

## On Megill and *The Birth of Tragedy*

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### Introduction

Nietzsche is often viewed—and correctly I think—as a social critic, exposing the *ressentiment* and “life-negating” rejection of this world that lies at the heart of our Socratic and Christian heritage. The noble, healthy instinct to life shifts in favor of a plebeian, decadent denial of the instincts—a morality that despises the body as the seat of all misery and error. Dialectics, the Socratic equation of reason-virtue-happiness, is a last resort in the battle against the instincts, against the noble: a case of plebeian *ressentiment*. This mistrust of the passions, a spurning of this life, of this world, begat a turn toward the ideal: a turn toward nothingness, a turn toward Being. Philosophers desired knowledge of the unchanging in that which changes, the necessary in what appears contingent, the eternal. The definition of Being is thus the definition of nothingness; in order for something to Be, to have Being, it must literally be no-thing. It is no great surprise then, that the philosophers never found Being, that Being never manifested itself. “‘There must be mere appearance, there must be some deception which prevents us from perceiving that which has being: where is the deceiver? We have found him,’ they cry ecstatically; ‘it is the senses! These senses, which are so immoral in other ways too, deceive us concerning the *true* world’” (TI, p. 480). Essentially, that which had no-being, was no-thing, was elevated to that of the highest Being (ultimately, God), and provided the grounds for repudiating the senses, the most real thing about us, the basis of any healthy morality.<sup>1</sup>

### On Megill and *The Birth of Tragedy*

Just as Nietzsche inscribes the metaphysical tradition within his own “life-affirming” perspective, dismantling the Platonic tradition’s quest for Truth and its promise of a privileged perspective, contemporary thinkers have attempted to disempower Nietzsche’s critique by subsuming it within their own metaphysical framework. Allan Megill’s treatment of Nietzsche

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<sup>1</sup> See “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” TI, 479-484.

in his book *Prophets of Extremity*, is such an instance. Megill sees Nietzsche as an “aestheticist,” and under that rubric appropriates Nietzsche within a metaphysical perspective that pours the foundation for his interpretation of, and objection to, Nietzsche’s project. This move fails, however, not because Nietzsche’s cannot be out-flanked, or redescribed, but because Megill’s attempt to turn the tables on Nietzsche lacks persuasive textual support. Megill often gets Nietzsche importantly right—there is a sense in which “aestheticist” is an appropriate label for thinkers like Nietzsche—but once Megill defines the aestheticist’s position, he situates it within a world of appearance and reality, a world that gives Nietzsche’s thought implications that lead Megill to reject that position. The dispute, then, hinges on how Megill situates the aestheticist space: Megill starts off on the wrong foot by wedging the aestheticist “realm” between the “really real” and “mere appearance”; caught between these two realms, Nietzsche cannot ignore, but cannot access, “reality.” This notion of Nietzsche’s commitment to an inaccessible reality, however, is the result of Megill’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s Apollo-Dionysus duality in *The Birth of Tragedy*. I will argue that Megill’s interpretation of Apollo and Dionysus is an unfounded oversimplification that fails to account for what is most significant about *The Birth of Tragedy*, namely, its explanation of the development of tragedy through the union of Apollo and Dionysus.

Prior to Megill’s interpretation of *The Birth of Tragedy*, his conception of the aestheticist already bears the seeds of his metaphysical determination of Nietzsche’s text:

As it is usually employed, the word *aestheticism* denotes an enclosure within a self-contained realm of aesthetic objects and sensations, and hence also denotes a separation from the “real world” of nonaesthetic objects. Here, however, I am using the word in a sense that is almost diametrically opposed to its usual sense. I am using it to refer not to the condition of being enclosed within the limited territory of the aesthetic, but rather to an attempt to expand the aesthetic to embrace the whole of reality. To put it another way, I am using it to refer to a tendency to see “art” or “language” or “discourse” or “text” as constituting the primary realm of human experience (Megill, p. 2).

