“Nietzsche’s Aesthetics”
Philosophy Compass
(5017 words, exc. refs)

DRAFT 28 July 2020

## Introduction

We find numerous discussions of art and aesthetics stretching from Nietzsche’s first book *The Birth of Tragedy* to his final books of 1888. Yet for all this attention, there is fairly little systematic treatment by Nietzsche of answers to the canonical questions of philosophical aesthetics. He has suggestive and illuminating remarks scattered across his dozen or so books. In contrast to his major philosophical predecessors in German philosophy—Kant, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer—for whom aesthetics was an integral part of a broader philosophical system, Nietzsche’s remarks are relatively more piecemeal. This makes the task of reconstruction and summary something of a challenge, but an important one, given the originality and interest of what Nietzsche has to say. In what follows, I will proceed in a roughly chronological fashion, but try to group key themes together insofar as possible.

## Tragedy and Affirmation

No figure looms larger for Nietzsche’s aesthetics, and maybe for Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole, than Richard Wagner. References to Wagner in Nietzsche’s writings are more frequent than those to Socrates, Jesus, and Schopenhauer combined. Nietzsche met Wagner in the late 1860s, when Nietzsche was a young professor at the University of Basel, and Wagner was living nearby in Switzerland. Nietzsche found in Wagner (thirty-one years Nietzsche’s senior) a fatherly, charismatic figure. And Wagner found in Nietzsche a budding, formidable intellectual, who could lend further credibility to Wagner’s enterprise for the rejuvenation of German culture, propagated through mythologically-inflected art. Wagner was at this point developing his monumental tetralogy *Der Ring des Niebelungen*. In doing so, he looked back to the aesthetic, religious, social, and political role of tragedy in ancient Athens and hoped to produce something of a similar form in the Germany of his day. It was with this project of Wagner’s in mind that Nietzsche wrote his first book, and his most enduringly influential book in aesthetics, *The Birth of Tragedy*, published in early 1872. Its full title is in fact *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, further underscoring its Wagnerian influences. It begins with a paean and dedication to Wagner: “my conviction that art is the highest task and the true metaphysical activity of this life,” Nietzsche writes, “is based on an understanding which I share with the man and fighter {Wagner} whose sublime lead I follow and to whom I now wish to dedicate this work,” (BT, “Foreward”).

By training and profession, Nietzsche was a classical philologist, and *The Birth of Tragedy* was an ostensible contribution to this discipline. The book charts, in a highly speculative fashion, the genesis, apogee, and decline of Greek tragedy. But more generally, it is also an account of tragic experience and of its existential value and cultural significance. At the heart of Nietzsche’s analysis are two aesthetic forces or impulses, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, named of course with reference to the two Greek gods. Dionysus is the god associated with wine, fertility, ritual madness, and excess, where Apollo is the god associated, among other things, with light, rationality, and order. “We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics,” Nietzsche tells us, when we recognize that the evolution of art is

bound up with the "duality" of these two impulses (BT, 1). How are these two impulses to be understood? Nietzsche characterizes them in a number of ways.

At the most basic, but also perhaps the most confusing level, these are supposed to have epistemic-metaphysical correlates. Nietzsche often presents the Dionysian as a vehicle of primal truth, perhaps even a window into noumenal metaphysics. The Apollonian, by contrast, is a sort of appearance or illusion or semblance [*Schein*].[1] Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, we find considerable metaphysical apparatus—the locutions and trappings of it anyway—much of it heavily inflected by Schopenhauer. Nietzsche came upon Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* several years before writing *The Birth of Tragedy*, and become besotted with it, an enthusiasm he shared in common with Wagner. Nietzsche's main metaphysical idea seems to be that individuation is a kind of illusion and that ultimate reality consists in a "Primal Oneness" [*Ur-Eine*] (BT, 1). There has been a considerable scholarly debate about how seriously Nietzsche actually takes this framework, and what role it is playing in the work.[2] Much of this is driven by an embarrassment, shared by Nietzsche's later self, at the book's apparent excesses, and an attempt to reject or at least soft-pedal the book's seeming metaphysical bombast. In a subsequent edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, 14 years after its original appearance, Nietzsche appends an "Attempt at Self Criticism" as a new preface. Among other complaints about the book, he notes that he lacked a "language of [his] very own" and resorted to an ill-suited Kantian and Schopenhauerian framework to express his points (BT, "Attempt," 6).

