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**THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING
NIETZSCHE'S INTERPRETATION
OF GREEK TRAGEDY
LIES IN SCHOPENHAUER'S
THINKING ABOUT MUSIC**

Discuss with reference to *Die Geburt der Tragödie* and
Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I, §§51-52, II, §§ 37
and 39.

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The question to what extent Schopenhauer's thinking about music can be considered the key to Nietzsche's interpretation of Greek tragedy opens up a wide range of issues. Nietzsche's work *Die Geburt der Tragödie* is definitely influenced by the philosophical heritage of Schopenhauer's thinking but Nietzsche regrets in his "Versuch einer Selbstkritik", a later comment on *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, that he was employing the familiar terms of Kant and Schopenhauer to develop his own understanding of tragedy:

Wie sehr bedauere ich es jetzt, daß ich damals noch nicht den Muth (oder die Unbescheidenheit?) hatte, um mir in jedem Betrachte für so eigene Anschauungen und Wagnis auch eine eigene Sprache zuzulegen, - daß ich mühselig mit Schopenhauerischen und Kantischen Formeln fremde und neue

Werthschätzungen auszudrücken suchte, welche dem Geiste Kantens und Schopenhauers, ebenso wie ihrem Geschmacke, von Grund aus entgegen giengen!^[1]

Thus for the understanding of Nietzsche's view of the Greek tragedy it is as important to look for parallels with Schopenhauer's expressions as it is significant to point out the differences between the usage of terminology within the works of the two philosophers.

In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* Nietzsche states that the development of arts is dependent on the two main principles of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. These two opposed sets of drives, as Nietzsche defines them, are responsible for the production of arts. In this sense the Apollonian principle is linked up with cognitive activity of the individual, with dreaming, visual art and the awareness of forms. Obviously the term of the Apollonian is derived from the name of the Greek god Apollo, who is the god "aller bildnerischen Kräfte"^[2], as Nietzsche states. On the other hand the principle of the Dionysian describes the situation of "Rausch", the abandonment of the demands and the excessive extremes of the natural existence. Nietzsche's term refers back to the name of the mythological figure Dionysus, who is known as the god of richness, wine and theatre.

Nietzsche recognizes these two principles as the fundamental drives of nature. Concerning the position of the artist among these drives he holds:

Diesen unmittelbaren Kunstzuständen der Natur gegenüber ist jeder Künstler >>Nachahmer<<, und zwar entweder appollinischer Traumkünstler oder dionysischer Rauschkünstler, oder endlich – wie beispielsweise in der griechischen Tragödie – zugleich Rausch- und Traumkünstler.^[3]

Thus in Greek tragedy the two principles of the Dionysian and the Apollonian come together, which means that the excessive element of "Rausch" can be

depicted through the restriction and the creative means of the Apollonian.

For Nietzsche music in general is part of the Dionysian. He gives evidence for this assumption by mentioning the explosive Greek feasts when he says:

Im dionysischen Dithyrambus wird der Mensch zur höchsten Steigerung aller seiner symbolischen Fähigkeiten gereizt; etwas Nieempfundenes drängt sich zur Aeusserung, die Vernichtung des Schleiers der Maja, das Einssein als Genius der Gattung, ja der Natur.[4]

In the sixteenth chapter of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* Nietzsche quotes a passage from Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Here he links up with Schopenhauer's thinking about music by asking how music, belonging to the Dionysian is related to image and term, in other words to the Apollonian.[5]

He follows Schopenhauer's theory that music is a language, which embraces the universality of all ideas or concepts (Begriffe) in the world, but he adds:

Ihre Allgemeinheit ist aber keineswegs jene leere Allgemeinheit der Abstraction, sondern ganz anderer Art und ist verbunden mit durchgängiger deutlicher Bestimmtheit.[6]

Furthermore, for Schopenhauer music is not a depiction of the appearance but rather of the adequate objectivity of the will, like e.g. other forms of arts such as sculpture and painting as well. Hence music is the direct reflection or image of the will itself. In this manner the world is embodied music as well as embodied will.[7] In Schopenhauer's opinion in music

one can recognize "[das] wahre Wesen aller Dinge"[8].