In spite of the fact that Megill is using “aestheticism” to denote the broadening of the aesthetic to the exclusion of the nonaesthetic, rejecting the traditional sense of the term which entailed an enclosure separated from

reality, he nonetheless employs the aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction to make his point; Megill places his definition of aestheticism within a perspective where the aesthetic-nonaesthetic distinction is very important. Implicit in his conception of the aestheticist position is a distinction between “the primary realm of human experience” and “the real world.” In expanding the realm of aesthetic objects to encompass *all experience*, Megill nevertheless retains the notion of nonaesthetic objects *beyond* our experience. These inaccessible nonaesthetic objects remain the measuring stick of truth, and lead Megill to see us as “cut off from ‘things’ and confined to a confrontation with ‘words’ alone” (Megill, p. 2).

Megill situates himself outside of the aestheticist position, a move which places “truth” beyond the reach of the aestheticist. Megill, and “truth,” are outside, casting a critical eye inward on the foolhardy aestheticist who seems unconcerned with the way things really are. This perspective is key to the distinction between his project in *Prophets of Extremity* and the interpretations others have advanced:

Foucault, Derrida, and their followers have already done much to suggest the importance of this [aestheticist] aspect of Nietzsche’s project. But they do so from inside the aestheticist perspective, and hence from a standpoint that is certainly not concerned with “correctness” in interpretation. I propose here to cast a scholarly eye on the Nietzschean beginnings of aestheticism (Megill, p. 34).

Foucault, Derrida, and others have occupied the aestheticist perspective precisely because they deny any place to stand outside of that perspective. Megill’s position, from which he criticizes the aestheticist, is constructed from a belief in a “true” world, a world beyond all redescription, a belief aestheticists whole-heartedly deny. Megill’s preoccupation with the “true” world is supposedly what distinguishes his “scholarly” view from the view of alleged “aestheticists” like Foucault and Derrida.

Megill’s interpretation of the Apollo-Dionysus duality in *The Birth of Tragedy* ultimately relegates Nietzsche to Megill’s line-up of “aestheticists.” According to Megill, Dionysus is the symbol of immediate vision, genuine knowledge, the “really Real.” Apollo, however, is the primary realm of human experience, the veil which protects us from the harsh reality of the Dionysian. The Apollonian constructions that mediate

our understanding never allow us a direct and unmediated glimpse of reality, but are nonetheless necessary for our survival. As Megill explains,

Nietzsche sees immediacy as unattainable, but still desired it; he views concepts as undesirable, but also as necessary. This puts him in an odd position, opposing the reduction of concepts to immediate vision and intuition, but at the same time refusing to forget vision and intuition when dealing with the world of concepts (Megill, p. 37).

So long as we share Megill's conception of the Dionysian as an inaccessible reality, Nietzsche remains in a difficult position indeed: with truth out of reach, with no hope of obtaining genuine knowledge, he is confined to a frivolous, inconsequential realm of play, frolicking in Apollonian illusion.

Essential to Megill's construction of this dilemma is his association of Apollo and Dionysus—which he takes as tokens for a “mediate-immediate” distinction—with a parallel distinction between skepticism and certainty. To say that one is in a particular relation to the “immediate,” according to Megill, is to make an epistemological claim: statements are more or less true to the extent that they tap directly into un-mediated “reality.” The aestheticist's predicament, then, is cashed out in terms of a simultaneous commitment to, and refusal of, Dionysian immediacy-as-certainty. This epistemological twist on the mediate-immediate distinction, however, is not supported by *The Birth of Tragedy*. Although there are several instances where Nietzsche describes Apollo and Dionysus in terms of “mediation” and “immediacy,” his use of those terms does not signify a concurrent distinction between the uncertainty of mediation and the *certainty* of the immediate. For example:

Among the peculiar art effects of musical tragedy we had to emphasize an Apollonian *illusion* by means of which we were supposed to be saved from the immediate unity with Dionysian music, while our musical excitement could discharge itself in an Apollonian field and in relation to a visible intermediary world that had been interposed (BT, p. 139).