Whatever we make of Nietzsche's metaphysical remarks, the Apollonian and Dionysian get characterized along other lines too. They also represent two different aesthetic paradigms: Whereas the Apollonian aesthetic is about order and restraint, the Dionysian aesthetic is about wild abandon and the elimination of boundaries. There is a natural alliance with particular art forms as well. The Dionysian is paradigmatically the art of music and dance. The Apollonian—Apollo's lyre notwithstanding—is paradigmatically the art of sculpture and epic poetry. So too, they are associated with different social belief systems and practices. The Dionysian strand involves cultic practices centered around the worship of Dionysus, involving collective intoxication and frenzy, verging into violence (BT, 1). The Apollonian strand involves the "magic mountain" of the Olympian gods (BT, 3). These radiant beings present us with a beautiful glorification of life. They give us, as Nietzsche says, a kind of "theodicy"— justifying the life of humans by living it themselves, and offer a sort of "veil" to protect us from life's horrors (BT, 3). Both the Apollonian and Dionysian strands are operative in Greek cultural life, and provide ways of coping, in a cultic-religious fashion,

---

[1] On the notion of *Schein*, see Stoll (2019). It is important to such *Schein* that it is not necessarily deceptive. One can self-consciously recognize such semblance/ illusion as such. Cf., Pippin (1997), Geuss (1999), Janaway (2014).

[2] For treatment of these issues, see Han-Pile (2006); Gemes and Sykes (2014); Janaway (2014); Ridley (2019). It is evident, from Nietzsche's notebooks of this period, that Nietzsche was dubious about various aspects of Schopenhauer's metaphysics. See "On Schopenhauer" in ENB. Questions are sometimes conflated, however, about whether Nietzsche endorses *Schopenhauer's* metaphysics per se in *The Birth of Tragedy* with whether Nietzsche has important metaphysical commitments of his own, expressed using vaguely Schopenhauerian formulations. To my mind, it is evident that Nietzsche has, in his own later words, an "artiste's metaphysics" (BT, "Attempt," 2) running through this book.

with suffering and seeing life as meaningful, whether through Dionysian orgiastic ecstasies or the Olympic worldview.[3]

On Nietzsche's historical account, Greek tragedy has its roots in these two main cultural strands. Tragedies, Nietzsche maintains, were an outgrowth of more basic kinds of Dionysian ritual— the dithyrambic hymns, for instance, sung in praise of Dionysus (BT, 5). Tragedies refine this idea by being presented, with musical accompaniment, as the centerpiece of a civic festival in honor of Dionysus. Tragedy also takes a page from the Apollonian in giving a narrative order to what transpires onstage. Tragedy becomes the story of the suffering and downfall of a particular individual (hence an Apollonian element), but told through the voice of the chorus (a more collective Dionysian element). The events presented onstage are supposed to be the vision and invention of the chorus (BT, 7). These involve a sort of formalized reenactment of ritual sacrifice, with the tragic hero in the role of sacrificial victim. The individual dies, but his suffering and death finds a sort of aesthetic redemption. At its best, tragedy, according to Nietzsche, thereby is able to provide a kind of existential solace, thanks to its intimation of meaning in the face of suffering.

In the background here, Nietzsche has in mind the views of Schopenhauer, both regarding our existential situation and tragedy's response to it. Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* maintains that it would be better never to have been born. Our lives are filled with suffering, leavened with only occasional respite, and this suffering is due not to incidental features of our personal or historical situation, but to the very nature of willing. When we will something, we are pained by its lack, and when we achieve what we want, our satisfaction from it is fleeting. Aesthetic experience is one of the rare bits of relief from this cycle of pained willing (WWR I, §38). Tragedy goes even further in encouraging *renunciation* of the will, the ascetic route of distancing ourselves from our desires, a route which Schopenhauer presents as a kind of salvation (WWR I, §51). It is unclear whether Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* endorses this extreme pessimism himself. But he certainly sees human life as replete with much suffering. Where he clearly and strongly disagrees, however, is with Schopenhauer's characterization of tragedy's role in answer to this suffering. It seems not to have had this effect of encouraging life renunciation on its originators, the Ancient Greeks. On the contrary, Nietzsche maintains, it stimulated them to greater heights of vitality and life affirmation, even as its dramatic content depicted the horror of existence. How is this possible, Nietzsche asks? His account of tragic experience, and the consolation it provides, is couched in response to this puzzle.

