

TRAGEDY, HISTORY, AND ECSTASY: CONCERNING NIETZSCHE'S “UNTIMELY” IDEAS ON AUTHENTIC SELFHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that there exists a specific philosophical connection between Nietzsche's thoughts on tragedy in *Birth of Tragedy* and his thoughts on history in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” The paper hopes to enrich one's appreciation of Nietzsche's early ideas on authentic selfhood by showing the relation between Dionysiac ecstasy and unhistorical consciousness. A postscript in the last part of the paper examines Philippine folk religiosity within the framework of the aforementioned connection between Dionysiac ecstasy and unhistorical consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Attic tragedy; Dionysiac; Philippine folk religiosity; Socratism; tragic knowledge; unhistorical sense

“In knowledge mankind has a beautiful means of downfall.”

—Nietzsche, *Notebook 19 (Writings from the Early Notebooks)*

The two works by Nietzsche that are examined in this paper were published during his early period. *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* was completed in 1872, while the short essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” was written in 1874 as a second chapter of a compilation of four works from 1873–76 entitled *Unfashionable Observations*, sometimes

called *Untimely Meditations. The Birth of Tragedy* has received more attention from scholars than any of the four works in the *Untimely Meditations*, and there has not been a discussion of this work's connection to "On the Uses and Disadvantages."¹ The goal of this paper, then, is to propose that there exists a specific philosophical connection between Nietzsche's thoughts on tragedy in *Birth of Tragedy* and his thoughts on history in "On the Uses and Disadvantages." Ultimately, the paper aims to enrich one's appreciation of Nietzsche's early ideas on authentic selfhood. Using his reflections on the creative contradiction between Apolline and Dionysiac tendencies and on the meaning of unhistorical consciousness, this essay will show that Nietzsche's conception of selfhood is radical, especially when it is viewed against the backdrop of western philosophical and scientific tradition up until his time. For Nietzsche, the rapturous unity and simultaneous dissolution of the self, achieved through its acquiring an unhistorical disposition toward life, is the locus of tragic wisdom, which is more valuable and more truthful than any other form of truth.² Although Nietzsche's critique of traditional philosophical views of the self, represented by the Socratic figure, is not novel in the context of Nietzsche scholarship, the link that this paper makes between tragic wisdom elaborated in *The Birth of Tragedy* and Nietzsche's idea of cultivating an unhistorical sense of history discussed in "On the Uses and Disadvantages"

¹Even Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins, in their chronological overview of Nietzsche's works in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, make no mention of any direct philosophical or ideological connection between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*. My own research on the topic has revealed no direct scholarly attempt to bridge the ideas found in the two works. Robert Pippin uses the contrast between the tragic and Socratic point of view in order to examine the works of the 1870s. However, he does not directly propose any direct relationship between "tragic wisdom" and "unhistorical consciousness." See Robert Pippin, "Truth and Lies in the Early Nietzsche," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 11 (1996), accessed May 29, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717641>.

²Nietzsche was not the first and only thinker to contemplate the relevance of "tragedy" in fashioning a more meaningful and authentic human life. Some notable thinkers who also dwelled on the topic are Schelling, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Camus, and Heidegger. See Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013). It is beyond the scope of this exposition to present a comparative analysis of these thinkers' ideas on the topic. Suffice it to say that Nietzsche owed a great debt to Hölderlin and Schopenhauer in forming his own ideas on the matter. Nietzsche's treatment of the concept of tragedy in *The Birth* has proven to be the most seminal especially considering its influence on postmodern theories on identity and selfhood. Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari are all influenced by Nietzsche's tragic vision of a non-unified or multiple self. See Robert Hollinger, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994), 113–15.

is a relatively new path of understanding that may open possibilities for deepening our appreciation for Nietzsche's early thought.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SOCRATIC ENTERPRISE

