from the very beginning.

The metaphors work well enough. Convalescents are to come down from the height of cosmic distance, cosmic irony, from which bird's-eye view [Vogel-Umblick] all earthly things must seem tiny and of no importance. On the surface of earth the world is not flat; it has a terrain. Here the sunlight the convalescents had begun to enjoy in the cold, thin, upper atmosphere can finally warm them. And for short spells this winter sun gives them an occasional taste of what Nietzsche calls "health": the magical delicacy of the near, nearest (*HH I*, P par. 5). The metaphors work well enough, but how are we to understand what Nietzsche calls the bloom and magic of the things that are near (*HH I*, P par. 5)?

I suggested we construe the sickness from which these convalescents are recovering as the sickness of nihilism, so we might try to discover the meaning of this bloom and magic by looking at Nietzsche's discussion of how to overcome nihilism.<sup>24</sup> Nihilism is a "transitional stage," because the nihilist is incompletely liberated from the hearth side values of the Platonic or Christian tradition (*WP* par. 13: 1887).

Briefly: the categories "aim," "unity," "being," with which we have injected some value into the world—we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*. . . We have to ask about the sources of our faith in these three categories. Let us try if it is not possible to give up our faith in them. Once we have devalued these three categories, the demonstration that they cannot be applied to the universe is no longer any reason for devaluing the universe.

Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world. (*WP* par. 12: 1887–88)

This passage can help elaborate the two phases of convalescence. The death of God can only seem to deprive the earth of its significance if we persist in assuming that there can be no value except theological value. Sacrilege delivers its familiar frisson, but only for those who still believe. So enjoying the shiver of sacrilege is a sign rather of faith than of its overcoming.<sup>25</sup> In terms of Nietzsche's genealogy of the free spirit: even the cool birdlike detachment that flattens the earth can only flatten the earth because of its height.<sup>26</sup>

The most concise (and least figurative) presentation of this defusing of nihilism appears in this section from Nietzsche's published account of how the so-called true world became a fable.

The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.* (TI iv, par. 6)

What *Human, All-Too-Human* describes as a potentially fatal sickness is the abolishing of the so-called true world, that is, the metaphysical world and theological values absorbed at the family hearth. During the convalescent's colder phase, the bird's-eye view of a completely flat world is the thought that, without the true world, nothing is real: everything is merely apparent, flat. The warmer phase of convalescence arrives when the convalescent finally casts off the last hearth value: the belief that if there were anything of value at all, that value would have to be metaphysically or theologically grounded. To cast that off is to recognize that by abolishing the metaphysical world we have thereby abolished the merely apparent world. Nietzsche can still write that "the 'apparent' ['scheinbare'] world is the only one: the 'true world' ['wahre Welt'] is only added by a lie" (TI iii, par. 2). But Nietzsche's scare quotes show that he is talking about what the *tradition* had thought of as the true and the apparent world. The world that the tradition devalued as merely apparent is the only world there is. So it is no longer *merely* apparent.

In 1888 Nietzsche still figured this as becoming warm. The last indented quotation is immediately followed by these parenthetical images: "(Noon; moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA)" (TI iv, par. 6). What Nietzsche calls the "spots of sunlight" of the warmer phase of convalescence are the first taste of the sunshine of this health (HH I, P par. 5). The bloom and magic [Flaum und Zauber] of the near, nearest things comes into view in these spots of sunshine. "Flaum" has some of the force of down or fluff and can refer to the tiny, infinitely delicate hairs that grow on the stems, leaves, or seeds of plants. Things that fine can be called precious in the sense of being delicate and refined. In such a mood, it is easy to be amazed, to stare in silent wonder [er ist verwundert und sitzt stille] that such soft, slender, slight things can manage to exist at all. They seem to owe their existence to some impossible magical spell. This is the bloom and magic of the things nearest:

precisely the spirit of the line from Emerson that Nietzsche used as the motto of the 1882 *Gay Science*: "To the poet and sage, all things are friendly and hallowed, all experiences profitable, all days holy, all men divine."<sup>27</sup>

Nietzsche has observed that without the metaphysical grounding provided by Platonic or Christian heavens, the persistence of the things of this world will be revealed in their fragility. This is not the robust, confident pragmatic or neopragmatic world of the man of affairs, immune to doubt, invulnerable to disaster. This is a more delicate, perhaps even more feminine<sup>28</sup> world shadowed by the threat of insecurity, whose security comes, if at all, as a magical spell. It is for these reasons that when the things nearest come into the "spots of sunlight," they are cherished (*HH P* par. 5). We care for them.