While it is evident that some kind of mediate-immediate distinction is at work in this passage, Megill's conclusion that this situation has somehow cut us off from “reality” is unfounded. In fact, Megill's version of the mediate-immediate distinction is not born out by Nietzsche's use of Apollo and Dionysus in the remainder of this passage. As Nietzsche continues from above:

At the time we thought that we had observed how precisely through this discharge the intermediary world of the action on the stage, and the drama in general had been made visible and intelligible from the inside to a degree that in all the other Apollonian art remains unattained. Where the Apollonian receives wings from the spirit of music and soars, we thus found the highest intensification of its powers, and in this fraternal union of Apollo and Dionysus we had to recognize the apex of the Apollonian as well as the Dionysian aims of art (BT, p. 139).

Megill's interpretation of Nietzsche's mediate-immediate distinction as an appearance-reality distinction makes it difficult to understand how Nietzsche could use that distinction—some kind of interaction between appearance and reality—to explain the mutual intensification of Apollonian and Dionysian powers peculiar to Attic tragedy. The inability to account for Nietzsche's use of the duo to explain the development of tragedy is a serious failing of Megill's interpretation, for it is the development of art, and tragedy in particular, through the union of Apollo and Dionysus that is the principal theme of *The Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>2</sup> Here, we would do well to abandon Megill's interpretation, and try to understand how, together, Apollo and Dionysus represent not only the dynamics of the dramatic dithyramb, but the tragic world-view that gave it birth.

According to Nietzsche, the ancient Greeks' acute sensitivity to what they "knew and felt [to be] the terror and horror of existence" (BT, p. 42) was the origin of Attic tragedy, and could be explained most profoundly by using the symbolism of Apollo and Dionysus. The relationship, however, between the horrors of existence and the Apollo-Dionysus duality is not, as Megill would have us believe, as simple as to say that Dionysus represents this horrible reality while Apollo succeeds in covering it up. For the ancient Greeks, existence was horrible because it was, at bottom, an unbearable contradiction—a contradiction fully represented only by Apollo and Dionysus *in union*. In part, as intoxication, Dionysus represents the unity of all existence prior to individuation—the breakdown of inhibitions, the loss of all existence prior to individuation (BT, p. 36). At the same time, however, this Dionysian unity is necessarily divided into individuals. Apollo represents the delimitation of Dionysus: "this apotheo-

<sup>2</sup> "We now approach the real goal of our investigation, which is directed toward knowledge of the Dionysian-Apollonian genius and its art product, or at least toward some feeling for and understanding of this mystery of union" (BT, p. 48).

sis of individuation knows but one law—the individual, i.e., the delimiting of the boundaries of the individual, *measure* in the Hellenic sense” (BT, p. 46). Apollo and Dionysus, then, are inextricably bound together as they symbolize the primordial contradiction of existence:

the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness (BT, p. 74).

Dionysus is whole yet necessarily manifest through Apollonian individuation; and Apollo’s “illusion,” the way he demarcates the individual, is always merely another form of the same Dionysian unity. Arising from this contradiction, tragedy provided the illusion that inspired the hope that the pain of individuation would somehow be resolved.

The tragic art inspired by the horror of existence in fact has its origin in that contradiction, and retains Apollo and Dionysus as the representatives of its fundamental elements: the tragic myth and the satyr chorus.<sup>3</sup> Tragedy’s peculiar art-effect is the result of beholding the Apollonian myth that grows out of the primordial unity represented by the satyr chorus. The chorus shuts out the everyday world of individuation, and lulls the tragic spectator into an identification with primordial unity—the wholeness prior to individuation. But this is dangerous, since a return to everyday existence after a glimpse into the unity of everything would result in a listless, will-negating apathy towards life: nausea at individuation.<sup>4</sup> But it is at this point that the tragic myth intervenes to halt our slide into oblivion. The Apollonian drama, the tragic myth, is intermediary only in the sense that it intervenes to prevent the audience of Attic tragedy from completely identifying with the primal unity that the music of the satyr chorus symbolized. When the Apollonian myth is viewed by the tragic spectator, in his susceptibility to the music of

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<sup>3</sup>“Let us recall our surprise at the chorus and the tragic hero of that tragedy, neither of which we could reconcile without customs any more than with tradition—till we rediscovered this duality itself as the origin and essence of Greek tragedy, as the expression of two interwoven artistic impulses, *the Apollonian and the Dionysian...*” (BT, p. 81).