The philosophical tradition to which Nietzsche was reacting can be traced back to Socrates. Traditionally understood, Socratic wisdom represents the veneration of reason that progressively overcomes intellectual and existential despair by dialectical logic. The rise of reason as the sole standard for metaphysical and moral evaluation was specifically unique to the Greeks during Socrates' and Plato's time.³ The point of departure was the dictum "Know thyself," that is, willful reflexivity, which then extends the horizons of subjectivity and of being itself. Nietzsche remarks, however, that such a well-defined and seemingly unobjectionable foundation for judgment perhaps conceals some sort of Socratic hubris. He writes:

The sharpest words in favour of that new, unheard-of esteem for knowledge and insight were those spoken by Socrates when he said that he was the only man of his acquaintance who confessed to *knowing nothing*; on his critical wanderings through Athens, by contrast, when he called on the greatest politicians, orators, poets, and artists, he encountered the same illusion of knowledge everywhere. He registered with astonishment the fact that all those famous men lacked even a secure and correct understanding of their profession, and performed it only by instinct. "Only by instinct": the phrase goes to the heart and centre of the Socratic tendency. With these words Socratism condemns existing art and existing ethics in equal measure; . . . it sees a lack of insight and the power of delusion, and it concludes from this lack that what exists is inwardly wrong and objectionable. Socrates believed that he was obliged to correct existence, starting from this single point . . .⁴

Put another way, the entire Socratic enterprise is grounded upon the forceful and violent disintegration of *doxa* by *episteme*. For Socrates, unquestioned beliefs and customs founded on tradition must be continually and stubbornly

³See William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 80-81.

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 65-66. Hereafter, this work will be cited as *The Birth*.

interrogated by dialectical logic. Socratic wisdom is decisive, incisive, and derisive; it confronts life (as we are used to viewing it) with remarkable earnestness and purpose, seeking to tame this wily and stubborn beast with shackles forged from conscious dialectical reflection. In contrast, the works of tragic poets, because derived from divine inspiration, are incapable of bringing order to an otherwise disorderly *polis*. Socrates's view, expressed in the *Ion*, is that "poetry, that at least which impresses, is produced out of a state of 'Dionysiac ecstasy' in which the poet is possessed by the gods, by the muses in particular. Divine possession bypasses his reason so that he is 'beside himself' (553d–535a)."⁵ From the Socratic perspective, the frenzy and chaos present in the works of the tragic poets are communal distractions that seduce the citizens away from the one and true activity fit for all human beings—the rational contemplation of The Good.

The progeny of the Socratic view is science, which reached an apex in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, as Robert Hollinger explains, was an era that strongly advocated the use of instrumental/scientific reason as the ground for structuring a rational and thereby just society, a position highly indebted to Socratic rationalism.⁶ For most of the highly regarded intellectuals of that era, "Only a society based on science and universal values is truly free and rational; only its inhabitants can be happy."⁷ The Enlightenment, Socratic rationalism's most distinguished historical offspring, had liberated Europe from the medieval shackles of blind adherence to religious dogma; however, it had also arguably produced a pale, anesthetized population that was spiritually destitute. As Robert Wicks expounds, the prevailing opinion was that the contemporary culture was "sick and weak," that organized

⁵Young, 5.

⁶Robert Hollinger, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994), 7. To further clarify, in the introduction to his edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Raymond Geuss explains, "The good man (and, on Socrates' reading of it, this means the man who was leading the good life) was the man who had a certain kind of knowledge. To be sure, the 'knowledge' the real historical Socrates sought . . . is not exactly scientific knowledge, certainly not in the sense that term had come to have by the end of the nineteenth century; it is a kind of 'moral knowledge', but Nietzsche assumes that there is a distinct, important, historically continuous line of development from the Socratic quest to the nineteenth-century ideal of the pursuit of objective, scientific knowledge for its own sake. . . . Nietzsche clearly holds that it is appropriate to call 'modern' nineteenth century culture 'Socratic' in the wider sense of being essentially devoted to the pursuit and application of propositionally articulated 'theoretical knowledge' and incapable of conceiving that anything else could be an appropriate guide for how to live" (xvi–xvii).

⁷Hollinger, 7.