To gain a broader understanding of Schopenhauer's thinking about music one has to look at the hierarchical order in which he relates the different branches of arts with each other. The first and lowest step in his hierarchy are sculpture and painting, then the three branches of literature follow. First of all he mentions lyric poetry, then drama and at least the epic forms of literature. The highest position in his scale is reserved

for music. However, in contrast to Nietzsche Schopenhauer does not tie his theory of music to his understanding of tragedy. These two topics remain separate in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.

Whereas Schopenhauer to some extent neglects the chorus of the Greek tragedy because he considers it only written for its sound, not for its sense, for Nietzsche the chorus plays an important role for his understanding of the Greek tragedy. For Nietzsche attributes the birth of tragedy to the Dionysian choir, which is older than the Greek tragedy itself. In the chorus for Nietzsche the Dionysian element of "Rausch" is integrated in the tragedy.

The main difference between Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's thinking about tragedy might lie in the function both see in it for the human being. Schopenhauer's answer to the question why human beings take pleasure in the dramatic display of pain sounds rather simple.

He states that the tragic demonstrates the joy of renouncing a world whose own joys are evanescent and of finding another mode of existence and being instead, a condition of aesthetic contemplation.^[9]

Agreeing so far with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche announces that tragedy demonstrates "the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature"^[10] to the spectator.

Through the sympathetic identification with the hero the Dionysian energies reveal the horror and absurdity of existence. In the figure of the tragic hero the spectator witnesses the embodiment of the clash between human aspiration and the natural and divine limits that are set within the world. When this hero demands justice in an unjust world the result must be terrible suffering. At this stage Schopenhauer's pessimism comes into play because for him nothing but denial follows the recognition of the evil and suffering in the world. To explain how the spectator perceives the tragic experiences of the hero in the tragedy Schopenhauer holds:

[...] bis endlich, in Einzelnen, diese Erkenntnis, geläutert und gesteigert durch das Leiden selbst, den Punkt erreicht, wo die Erscheinung, der Schleier der Maja, sie nicht mehr täuscht, die Form der Erscheinung, das principium individuationis, von ihr durchschaut wird, [...]

wodurch nunmehr die vorhin so gewaltigen Motive ihre Macht verliehren, und statt ihrer die vollkommene Erkenntnis des Wesens der Welt, als Quietiv des Willens wirkend, die Resignation herbeiführt, das Aufgeben, nicht bloß des Lebens, sondern des ganzen Willens zum Lebens selbst.^[11]

However, it is not this condition in which tragedy leaves the spectator in Nietzsche's understanding. Here Nietzsche pushes his argument further than Schopenhauer. It is obvious that the formulation of the "Schleier der Maja" that has been quoted earlier on from *Die Geburt der Tragödie* Nietzsche abstracts from Schopenhauer. However, Nietzsche uses the formulation in connection with the Dionysian Dithyrambs, the Greek choral music, whereas Schopenhauer employs it to depict the effect of the tragedy without noticing music at all.

It is remarkable that Schopenhauer never speaks of "Tragödie" in paragraph 51 of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* but always refers to the "Trauerspiel", which definitely relates to the bourgeois German 'mourning play' of the 19th century. Thus for him the Greek tragedy seems far less important for the purifying effect of tragedy than it does for Nietzsche. Schopenhauer's concept implies that a tragic issue developing with a steady descent towards a catastrophe rather creates a purifying effect in the spectator than the accidental misfortune or exceptional design it derives from in the Greek tragedy.

This is why Schopenhauer avoids the Greek connotation for a tragic theme in his opinion has to come from the regular course of life.^[12]

According to Nietzsche's account the elements of tragedy, which Nietzsche has associated with Dionysus, embodying the exuberant energy of the choral music and dance, give the spectator an example of order asserted in the face of disorder.

The Dionysian music shows an artistic making that does not depend on any external order in nature. Seeing how Dionysus and the energies he represents transform the world, the spectator is seduced back into life, brought to affirm life by the erotic and bodily energies, which for Schopenhauer were compelling reasons to escape from life.