It is a long-standing problem in aesthetics, going back at least to Aristotle, of why we value engagement with tragedies, depicting, as they do, suffering and death.[4] Aristotle's answer in the *Poetics* is twofold. Tragedy enables a form of *katharsis* (a purgation, as he says, of pity and fear), and it delivers a valuable form of knowledge (conveying universal truths, in contrast to the more particular truths conveyed in history). Nietzsche has a distinctive answer to this paradox of tragedy. According to Nietzsche, art conveys the truth, but refracts this with aesthetic illusion that makes this truth bearable. As Michael Tanner nicely puts it,

---

[3] See Huddleston (2019a), Ch. 1.

[4] This debate is sometimes framed, rather unhelpfully, as though there were a single answer to this question. But there may well be a number of different solutions, which are variable depending on the people in question, their proclivities, the worldviews they endorse, etc.

"Art, at its greatest, tells the truth and makes it possible to bear it."[5] To make it possible to bear this insight, tragedy offers us a form of "metaphysical consolation," as Nietzsche calls it (BT, 7; 18). The consolation comes in two related forms: tragedy, though it communicates truths that are difficult to face, at the same time a) intimates an aesthetic justification of existence, and b) suggests the possibility of persistence beneath the destruction. To the first point, tragedy, by recreating life onstage, invites us to a certain external, cosmic perspective on life. From the standpoint of this cosmic spectator— a sort of "artist-god" (BT, "Attempt," 5)—the events portrayed in the tragedy can appear justified in aesthetic terms, even if they cannot be in moral terms. Hence Nietzsche's famous formulation, with a vaguely theological flavor, that "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*" (BT, 5). Nietzsche compares us to painted soldiers on a canvas depicting a battle (BT, 5), participants in an art work that we cannot ourselves view. In everyday life, we can't inhabit this cosmic perspective and are unaware of our role in the grand aesthetic spectacle of existence. But tragedy entices us toward a new, artist-godly vantage point. The justification is thus founded on a kind of semblance or illusion, in that this radical shift in perspective belies our actual, worldly concerns.[6] But it leaves us in a position where we are (supposedly) armed with something to help us—if only at an emotional and not a rational level—against the existential terrors of existence. Complementary to this, Nietzsche, drawing on an image from Heraclitus, compares this amoral artist god to a child building sand creations and knocking them over for fun (BT, 24). The creation and destruction of individuals is a sort of entertainment for such a child/ artist god. Yet these creations (us) were fleeting anyway and return to the figurative sand from whence they came. That too is supposed to provide a certain kind of consolation, our sense that, as we ebb away, existence courses on eternally beneath the "turmoil of appearances" (BT, 18).[7] Nietzsche's suggestions here are of course quite elaborate and likely do not describe the aesthetic experience of most of us, or identify what might actually give us consolation. But his important deeper idea, it seems to me, is that tragedy can intimate or adumbrate a justification (even if only an illusory one) for suffering and death, and that this disposes us positively towards life, thanks to the way it combines the revelation of truth with comforting illusion.[8] The hazier the details, the more effective this is.

In addition to Nietzsche's account of the origins of tragedy, and characterization of tragic experience, he also considers its trajectory as a genre. Tragedy, he suggests, is at its pinnacle with Aeschylus and Sophocles, but falls into decline with Euripides (BT, 10-11.) The former tragedians preserve a sense of mystery, but Euripides tries to find rationality and order in the drama, and this ruins the tragic effect. Nietzsche identifies the influence of "Socratism" as a crucial problem here (BT, 12-13). The claim is less about the personal influence of the man Socrates, but rather about the cultural shift his worldview represents.

---

[5] Tanner (1992), p. xxix.

[6] For further discussion of this theme, see Geuss (1999); Came (2006).

[7] See discussion in Young (1992) and Clark (2015) on this passage and some of the complexities it raises.