Of course fragility of every sort is not wonderful, for we cannot, normally, increase our wonder at the delicacy of a chair by cracking it. But speaking roughly, when the healthy state of a natural object<sup>29</sup> is to be fragile, or scarce, or delicate, then that very fragility will contribute to our wonder. The delicacy of the things nearest is of precisely that sort. They are not wonderful *in spite of* lacking metaphysical grounding; their value is constituted by their lack of such grounding. Their wonder *is* their fragility.<sup>30</sup>

The character Nietzsche calls the wanderer's shadow<sup>31</sup> says to the wanderer: "Of all that you have said nothing has pleased me *more* than a promise you have made: you want again to become a good neighbor to the nearest things" [gute Nachbarn der nächsten Dinge] (*HH II*, WS last dialogue, p. 394).<sup>32</sup> The spots of sunlight that warm this second phase of convalescence are the first signs that the convalescent has also made this promise. Moreover the only difference between the warmer phase of convalescence and the great health is that what comes in "small doses" during recovery is always at hand when the spirits of the convalescents are finally free (*HH I*, P par. 5). The warmer convalescents were "half turned toward life"; the free spirits are fully turned toward life (*HH I*, P par. 5).

#### (iv) The Great Health of the Free Spirit

Free spirits will have discovered the answer to the riddle of the great liberation. They will have discovered why their cure had to be so long and so lonely (*HH I*, P par. 6). The answer is that the future free spirits had to learn that all value judgments manifest the perspective of the

person judging, and in order to become free, these spirits would have to learn to judge in accord with their own “higher goals,” not the artificial warmth of the hearth, but the great health: the warm sunshine that lights up the value, the significance, the meaning of the earth (*HH I*, P par. 6).<sup>33</sup> So the free spirits learn that their problem is “*the problem of order of rank*” (*HH I*, P par. 7). They learn to “transfer seriousness” (*WP* par. 1016: 1888) from the things heretofore considered of highest value to those “little things” (*EH II* par. 10), the things nearest to us (*HH I*, P par. 5) that were formerly considered of no value at all.

The telos of convalescence is a “tremendous overflowing security [Sicherheit] and health . . . *great health*” (*HH I*, P par. 4). Note that Nietzsche uses Sicherheit/security rather than Gewissheit/certainty to describe the feeling of great health. In chapter 5, relying on Wittgenstein, I will discuss the different dimensions of these two concepts. At this stage I will simply assert that certainty suggests being certain that X is a Q because of the presence of criteria for being a Q. Certainty is a matter of evidence supporting a conclusion, silencing doubt, delivering knowledge: Gewissheit delivering Wissen. Security is rather a lack of care, safety; it is less a matter of evidence than an affair of the heart (see *A* par. 34). Closer to faith than to knowledge (see *D P* par. 3–4). Not too distant from the magic [Zauber] of a spell, a safety, beyond reason’s power to comprehend: beyond grounding’s grasp.

In the second edition of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche scorns the positivistic “demand for certainty” [Gewissheit] (*GS* par. 347: 1887), but he honors the security of priestly men of faith.

The common people [Das Volk] attribute *wisdom* [*weise*] to such serious men of “faith” [“Glaubens”] who have become quiet, meaning that they have acquired knowledge and are “secure” [“sichere”] compared to one’s own insecurity [Unsicherheit]. Who would want to deny them this word [i.e., wisdom] and this reverence. (*GS* par. 351: 1887)

What Nietzsche does want to deny is that knowledge and wisdom can be nonprecariously acquired. The overflowing security (*HH I*, P par. 4) that characterizes Nietzsche’s “great health” cannot, on this account, be freed from the risk of sickness. Discovering the precious bloom of what

is normally overlooked remains a task. The great health, which is astonished and wonders at what is precious, is itself fundamentally fragile.