Nietzsche's answer to this position refers to the salvation experienced through arts by the spectator of the choir in ancient Greece:

Ihn rettet die Kunst, und durch die Kunst rettet ihn sich – das Leben.^[13]

In that sense arts knows how to turn the thoughts about the horror and absurdity of life into notions which one can accept:

Hier, in dieser höchsten Gefahr des Willens, naht sich, als rettende, heilkundige Zauberin, die Kunst; sie allein vermag jede Ekelgedanken über das Entsetzliche oder Absurde des Daseins in Vorstellungen umzubiegen, mit denen sich leben lässt [...]^[14]

Nietzsche stresses that the artistic process requires an interweaving of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in tragedy itself and in the spectator's reaction to it. At the end of the seventh paragraph of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* the satyr chorus is called “die rettende That der griechischen Kunst”^[15]. Nietzsche insists that in the chorus and in the identification of the spectators with the chorus they see something true about themselves as natural bodily beings. This is how the spectator becomes a Dionysian himself.

As a Dionysian he views the Dionysian image of himself, seeing his own body as something sophisticated, orderly and splendid, which is taking part in the human capabilities for artistry that have been associated with Apollo.^[16]

So the Dionysian chorus and its spectators create themselves the Apollonian vision of the tragic hero. Thus the Dionysian dancers are actually dreamers. Through their perception the entire order of the dramatic action is dreamt or viewed.

The central object of the dream is the suffering hero, who is none other than the god “Dionysus, der eigentliche Bühnenheld und Mittelpunkt der Vision”^[17]. Hence the spectators' concern for the

hero's anguish becomes their affirmation of the joyous rebirth and the versatile artistry of the god.

According to Nietzsche the achievement of Greek tragedy, first of all, has the purpose of confronting the spectator directly with the fact that there is just one world, the chancy, arbitrary, but also rich and beautiful world of nature.

By showing how life beautifully asserts itself in the face of a meaningless universe, showing the joy of human making in a world of becoming, and by being itself an example of joyful making, tragedy confronts the spectator not only with the painful events of the tragedy but also with the painful events and uncertainties of life. Instead of giving up his will of live, as Schopenhauer states, the spectator, intoxicated by Dionysus becomes a work of art and artist.

In the end we can see that in both Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's thinking music takes up a significant place. Whereas for Nietzsche it is the main founding condition of the tragedy – he assumes that the tragedy has developed out of music in form of the Dionysian choir – in Schopenhauer's hierarchy of arts it holds the highest position as the direct expression or image of the will without a connection to tragic word and term. Wherever it occurs a connection between poetry and music, e.g. in opera or folk song, Schopenhauer does not estimate this connection very much:

Die Worte sind und bleiben für die Musik eine fremde Zugabe von untergeordnetem Werte, da die Wirkung der Töne ungleich mächtiger, unfehlbarer und schneller ist als die der Worte.^[18]

In *Die Geburt der Tragödie* Nietzsche undoubtedly relies on Schopenhauer's terminology and his main point that music is the reflection of the will. So far Nietzsche goes with Schopenhauer.

However, his whole system of the Dionysian and the Apollonian and their fusion in the Greek tragedy is not based on Schopenhauerian thinking about music. Thus Schopenhauer might be a source inter alia for Nietzsche's understanding of the Greek tragedy but not the exclusive key.

- [1] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 13
- [2] *ibid.*, p. 21
- [3] *ibid.*, p. 24
- [4] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 27
- [5] comp. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 99 – 101 and Schopenhauer, Arthur, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I*, Wiesbaden, 1972, p. 309 - 311
- [6] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 99
- [7] comp. *ibid.*, p. 101
- [8] *ibid.*, p. 100
- [9] comp. M.S. Silk & J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, CUP 1981, p. 327
- [10] Nussbaum, Martha, „Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus“, in Christopher Janaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, Cambridge 1999
- [11] Schopenhauer, Arthur, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung I*, Wiesbaden, 1972, p. 299
- [12] comp. M.S. Silk & J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, CUP 1981, p. 326
- [13] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 50
- [14] *ibid.*, p. 51
- [15] *ibid.*
- [16] comp. Nussbaum, Martha, „Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus“, in Christopher Janaway (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, Cambridge 1999, p. 368
- [17] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 57

[18] Schopenhauer, Arthur, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung II*, Stuttgart/Frankfurt am Main, 1960, p. 575

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