[8] See Anderson (2009).

Rather than taking ideas on authority and tradition, rather than letting myths and illusions be, Socrates insists on questioning everything and subjecting it to penetrating rationality scrutiny. But tragedy, according to Nietzsche, depends on the irrational (or at least the ara-tional) for its crucial aesthetic effect. Socratism is thereby the undoing of Greek tragic culture (BT, 14-15).

## Art, Truth, and Self-Creation

In the final sections of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche celebrates the potential for tragedy's rebirth in Wagnerian music drama. At this point in his career, Nietzsche has high hopes that Wagner might be able to reunify a fragmented German culture. These hopes are dashed at the first Bayreuth festival in 1876, where Nietzsche sees rich grandees swanning around at what was supposed to be a quasi-sacred experience. Nietzsche comes to repudiate *The Birth of Tragedy* and its "artiste's metaphysics" (BT, "Attempt at Self-Criticism," 2), along with Wagner and his artistic program. In Nietzsche's book of the late 1870s *Human, all too Human*, he is deeply skeptical of art and artists with such grand pretensions. This period in his work is sometimes described as Nietzsche's "positivistic" phase. He abandons the undercurrent of Schopenhauerian pessimism characteristic of *The Birth of Tragedy* and comes to put his faith, rather like Socrates whom he had so vehemently criticized, in progress through rationality and science, and against anything smacking of metaphysics. "It is the mark of a higher culture," Nietzsche writes, "to value the little unpretentious truths which have been discovered by means of rigorous method more highly than the errors handed down by metaphysical and artistic ages and men" (HH I, 3). Although he before long becomes less sanguine in his positivism, he never returns to the high-flown picture present in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nonetheless, two of its most important themes remain in similar, if somewhat modified form, in his later thinking about aesthetics.

The first of these themes is that a crucial value of art is to provide us with semblance or illusion [*Schein*]. This is most pointedly formulated in one of Nietzsche's late notebook entries: "For a philosopher to say 'the good and the beautiful are one' is infamy. If he goes on to add, 'also the true,' he should be thrashed. Truth is ugly. We have art, lest we perish of the truth" (WP, 822 [1888]). These ideas are paralleled earlier in *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche celebrates art as a "cult of the untrue" founded on "the good will to illusion" [*Scheine*] providing a "counterforce" to our obsession with truth (GS, 107). This line of thinking is one of Nietzsche's most striking contributions to aesthetics. Although nearly all acknowledge that art traffics in fiction, falsehood, and illusion, theorists tend to see this, apologetically, as incidental to its value, which, in their view, has more fundamentally to do with, for example, deeper truth, or free play, or emotional engagement, or some such. Nietzsche claims that *providing illusion* is central to art's value.

The second of these themes is about considering life in artistic terms.[9] *The Birth of Tragedy*, as we saw, put forward the idea of an "aesthetic justification" of existence. We are to look upon the world as if it were a work of art and to assess it accordingly.[10] Nietzsche con-

---

[9] For a seminal treatment of this theme, see Nehamas (1985).

[10] This idea is indebted to the Early German Romantics, who, under the auspices of "universal poetry" [*Universalpoesie*] called for life to be modeled after art and for aesthetic ideals to infuse life. See Beiser (2003).

tinues with a similar idea when he exhorts us to be "the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters (GS, 299). We are, to this end, called to fashion ourselves into an aesthetic whole: "To 'give style' to one's character—a great and rare art. It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye" (GS, 290). We are both the artist and the art object. As Nietzsche puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "in man *creature* and *creator* are united: in man there is material, fragment, excess, clay, dirt, nonsense, chaos; but in man there is also creator, form-giver, hammer hardness, spectator divinity, and seventh day" (BGE, 225). There are puzzles about how exactly such self-creation or self-shaping is supposed to work and how much freedom is required for it. *Who* is doing the creating and the aesthetic planning here? To what extent is there a conscious plan at all? How much of our nature is ineluctable and resistant to shaping? Regardless of where we stand on these difficult philosophical issues, Nietzsche is envisaging a model of aesthetic self-fashioning of some sort here.[11]