The solution to the problem of an order of rank will involve the discovery of our *own* virtues, those settled dispositions conducive to the great health. But, Nietzsche observes,

Doesn't this almost mean: *believing* in one's own virtues [an seine eigene Tugend *glauben*]? But this "believing in one's virtues"—isn't this at bottom the same thing that was formerly called one's "good conscience," that venerable long pigtail of a concept [Begriffs-Zopf] which our grandfathers fastened . . . often enough . . . behind their understanding [hinter ihren Verstand]. . . . In one respect we are nevertheless worthy grandsons of these grandfathers, we last Europeans with a good conscience: we, too, still wear their pigtail. (*BGE* par. 214)

This pigtail, this believing, trusting, or having faith in one's own virtues remains for Nietzsche beyond proof. The title page of the second (1887) edition of *The Gay Science* replaces the quote from Emerson with Nietzsche's own rewriting of a famous line from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (1841) that emphasizes just this lack of proof. Emerson was voicing his view that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind," and recalled being asked "when quite young" how he could be sure that the impulses he followed came from above and not from below.<sup>34</sup> As part of his reply he exclaimed, "I would write on the lintels of the door post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but I cannot spend the day in explanation."<sup>35</sup> Just as in Kant, there cannot be an explanation of autonomy.<sup>36</sup> Emerson draws the conclusion that whim is what one's acceptance of one's own virtues must look like: to others, but also to oneself.<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche rewrote this passage about self-reliance, and when he brought out a second edition of *The Gay Science*, he used it instead of the straight Emerson that had been on the title page of the first edition. Nietzsche's rewritten version is:

I live in my own place,  
have never copied nobody even half,  
and at any master who lacks the grace  
to laugh at himself—I laugh.

OVER THE DOOR TO MY HOUSE (*GS* title page: 1887)

Nietzsche's laugh underlines the whimsy in whim, and acknowledges that we cannot prove, or make certain, that our own virtues are either *ours* or *virtuous*. At best we can trust them without care, with security, with that "overflowing security" [Sicherheit] of the great health (*HH I*, P par. 4).

Without the weight of metaphysics, all the anchors of our lives can drift. And while that can indeed seem a sickness, nihilism, Nietzsche saw further.

The trust in life is gone: life itself has become a *problem*. Yet one should not jump to the conclusion that this necessarily makes one gloomy. Even love of life is still possible, only one loves differently. It is the love for a woman that causes doubts in us. The attraction of everything problematic, the delight in an *x* . . . flares up again and again like a bright blaze . . . over all the danger of insecurity [Unsicherheit], and even over the jealousy of the lover. We know a new happiness. (*GSP* par. 3)

There is a love of life that requires complete freedom from all risk of disaster, a comfortable happiness resting on certain knowledge of what is right and wrong. On Nietzsche's account this is inaccessible. The different kind of love, producing a new happiness, is a love of what is precisely not immune to disaster, of what is delicate. This happiness, this great health, is a security within the shadow of risk, of fragility. It is the overflowing security with which we greet the downy magic of what is nearest with gratitude (*HH I P* par. 4 and 5).

The *Seven Prefaces* of 1886 display the genealogy of the free spirit. (i) The artificial metaphysical comfort of the family hearth succumbs to (ii) the sickness of nihilism, the hateful assault on everything that had seemed so comforting. (iii) Convalescence proceeds in two phases: a first cooler phase in which the convalescent lives without any love of metaphysical comforts but also without any hatred. The cooler convalescent—neither alive nor dead—floats above the earth. The second warmer phase of convalescence discovers the natural warmth of the spots of sunlight on the wall, the bloom and magic of things that are nearest. And (iv), the final phase of great health lives these moments of natural warmth as a way of life. This spirit freed from the tradition that seeks metaphysical comforts is surprised by a new happiness and a new love for all that is delicate. The great health is a life attuned to what is near.