<sup>4</sup>“For the rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence contains, while it lasts, a *lethargic* element in which all personal experiences of the past become immersed. This chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality. But as soon as this everyday reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such, with nausea: an ascetic, will-negating mood is the fruit of these states...” (BT, pp. 59-60).

the chorus and the unity it symbolized, it is seen in a clarity and intensity that is absent in all other strictly Apollonian art-forms. In the tragic myth, the destruction of the tragic hero both places our sympathy in the individual, making individuation something with which we can live,<sup>5</sup> and reminds the tragic spectator of the unity that lies beneath individuation which the tragic hero prepares to join through his destruction.<sup>6</sup> This latter effect, the tragic myth's suggestions of a unity that lies beneath it, gives the tragic spectator the urge to tear the myth aside and behold the primordial unity. This tragic effect is what Nietzsche calls the experience of "having to see at the same time that...[one] also longed to transcend all seeing..." (BT, p. 140). This peculiar tension has its roots in the character of existence as contradiction: intensified by the satyr chorus, the tragic myth suggests a unity beneath individuation such that the spectator wishes to get beyond the pain of individuation and behold the blissful primordial unity; the unity, however, is only manifest through individuals, and to do without the myth would be to simultaneously do without the unity—one must endure individuation to experience its fundamental unity.

To be sure, passages that discuss aspects of this phenomenon of "having to see but longing to get beyond all seeing," passages that ally Dionysus with a "primordial unity" hidden behind Apollo's veil, seem to support Megill's interpretation of the Apollo-Dionysus opposition as an opposition between appearance and reality:

Now, ["under the charm of the Dionysian,"<sup>7</sup>] 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 (BT, p. 37).

Megill wants this passage to identify the Dionysian with an independent unity underlying manifold Apollonian veils, a substratum revealed after those veils have been torn aside. Central to my dispute with Megill is the

<sup>5</sup>"Thus the Apollonian tears us out of the Dionysian universality and lets us find delight in individuals; it attaches our pity to them, and by means of them it satisfies our sense of beauty which longs for great and sublime forms..." (BT, p. 128).

<sup>6</sup>"On the other hand, by means of the same tragic myth, in the person of the tragic hero, it knows how to redeem us from the greedy thirst for this existence, and with an admonishing gesture it reminds us of another existence and a higher pleasure for which the struggling hero prepares himself by means of his destruction..." (BT, p. 125).

<sup>7</sup>(BT, p. 37), Nietzsche's words, top of the same paragraph.

disagreement over how to interpret Nietzsche's notion of the "primordial unity." Megill takes it to be Nietzsche's way of talking about the really real, the thing-in-itself. But first of all, as it has already been stressed, an interpretation that delimits and relegates Apollo and Dionysus to two separate spheres cannot account for the interaction that explains the tragic world-view and its art-form. By interpreting the "primordial unity" independently of Apollonian individuation, Megill is guilty of an unwarranted abstraction; Apollo and Dionysus are meaningless without each other. And secondly, we can refer to persuasive textual support that indicates that the "primordial unity" was, for Nietzsche, only one more illusion:

It is an eternal phenomenon: the insatiable will always finds a way to detain its creatures in life and compel them to live on by means of an illusion spread over things. One is chained by the Socratic love of knowledge and the delusion of being able thereby to heal the eternal wound of existence; another is ensnared by art's seductive veil of beauty fluttering before his eyes; still another by the metaphysical comfort that *beneath the whirl of phenomena eternal life flows on indestructibly*—(BT, pp. 109-110; my emphasis).

So, not only does Megill's interpretation of Apollo and Dionysus as appearance and reality fail to account for Nietzsche's union of that opposition to explain Attic tragedy, but it also seems that Nietzsche explicitly speaks against an interpretation of the primordial unity as a "thing-in-itself."