What implications does this model have? Its most crucial lesson is, I think, one about evaluation: When we assess the goodness or merit of a life, we do not do so in narrowly moral terms (e.g, were you helping the needy and feeding the poor), or indeed in hedonic terms (did your life feel pleasurable for you?). But we assess it (largely or partly anyway) according to aesthetic criteria (e.g., unity, style, and the like). That said, Nietzsche does not see just see formal aesthetic criteria as the sole arbiters of human excellence. Nietzsche also concerns himself with qualities such as vitality, power, life affirmation, as well as others (e.g.,"magnificence" [Pracht] GM, "Preface," 6) that are in a sort of intermediate space between the broadly ethical and the aesthetic.[12] The important point is that our lives are assessed as though they were works of art.

Creativity and Aesthetic Experience

In this idea of aesthetic self-fashioning, we see another key Nietzschean aesthetic theme: that of creativity. Nietzsche admires people who do not merely play by the existing rules, but who go beyond them, who, in his terms, "legislate" or "create" values. He is thinking in the first instance of philosophers (BGE, 211), but his model for them is essentially a creative-artistic one. Like great artists, they conceive new ways of doing things and come to win adherents to their way of looking at the world. It is for this reason that we often see Nietzsche's greatest admiration focused on creative figures, such as Goethe and Beethoven.[13]

Nietzsche, however, tempers this idea of path-breaking creativity with one of constraint. Creativity is not just a matter of "*laisser aller*" (BGE, 188). Great artists, he says, respect constraints of style and find their artistic excellence *through* subjecting themselves to these limitations: "Every artist knows how far from any feeling of letting himself go his 'most natural' state is—the free ordering, placing, disposing, giving form in the moment of 'inspiration'--and how strictly and subtly he obeys thousandfold laws precisely then, laws

---

[11] For further treatment of these difficult questions, see Ridley (2016) and Nehamas (2018). For skepticism about the ideas of self-creation, see Leiter (1998).

[12] See Huddleston (2019b) for further on these issues.

[13] Nehamas (1985); Leiter (2002); Huddleston (2019b)

that precisely on account of their hardness and determination defy all formulation through concepts" (BGE, 188). Discipline is thus a counterweight to innovation. Thanks to such strictures, we foster the things "for whose sake it is worth while to live on earth; for example, virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality" (BGE, 188).

Coupled with this celebration of (disciplined) creativity, we find as well in Nietzsche probing reflections on the nature of aesthetic and artistic value, key insights which still remain largely unassimilated in contemporary philosophical aesthetics. Aesthetic theorizing has tended to privilege the standpoint of the spectator over that of the creator: "Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem starting from the experiences of the artist (the one who creates), thought about art and the beautiful from the viewpoint of the "spectator" and thus, without it being noticed, got the "spectator" himself into the concept "beautiful" (GM, III: 6). Nietzsche means this in the following sense: On this spectator-focused approach, we are prone to construe aesthetic value as something that is either a property or concomitant of aesthetic experiences themselves (e.g., pleasure), or else something that is a property of the work, which is then accessed through these experiences, that is to say, something appreciated in, or extracted from the artwork. Yet this is all essentially spectator-focused. These views neglect the fact that artistic and aesthetic value are also instantiated in the *artistically-creative activities of artists*. To give heed to the creator's side of things is to recognize this locus of value as well. Artistic value was realized *in Beethoven's creative innovation itself,* not simply in subsequent or potential appreciation of this, or in the aesthetic fruits of it.

In his broadside against Kant and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche also criticizes their fixation with the "disinterestedness" of aesthetic experience.[14] They see it as a preeminent mark of aesthetic experience that it is detached from our ordinary interests and concerns. Nietzsche is incredulous about this move: "If our aestheticians never tire of throwing into the balance in Kant's favor that under the enchantment of beauty one can look at *even* robeless female statues 'without interest,' then certainly one may laugh a little at their expense:—the experiences of *artists* in connection with this sensitive point are 'more interesting,' and Pygmalion was in any case *not* necessarily an 'unaesthetic human being'" (GM, III: 6). Indeed, in Schopenhauer's case, this disinterestedness (in part, anyway) is supposed to explain the *value* of aesthetic experience, since aesthetic experience is thought to still our desires and thus free us from the pains of willing. Schopenhauer's account of the aesthetic, Nietzsche says, is, like Kant's, beset with the "fat worm of basic error," and rests on an idiosyncratic generalization: "Schopenhauer described *one* effect of the beautiful, the will-calming one—is it even a regularly occurring one? Stendhal, as noted, a no less sensual but more happily-formed nature than Schopenhauer, emphasizes a different effect of the beautiful: "the beautiful *promises* happiness"—to him it is precisely the *excitement of the will* ("of interest") by the beautiful that seems to be the fact of the matter" (GM, III: 6).[15] This focus on disinterestedness is a sign that Kant, Schopenhauer, and many others are in thrall to ascetic ideals that seek the erasure of the animal self and the bodily drives. Their conception of aesthetic experience is one channel this asceticism takes.