Christianity was uninspiring, and that increased mechanization contributed to the dehumanization of the working class.⁸

The eventual bureaucratization of the lifeworld and the domination of people by the idea of capitalistic progress were initiated by a philosophical tradition that compulsively sought to bring rational order to all aspects of human life. The price of this order was spiritual malaise—a general population that was compelled by reason and conscience to produce optimal results for the greater good, but one that was inexplicably world-weary and lost in a world that it has fashioned according to the demands of the Socratic vision of the good life. This vision may generally be defined as a favoring of the intellectual and rational over the instinctive and emotional. The Enlightenment is marked as a period of unprecedented advances in technology aimed towards the greater rationalization of most aspects of human life. Isaiah Berlin explains:

The rational reorganization of society would put an end to spiritual and intellectual confusion, the reign of prejudice and superstition, blind obedience to unexamined dogmas, and the stupidities and cruelties of the oppressive regimes which such intellectual darkness bred and promoted. All that was wanted was the identification of principal human needs and discovery of the means of satisfying them.⁹

The Enlightenment may be viewed as a period of drastic social and cultural adjustment. Such developments, however, may be considered as inordinately one-dimensional. Since reason becomes the sole measure and purveyor of ideas portraying the good life, the Socratic tradition leaves the person bereft of alternative grounds for validating and valuing various aspects of human existence. Within the context of this Socratic ideal, a person must subdue his instincts and allow reason to take charge over one's life. To fashion one's life in any other way is essentially to succumb to the pull of ignorance and indolence.

NIETZSCHE'S RESPONSE: THE RETURN TO THE DIONYSIAC

For Nietzsche, the progressive colonization of life by scientific/technical reason in his time, as perhaps unwittingly precipitated by the Platonic

⁸Robert Wicks, *Nietzsche* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2002), 24–25.

⁹Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 4.

representation of Socrates in the Dialogues, played a crucial role in Europe's cultural bankruptcy in the nineteenth century. Julian Young notes that for Nietzsche, "Socrates and Plato saw control, 'correction,' of the natural and human environment as a goal of overriding importance; that they viewed the mytho-poetic thinking of their poet-predecessors as an ineffective way of achieving that end; that scientific thinking was the effective alternative; and finally that this rationalist view achieved dominance in the fourth century BCE, which brought about the demise of the tragic festival as a culturally important event."¹⁰ Nietzsche drew inspiration from ancient Greek culture (*sans* Socrates). *The Birth of Tragedy* is an attempt to challenge the prevailing tendencies embedded in Europe's myopic belief in capitalistic, scientific, and technological progress.

Nietzsche brands Socrates as "der theoretische Mensch" (the theoretical man). The theoretical man, according to him, is taken over by "a profound *delusion* which first appeared in the person of Socrates, namely the imperturbable belief that thought, as it follows the thread of causality, reaches down into the deepest recesses of being, and that it is capable, not simply of understanding existence, but even of *correcting* it."¹¹ Such a man assumes that being is knowable and controllable, denying both the self's finitude and the intractability of the world.

For Nietzsche, absolute faith in reason and scientific logic, to the detriment of a person's other instinctive faculties, results in the negation of life itself. For him, such "Socratism" can very well be "a sign of decline, of exhaustion, of sickness, of the anarchic dissolution of the instincts."¹² No amount of rational meticulousness and stringency can negate the simple fact of human finitude and the tragic nature of his/her existence in an absurd/opaque world.¹³ *The Birth of Tragedy* is an invitation to take delight in the tragic nature of all existence, of the radical finitude of human powers in the face of the great deluge of existence—such is the locus of what Nietzsche called *tragic knowledge*. Nietzsche explains that ultimately, despite all its efforts, science, as represented by the theoretical man, inevitably realizes that the darkness which shrouds reality/existence is essentially beyond methodical or systematic illumination. He writes: "But now . . . science is rushing irresistibly to its limits, where the optimism essential to logic collapses. For the periphery

¹⁰Young, 7–8.

¹¹Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 73. Nietzsche's italics.

¹²Ibid., 2.