## (2) Dionysian Terror and Dionysian Ecstasy

The title *Seven Prefaces* would not have been precisely correct. Four of the published prefaces were indeed prefaces [Vorrede], but one of them was an attempt [Versuch], an "Attempt at a Self-Criticism." *The Birth of Tragedy* was republished in 1886 with only two significant changes: the first was the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" and the second was its new subtitle.<sup>38</sup> The 1872 edition wasn't exactly subtitled, it simply had a long title: "The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music." The 1886 edition wasn't exactly subtitled either; it was doubly titled: "The Birth of Tragedy. Or: Hellenism and Pessimism." By drawing attention to pessimism Nietzsche would have been drawing attention to Schopenhauer.

According to Schopenhauer, "*all life is suffering*."<sup>39</sup> He described tragedy as the "summit of poetic art" because it made the "terrible side of life" so wholly unavoidable.<sup>40</sup> On his account, tragic drama tears aside the veil of illusion, "the veil of Maya," revealing that the principle of individuation is merely apparent.<sup>41</sup> The deep truth is that there are no individuals and every individual person or thing we have ever cared for is only apparent. According to Schopenhauer, tragedy

sees through the form of the phenomenon, the *principium individuationis*; the egoism resting on this expires with it. The *motives* that were previously so powerful now lose their force, and instead of them, the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world, acting as a *quieter* of the will [als *Quieter* des Willens], produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself. Thus we see in tragedy the noblest men, after a long conflict and suffering, finally renounce for ever all the pleasures of life and the aims till then pursued so keenly, or cheerfully and willingly give up life itself.<sup>42</sup>

The 1886 prefaces were eager to distance themselves from this Schopenhauerian position. In the preface to the second volume of *Human, All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche brags about how early he had separated himself from Schopenhauer (*HH* II, par. 1), and it starts its final paragraph with this thought:

Finally, to reduce my opposition to *romantic pessimism*, that is to say to the pessimism of the renunciators, the failed and defeated, to a formula: there is a will to the tragic and to pessimism that is as much a sign of severity and strength of intellect (taste, feeling, conscience).

With this will [to the tragic] in one's heart one has no fear of the fearful and questionable that characterizes all existence; one even seeks it out. . . . This has been *my* pessimistic perspective from the beginning—a novel perspective, is it not? (*HH* II par. 7)

*The Birth of Tragedy's* "Self-Criticism" drew a related distinction between: a (Schopenhauerian) pessimism of weakness that craves the beautiful and would rather die than face the terrible, the ugly; and a (Nietzschean) pessimism of strength that craves the ugly and would rather risk death than turn away from the terrible (*BT* SC par. 1, par. 4).<sup>43</sup>

There are reasons for thinking that the Schopenhauerian strands of *The Birth of Tragedy* were unduly emphasized because of Nietzsche's friendship and admiration for Wagner,<sup>44</sup> but conversely these 1886 prefaces probably exaggerate his distance from Schopenhauer.<sup>45</sup> Still, I am not concerned with how far Nietzsche misread his own past. My concern is not with whether it is a misreading, but with the misreading itself.

The 1886 "Self-Criticism" insists that *The Birth of Tragedy* is about how to make life worth living:

You will guess where the big question mark<sup>46</sup> concerning the *value of existence* had thus been raised. (*BT* SC par. 1; my emphasis)

Given the role that Nietzsche's 1886 genealogy of the free spirit gave to the sickness unto death of nihilism, this is just the emphasis we would have expected. Yet many of the antimetaphysical interpreters of Nietzsche, here represented by de Man, sneer at what de Man calls "the entire semipopular 'existential' reading of Nietzsche."<sup>47</sup> De Man would focus rather on Nietzsche's deconstruction of metaphysics than on the existential dimension of Nietzsche's concern with sickness and convalescence. But de Man needlessly opposed the deconstructive side of Nietzsche to the side displayed in Nietzsche's genealogy of the free spirit. That genealogy shows that Nietzsche's antimetaphysical stance, not only issues in nihilism, but also that it can defuse that very nihilism, the existential sickness, which de Man refuses to see. *The Birth of Tragedy* is soaked in what an early letter to Rhode calls "the true and highest problems of life."<sup>48</sup>

In 1872 the association of Dionysus and the sickness that can make us want to die, nihilism, is quite explicitly made in a passage presenting "Greek folk wisdom" addressing "the big question mark concerning the value of existence" (*BT* par. 3, p. 42; *BT* SC par. 1, p. 17).