The underpinning to Megill's assignment of Apollo as mediator is the notion that somewhere beneath this world of appearance lurks the "thing-in-itself." Megill's commitment to the appearance-reality distinction, a distinction that posits the "thing-in-itself" as the standard of truth lying beneath mere appearance, casts Apollo as a mediator that obscures. Megill's perspective sees Apollo as necessary, since we cannot bear Dionysian reality, but unfortunate because we would really like to get at the "thing-in-itself." Nietzsche, however, in rejecting the notion of the "thing-in-itself," has no grounds to consider Apollo "necessary but unfortunate." He makes this clear in *On Truth and Lie in an Extramoral Sense*, written in the same period as *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is Nietzsche's treatment of concepts in *OTL* that Megill takes as evidence of Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with Apollonian illusion and his subsequent entrapment in the aestheticist's dilemma. According to Megill, Nietzsche denies both our capacity to behold



Dionysian immediacy and the adequacy of concepts for representing the "thing-in-itself"—in neither realm, Apollonian or Dionysian, can we hope to obtain genuine knowledge. What Nietzsche objects to in *On Truth and Lie*, however, is not the inadequacy of concepts to represent the "thing in itself," but the metaphysician who forgets that concepts are based on arbitrary differentiations and that the "thing-in-itself" is only the abstraction of these conventional designations from their consequences.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche's point is not that we are cut off from the "thing-in-itself," but that the "thing-in-itself" is a nonsensical and useless notion.

Megill finds Nietzsche's rejection of the "thing-in-itself," Nietzsche's failure to distinguish between appearance and reality, a reckless and untenable position. As Megill so clearly states:

one can call everything "illusion" if one wishes, just as one can call everything "disclosure" or "text." But this does not abolish the distinction between, say, an interpretation of the experience of being run over by a truck and the experience itself—a distinction which every language, if it is to function on something more than a purely fantastic level, must somehow accommodate (Megill, p. 42).

In calling for a distinction between the "interpretation" of an experience and the experience "itself," Megill once again draws the lines that oppose his position to the aestheticist's. Of course, aestheticists will deny that such a distinction needs to be made. Nietzsche's point is simply that no experience occurs independently of a perspective, and hence independently of an

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<sup>8</sup>"That is to say, a uniformly valid and binding designation is invented for things, and this legislation of language likewise establishes the first laws of truth" (OTL, p. 81). Truth, according to Nietzsche, only exists as a convention of language, with purely practical origins; it is to one's advantage to use the "true" designations in appropriate ways because they facilitate co-existence with others. "What arbitrary differentiations! What one-sided preferences, first for this, then for that property of a thing! The various languages placed side by side show that with words it is never a question of truth, never a question of adequate expression; otherwise there would not be so many languages. The 'thing in itself' (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences, would be) is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for" (OTL, p. 82). The "thing in itself," the pure truth apart from its consequences (which is a convention of language apart from its consequences) is not worth striving for because we only use "true" designations in order to take advantage of their consequences. In Megill's interpretation, it seems he is taking Nietzsche's use of "pure truth" in this passage to refer to a true world really "out there," not worth striving for only because we cannot attain it. In light of Nietzsche's genealogy of truth on preceding pages, however, Megill's interpretation is less than convincing.

interpretation.<sup>9</sup> One can talk about an experience “in itself” if one wants to, but it will at best only be an abstraction from some particular experience. The aestheticist does not see a need to distinguish between trucks and interpretations of trucks; there is, fundamentally, just one kind of truck: the kind you don’t want to get hit by. In each case of “being run over by a truck,” there is someone being run over. And that person is probably just as dead as the person who gets hit by the truck “itself.” Megill, however, can’t help but take the notion of “interpretation” lightly, as if an interpretation were merely a mirage that fades as it approaches. From Megill’s perspective, Nietzsche is cut off from reality, dancing foolishly in a realm of play at his own peril, ignoring the real world in a fanciful idealism. Some day, Megill seems to hope, that truck will come around the corner—not some wispy interpretation of a truck, but the “Truck-itself” in all its weighty reality—and flatten a deserving Nietzsche who was playing in the middle of the street.

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am employing the distinction between “perspective” and “interpretation” pointed out in Alan Schrift’s book, *Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation*. Nietzsche’s “perspectivalism” is his recognition that all experiences are inextricable from a particular point of view, or perspective. No one has an “objective” view, a privileged perspective. “Interpretation” refers to what each of us does with our particular perspective, how we assign meaning to those experiences.

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