¹³William Barrett describes this seemingly futile enterprise of reason rather eloquently in *Irrational Man*, 90.

of the circle of science has an infinite number of points, and while it is as yet impossible to tell how the circle could ever be fully measured, the noble, gifted man, even before the mid-course of his life, inevitably reaches that peripheral boundary, where he finds himself staring into the ineffable. If he sees here, to his dismay, how logic twists around itself and finally bites itself in the tail, there dawns a new form of knowledge, tragic knowledge, which needs art as both protection and remedy, if we are to bear it."¹⁴

Nietzsche introduces a radically different and, one might argue, a diametrically opposed perspective to Socratism—the Dionysiac perspective. The Dionysiac, for Nietzsche, represents "intoxicated reality, which has just as little regard for the individual, even seeking to annihilate, redeem, and release him by imparting a mystical sense of oneness."¹⁵ The Dionysiac outlook is grounded upon frenzy, chaos, madness, and intoxication. Unlike the theoretical man who takes delight in peeling off layers from the unknown, the Dionysiac artist's eyes "remain fixed on what still remains veiled, even after the unveiling."¹⁶ Nietzsche believes that only by reconnecting with the mysterious, instinctive, playful, and chaotic nature of reality can we, as human beings, be saved from the rigid *formalism* of Socratic rationalism, a position analogous to the stare of the Gorgon vis-à-vis the perpetual flux and frenzy of existence. The Heraclitean call *to be, to exist, and to create oneself* in, with, and through the ecstatic flux of nature is Nietzsche's formula for authentic selfhood.¹⁷

The Dionysiac is truly un-Socratic; it is not theoretical and it does not rest upon an objective, universal, and confident reckoning of being. It is

¹⁴Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 75. According to Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins, "*The Birth of Tragedy* involves an indictment of contemporary culture as well as an account of the significance of tragedy. Contemporary culture's reliance on reason and its commitment to scientific optimism had rendered the modern individual largely oblivious to the Dionysiac character of reality—a character which engulfed all individuals in the flow of life but which also rendered everyone subject to death and devastation. The repression of vulnerability was psychologically disastrous, in Nietzsche's view" (23–24).

¹⁵Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 19.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁷Nietzsche, in a short work concerning what he termed as the "tragic age of the Greeks," shows his interest and admiration for Heraclitus: "The everlasting and exclusive coming-to-be, the impermanence of everything actual, which constantly acts and comes-to-be but never is, as Heraclitus teaches it, is a terrible, paralyzing thought. . . . It takes astonishing strength to transform this reaction into its opposite, into sublimity and the feeling of blessed astonishment" (Friedrich Nietzsche, "Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks," in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006], 108).

rather a kind of disposition that is achieved momentarily, to be lost again and again in the great wave of chaos and frenzy—the ecstasy (*Rausch*) of the Dionysiac. As Nietzsche explains, “This blissful ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man, indeed of nature itself, whenever this breakdown of the *principium individuationis* occurs, we catch a glimpse of the essence of the *Dionysiac*, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting”¹⁸ This momentary self-forgetting signifies one’s entry into the fold of existence. With the dissolution of individuation, Socratic knowledge is revealed to be essentially powerless against the great tide of existence. The Dionysiac produces and sustains the knowledge of historical reality as flux. Jill Marsden explains that, “To surrender to becoming may mean to resign the human condition but to do so is to realize *in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also includes *joy in destruction*.”¹⁹ The joy of destruction represents the dynamic fascination of the self that has caught a glimpse of the eternal absurdity of existence. Absurdity should not be seen here in a negative light. Absurdity implies that life is a blank canvas, a riddle without clues; absurdity is an invitation to suffer, a challenge to invent, put simply, a call to live.

The groundless, coming-to-be of everything in history cannot be fixed or arrested by knowledge. As flux, historical reality must not just be studied, catalogued, known, or used; one has to live through and within it. This Heraclitan coming-to-being cannot be subdued simply by rationalizing the flux and projecting an eternal permanence or origin to it. Whereas the Socratic perspective would have the poets banished for their Dionysiac tendencies, for Nietzsche, the transformation from despondency to astonishment and sublimity is achieved intuitively and aesthetically by the explosive combination and contradiction of the Apolline and Dionysiac artistic drives realized in Attic tragedy. Nietzsche explains:

Their two deities of art, Apollo and Dionysos, provide the starting point for our recognition that there exists in the world of the Greeks an enormous opposition, both in origin and goals, between the Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor (*Bildner*) and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos. These two very different drives (*Triebe*) exist side by side, mostly in open conflict, stimulating and provoking (*reizen*) one another to give birth to ever-new, more vigorous offspring in whom they perpetuate the conflict inherent

¹⁸Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 17.