There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, without capturing him. When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out in these words: "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* [nicht zu *sein*, nicht zu sein]. But the second best for you is—to die soon." (BT par. 3, p. 42)<sup>49</sup>

Silenus reveals to Midas that there is no reason for living, that existence has no value; so it would be better to be dead: "Better to die than to go on living *here*" (HHP par. 3).

Opposed to Apollo, who is associated with "*measure*" [das *Maas*], is Silenus's friend Dionysus, who is associated with "*excess*" [das *Übermaas*] (BT par. 4, p. 46).<sup>50</sup> Explicitly referring to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche notes that Dionysian excess is the source both of tremendous terror [Grausen] and blissful ecstasy [Verzückung] (BT par. 1, p. 36). Nietzsche uses various words for this terror and for this ecstasy, but it remains clear that there are two sides to the Dionysian experience: (1) one which is confrontation with something that is terrifying, horrifying, dreadful, or fearful [e.g., Grausen, Entsetzliche, Schrecken]<sup>51</sup> and (2) one which is ecstatic union with what transcends the individual [e.g., Verzückung, Entzückung].<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche structures his discussion of these emotions so that terror is caused by a lapse in the "principle of sufficient reason," and ecstasy by a lapse in the principle of individuation (BT par. 1, p. 36). *The Birth of Tragedy* links Dionysus with both terror and ecstasy; the author of the "Self-Criticism" uncouples Dionysus from ecstasy. That uncoupling is the center of Nietzsche's mature misreading of his earliest literary project. His mature interpretation of tragedy is simply his earlier interpretation *minus* the Dionysian ecstasy: the ecstatic union with the metaphysical heart of the world.

*Dionysian terror.* Silenus's statements are so grim that we should understand them as inspired not by Dionysian ecstasy but by Dionysian terror. But why would the appearance that the principle of sufficient reason had suffered an "exception" cause terror (BT par. 1, p. 36)? The

principle of sufficient reason is that nothing happens without reason, that there is a reason for everything; nothing is beyond reason's reach. Nietzsche declares that when we suspect that this principle has suffered exception we will feel tremendously terrified. But why? Contrast this homely example. Suppose we endorse the principle that car mufflers wear out in seven years. We can discover a functioning eight-year-old muffler without threatening our general belief. Why must matters be different with the principle of sufficient reason?

Our belief about mufflers can be protected from falsification because each exception to our belief will have its own particular reason. The exceptions can be corralled. Apparent exceptions to the principle of sufficient reason cannot be similarly corralled. When the principle of sufficient reason suffers exception this cannot be for a reason, for in that case it would not have suffered exception in the first place. So giving up the principle and discovering an exception to the principle are the same thing. When the principle suffers exception the game of reason is over.<sup>53</sup> The end of the principle of sufficient reason, the revelation of the absurdity of the world, comes all at once. It has the same tempo as the loss of the world in skepticism: *Presto*.

Suddenly all that we thought reasonable and justified takes on the appearance of being simply due to brute, unintelligible contingency. The light of reason becomes blind fate. *The Birth of Tragedy* assumes that confrontation with this absence of sense is terrifying, and this reaction is preserved as the "sickness that can destroy the man who has it" in the 1886 genealogy of the free spirit. But Nietzsche's first book associates Dionysus not only with this particular form of terror, but also with ecstasy.

*Dionysian ecstasy.* Whereas terror is induced by the appearance that the principle of sufficient reason has suffered exception, ecstasy is induced by the appearance that the principle of individuation has suffered exception. This is the experience that Nietzsche describes as feeling joined to the primordial unity [Ur-Eine] of the world, uniting all humanity and all of nature in one primordial unity:

Now, with the gospel of universal harmony, each one feels himself not only united, reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him, as if the veil of *maya* had been torn aside and were now merely fluttering in tatters before the mysterious primordial unity [Ur-Eine]. (BT par. 1, p. 37)

Nietzsche's praise of Wagnerian music in this book rests on the thought that Wagner's music overpowers the individuality of the listener, uniting the listener with the primordial unity [Ur-eine].