---

[14] Zangwill (2014).

[15] For a contemporary elaboration of this idea, see Nehamas (2007).

The Case of Wagner and Physiological Aesthetics

Nietzsche, the great celebrator of creativity, desperately wanted to be a creative artist himself. But he always stood in Wagner's shadow, whether in championing him, trying to imitate him, or in a furiously overwrought, though often insightful way, denouncing him. The attempt at Wagnerian imitation led Nietzsche into his most serious aesthetic (mis)adventure, his philosophical novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. After Wagner's death in 1883, Nietzsche announced in a letter that he was to a considerable extent Wagner's "heir."[16] He wanted to follow in Wagner's footsteps to create a work that would fuse art and philosophy and foster a new mythology. But Nietzsche's literary talents lay elsewhere. He simply, it seems to me, did not have the requisite creative skill to pull this novel off, much as he tried, nor the self-knowledge and honesty to appreciate his failure, instead praising it to the skies in his autobiography as the greatest gift bestowed on humanity (EH, "Preface," 4). Nietzsche is much more in his element in writing beautiful, penetrating aphorisms and essays. When Nietzsche strays from these forms, he is, a few choice lines aside, a dilettantish poetaster. Compared with the geniuses in the German canon in the decades either side of him—Goethe, Hölderlin, Wagner, Rilke, Mann, Broch, Musil—Nietzsche, as a creative artist, simply does not rate. At his best, he could be a real master of prose style, imagery, allusion, humor, and other literary devices. But in *Zarathustra* he goes grotesquely overboard and produces what, in my view, is an ill-judged, pompously-inflated, crudely-didactic and nearly unreadable confection of outlandish mock-biblical mumbo jumbo. It has of course unaccountably appealed to many, including a number of significant writers and artists, but whatever we make of it, we need to keep in mind that his tirades against Wagner are shot through with profound envy, as well as with an ambivalent admiration, which he occasionally allows himself to express in backhanded compliments: "But I have never found a work as dangerously fascinating, with as weird and sweet an infinity, as *Tristan*,—I have looked through all the arts in vain…The world is poor for anyone who was never sick enough for this 'voluptuousness of hell'" (*EH*, "Clever," 6).[17]

This theme of the sickness of Wagnerian art and its admirers is pursued at length in one of Nietzsche's final books *The Case of Wagner*, written, to drive home its point, in the form of a mock medical case report. Wagner had at this point been dead for 5 years, but the book reads as if Nietzsche is needling his former mentor beyond the grave in a number of respects, describing him as a hypnotist (CW, 5), a "magician" (CW, "Postscript"), a "clever rattlesnake" (CW, 3) and a "sickness" instead of a man (CW, 5). Several of Nietzsche's most *ad hominem* points are barbed inside references for those in the know: He characterizes Wagner as "actor" (CW, 8) and a man of the theater (Wagner inveighed against both), as French (CW, 4-5) (Wagner thought the French were shallow and incapable of *echt* German profundity), and insinuates he is the bastard son of a Jewish father (CW, "Postscript") (very unlikely to be true, but Wagner was a notoriously vocal anti-Semite, who secretly and irrationally feared this might be his parentage). Yet if we put aside these low blows, there are several more general aesthetic points that Nietzsche is making here, some of which are expansions on previous themes.

[16] Letter to Heinrich Köselitz, 19 Feb. 1883

[17] See Ridley (2008); Scruton (2014) for further on the Nietzsche-Wagner connection.

One of these concerns a certain psychology of emotional impoverishment that hopes to find compensation for its shortcomings in art. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes: "Regarding all aesthetic values I now avail myself of this main distinction: I ask in every instance: 'is it hunger or superabundance that has here become creative?'" (GS, 370). This theme is crucial in his work on Wagner as well. Wagner caters to stunted audiences who need artificial stimulants through his art to awaken them emotionally and thus are drawn to his works with the hunger of addicts (CW, 5-6).

A second of these themes is a continuation of his earlier celebration of unity and integration. Nietzsche focuses considerable attention in this late period on *décadence* and analyses it, at bottom, in terms of a failure of unity: "life does not reside in the totality any more. The word becomes sovereign and jumps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and blots out the meaning of the page, the page comes to life at the expense of the whole—the whole is not whole any more (CW, 7).[18] This sort of *décadence* is allegedly a feature of Wagner's work, but it is part of a more general cultural problem, of which Wagner's work is a microcosm.[19]

Nietzsche's reflections on *décadence* shade into the more biologically-twinged idea of "degeneration" {*Entartung*]. Earlier in his career, Nietzsche is more even-handed about degeneration, seeing in it a potential for possible "ennoblement" (HH, 224). But in his later works, Nietzsche tends to emphasize the need thoroughly to extirpate it (e.g., TI, "Skirmishes," 36) to preserve the organism. This is part and parcel of his aesthetic reflection taking an apparently more crudely physiological and biological turn. The crucial aesthetic standard is whether something promotes "life," or is injurious to it, with "life" functioning as the crucial standard of evaluation.[20] Does Wagner's art literally destroy nerves and make us sick, or is this a metaphor of some kind? Does art literally enhance vitality? Whether or not this is plausible, Nietzsche may well have thought this.[21]

This biological turn in Nietzsche's later work is connected with a sort of anthropocentric aesthetics. The standard of the beautiful bears a close connection to humans. "Nothing is beautiful, except man alone: all aesthetics rests upon this naïveté, which is its *first* truth. Let us immediately add the second: nothing is ugly except the degenerating man —and with this the realm of aesthetic judgment is circumscribed" (TI, "Skirmishes," 20). Now Nietzsche does call this a *naïveté* [Naivetät], but he apparently does not mean this pejoratively, but instead as what people would (and in fact do) think when they are not corrupted by accreted aesthetic artificialities. This is underscored in the previous passage, where he confirms essentially the same point: "In the beautiful, man posits himself as the measure of perfection; in special cases, he worships himself in it…Man believes the world itself to be overloaded with beauty—and he forgets himself as the cause of this. He alone has presented the world with beauty—alas, only with a very human, all-too-human

---

[18] Nietzsche borrows—indeed plagiarizes—this formulation from the French theorist Paul Bourget, whose *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883) Nietzsche read.

[19] Huddleston (2019a).

[20] Stern (2020). Cf. Richardson (2004), Ch.

[21] Cf., Moore (2002)

beauty." (TI, "Skirmishes," 19). How far one can take this idea is another matter, but Nietzsche does seem to subscribe to it.

Conclusion: Nietzsche's Influence

Nietzsche's influence on art and artists was extensive. Figures such as Mann, Rilke, Joyce, Proust, Hesse, Yeats, and many others took sustenance from Nietzsche. But Nietzsche has had a limited reception in anglophone philosophical aesthetics. This is partly because he is not occupied, at least in terms of giving a systematic picture, with the standard philosophical questions, such as the definition of art, or the objectivity of aesthetic judgment. But as I've sought to show in this article, Nietzsche has important suggestions concerning some of the main philosophical topics that continue to be discussed today: artistic value and aesthetic experience, creativity, the connection between art and truth, the nature of tragic experience, the connection between aesthetics and evolutionary biology and science. As often with Nietzsche, we are left not with a systematic and worked-out picture, but with tantalizing suggestions that we might further develop.

Bibliography:

Works by Nietzsche are cited by section number using the following abbreviations and translations, which I have modified where I've thought appropriate.

BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. W. Kaufmann
BT = *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. R. Speirs
CW = *The Case of Wagner*, trans. J. Norman
EH = *Ecce Homo*, trans. J. Norman
ENB = *Writings from the Early Notebooks*, trans. L. Löb, ed. R. Geuss and A. Nehamas.
GM = *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. M. Clark and A. Swenson.
GS = *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann
HH = *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale
TI= Twilight of the Idols, trans. J. Norman
WP = *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale

In works that comprise several individual essays, after the abbreviation is, if applicable, the essay number (as a Roman numeral) and section number (as an arabic numeral). For example, GM, I:2 is *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay I, Section 2. In works that include titled main sections, I include a key word for that section, followed by subsection numbers, if applicable. For example, TI, "Socrates," 1 is the *Twilight of the Idols* section "The Problem of Socrates," sub-section 1.

Secondary Literature:

For an overview of Nietzsche's aesthetics, Young (1992) and Ridley (2008) are a good place to begin. For a scholarly treatment of the background of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Silk and Stern (1983) and von Reibnitz (1992) have a wealth of information. For different philosophical issues in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Staten (1988), Geuss (1999), Han-Pile (2006), Anderson (2009),

Gemes and Sykes (2014), Janaway (2014), Clark (2015), Stoll (2019), Ridley (2019) are particularly helpful sources. For Nietzsche on self-creation, Nehamas (1985) is the classic point of reference. Nietzsche's later aesthetics, centered around notions of life, is well-discussed in Richardson (2004) and Stern (2020).

Anderson, R.L., "Nietzsche on Redemption and Transfiguration," in *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*. Ed. J. Landy and M. Saler (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Beiser, F. *The Romantic Imperative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Came, D. "The Aesthetic Justification of Existence," In *A Companion to Nietzsche*. Ed. K. Ansell-Pearson. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

Clark, M. "Deconstructing *The Birth of Tragedy*." In *Nietzsche on Ethics and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Gemes, K and Sykes, C. "Nietzsche's Illusion." In *Nietzsche on Art and Life*. Ed. D. Came. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Geuss, R., "Art and Theodicy." In *Morality, Culture, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Han-Pile, B. "Nietzsche's Metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy.*" *European Journal of Phiosophy* Vol. 14, No. 3, 2006, 373-403.

Heller, E. *The Importance of Nietzsche*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Huddleston, Andrew. *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. {Huddleston 2019a].

Huddleston, A. "Nietzsche on Magnanimity, Greatness, and Greatness of Soul." In *The Measure of Greatness: Philosophers on Magnanimity*. Ed. S. Vasalou. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. [Huddleston 2019b].

Janaway, C. "Beauty is False, Truth Ugly: Nietzsche on Art and Life." In *Nietzsche on Art and Life*. Ed. D. Came. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Leiter, B., "The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche," in *Willing and Nothinness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator*. Ed. C. Janaway. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Moore, G. *Nietzsche, Biology, Metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Nehamas, A. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Nehamas, A. *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Nehamas, A. "Nietzsche, Intention, Action," *European Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 26, No. 2, 2018, 685-701.

Pippin, R. "Truth and Lies in the Early Nietzsche." In *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Richardson, J. *Nietzsche's New Darwinism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Ridley, A. *Nietzsche on Art*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.

Ridley, A. "Nietzsche, Nature, Nurture." *European Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 25, No. 1, 2017, 129-143.

Ridley, A. "Nietzsche on Tragedy: First and Last Thoughts." *Monist* Vol. 102, No. 3, 2019, 316-330.

Scruton, R. "Nietzsche on Wagner." *Nietzsche on Art and Life*. Ed. D. Came. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Silk, M.S. and Stern, J.P., *Nietzsche on Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Staten, H. *Nietzsche's Voice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Stern, T. *Nietzsche's Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Stoll, T. "Nietzsche and Schiller on Aesthetic Semblance" *Monist* Vol. 102, No. 3, 2019, 331-348.

Tanner, M. "Introduction" to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. S. Whitside (London: Penguin, 1992).

von Reibnitz, B. *Ein Kommentar zu Friedrich Nietzsche, "Die Geburt der Tragodie aus dem Geiste der Musik"* (Kap. 1-12). Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 1992.

Young, J. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Zangwill, N. "Nietzsche on Kant on Disinterestedness," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* Vol. 30, No. 1, 2013.