To these genuine musicians I direct the question whether they can imagine a human being who would be able to perceive the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, without any aid of word and image, purely as a tremendous symphonic movement, without expiring in a spasmodic unharnessing of the wings of the world? Suppose a human being has thus put his ear, as it were, to the heart chamber of the world will and felt the roaring desire for existence pouring from there into all the veins of the world, as a thundering current or as the gentlest brook, dissolving into the mist—how could he fail to break suddenly? (*BT* par. 21, 126–27)

This is not death through suicide as intimated by Silenus, this is death through ecstatic union with the heart chamber of the world will. It is such passages that rely most heavily on Schopenhauer's view that music represents "*what is metaphysical*, the thing in itself" normally veiled by the principle of individuation (*BT* par. 16, p. 100).

The mature Nietzsche uncoupled Dionysian ecstasy from Dionysian terror and discarded the ecstasy.<sup>54</sup> Ecstasy can be understood as our acquaintance with that which "explains" the lapse in the principle of sufficient reason: the principle suffers exception because the *world in itself* is ultimately contingent, inexplicable, beyond reason's reach. Moreover this paradoxical explanation of the inexplicable can only be revealed by music:

Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in a symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain at the heart of the primordial unity [den Urwiderspruch und Urschmerz im Herzen des Ur-Eine], and therefore symbolizes a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena [über alle Erscheinung und vor aller Erscheinung]. (*BT* par. 6, p. 55)

Thus granting priority to contradiction and pain is an instance of the weakness that Nietzsche speaks about in 1886: the weakness of hiding from one's sickness by taking what was formerly considered bad, evil, apparent, and making it over into the good and the true (*HHI P* par. 3). The author of these prefaces is up to a "more perilous curiosity" than

the author of the 1872 *Birth of Tragedy*: Dionysian terror without Dionysian ecstasy (*HH I*, P par. 3).

In 1886 Nietzsche set himself against “romantic pessimism” and against the romantic music of Wagner, a composer he had come to think of as a “decaying, despairing romantic” (*HH II* P par. 7, par. 3). Whereas Wagner’s music had been the young Nietzsche’s access to an ecstatic union with the “innermost abyss of things” (*BT* par. 21, p. 126), the author of the seven prefaces thought of this union simply as the “greedy, spongy desire” of a typical romantic.

I began by *forbidding* myself, totally and on principle, all romantic music, that ambiguous, inflated, oppressive art that deprives the spirit of its severity and cheerfulness and lets rampant every kind of vague longing and greedy, spongy desire. (*HH II* P par. 3)

In the 1886 “Self-Criticism,” *The Birth of Tragedy* is itself described as romantic: “the typical creed of the romantic of 1830, masked by the pessimism of 1850. . . . Even the usual romantic finale is sounded—break, breakdown, return and collapse before an old faith, before *the* old God” (*BT SC* par. 7). What Nietzsche is here associating with the comforting God is immediately linked to the metaphysical Ur-Eine of the world heard behind the veil of *maya* (*BT SC* par. 7). The “Self-Criticism” thus purges the Dionysian of the ecstatic union with the Ur-Eine, and restricts it to the terror of discovering an exception to the principle of sufficient reason.

This interpretation of *The Birth of Tragedy* is not shared by Henry Staten. He cites Nietzsche’s description of how a purely musical *Tristan* could overpower the principle of individuation and unite us with the Ur-Eine (*BT* par. 21, 126–27), and he explicitly asserts that this very passage represents beliefs Nietzsche retained throughout his life.<sup>55</sup> And Staten does indeed cite descriptions of similar psychological experiences from Nietzsche’s later writings (e.g., *GS* par. 337: 1882). But Nietzsche has revalued what he still calls rapture or ecstasy [*Entzücken*] (*GS* par. 338: 1882). The loss of one’s self—a lapse in the principle of individuation—is no longer seen as our longing for unification with the Ur-Eine. It is seen as a danger and threat to Nietzsche’s own virtues. So *The Gay Science* (1882) rejects precisely what *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) yearns for, and maintains:

I do not want to remain silent about my morality which says to me: Live in seclusion so that you can live for yourself. Live in ignorance