¹⁹Jill Marsden, *After Nietzsche: Notes towards a Philosophy of Ecstasy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 95. Marsden’s italics.

in the opposition between them, an opposition only apparently bridged by the common term "art"—until eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic "Will", they appear paired and, in this pairing, finally engender a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure: Attic tragedy.²⁰

Nietzsche posits that an authentic self is one which has gained momentary insight into the mysterious dichotomy of two primal artistic drives in people and nature. The Apolline tendency towards measure, harmony, vision, and clarity of form rests upon the underlying Dionysiac tendency towards intoxication, chaos, frenzy, and formlessness. The two are never alienated from each other. The *principium individuationis* achieved and sustained through the Apolline formative drive is always just the temporary result of a struggle with the formlessness and primal unity of all existence represented by the Dionysiac.

John Sallis defines Dionysiac ecstasy as "abysmal loss of self."²¹ This loss must not be interpreted in a negative axiological fashion, or as a function of existential anguish borne out of psycho-pathological alienation. Selfhood from the Dionysiac perspective is a breaching, a crossing of limit; the limit of individuation, or as Nietzsche often says, the lifting of the veil of Maya—the destruction of illusion.²² Absolute rational self-possession is transgressed and

²⁰Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 14.

²¹John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 56. The full explanation is as follows: "For in its character as ecstasy the Dionysiac state/impulse is excess itself, excess as such, the very moment of exceeding; or, more precisely, the Dionysiac is what one would call excess *itself*; excess *as such*, were not the excess such as to disrupt the very operation of such delimitation as would be presupposed by the *as such*, by the *itself*—hence, again, the need for a crossing of saying with unsaying. In reference to the self, the Dionysiac is the exceeding of the limit by which the self would be defined and constituted as an interior space of self-possession. Such exceeding is such a disruption of determinate selfhood, a certain loss of self—let it be called: an abysmal loss of self. It is thus that Nietzsche repeatedly relates the Dionysiac to terror, dread, suffering (*Schrecken, Entsetzlichkeit, Leiden*). It is not that the Dionysiac produces or discloses terror, dread, suffering; rather, the Dionysiac *is* to the utmost extent that loss of self, of self-possession and measure, that one undergoes in various degrees and connections when one is struck with terror, or overcome with suffering. And yet, the logic of the Dionysiac, the logic of the dual, is such as to intertwine such loss with the joy, the jubilation, the pleasure of transgressive reunion" (italics in original).

²²It is interesting that Nietzsche's insights on the Apolline/Dionysiac polarity somewhat find an analogue in Asian thought. If the Apolline aspect of existence is associated with light and the Dionysiac with darkness, the famous diagram of the Chinese forces *yin* and *yang* comes to mind "in which the light and the dark lie down beside each other within the same circle, the dark area penetrated by a spot of light and the light by a spot of dark, to symbolize that each must borrow from the other, that the light has need of the dark, and conversely, in order for either

the delimitation of personality granted by the *principium individuationis* is exceeded by the ecstatic reunion of people with other people, with nature, with himself, with the abyss itself. As Nietzsche says:

Not only is the bond between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysiac, but nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind. . . . Now the slave is a free man, now all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or “impudent fashion” have established between human beings, break asunder. Now, hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn apart, so that mere shreds of it flutter before the mysterious primordial unity (*das Ur-Eine*). Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the brink of flying and dancing, up and away into the air above. . . . Just as the animals now talk and the earth gives milk and honey, there now sounds out from within man something supernatural: he feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: all nature’s artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity.²³

In other words, the dissolution of self, which happens in Dionysiac revelry and intoxication, is the portal through which the human being is granted access to face the abyss of being. For Nietzsche, exposure and physiological commitment to the tragic nature of existence as revealed by Attic tragedy, exemplified by the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, bring people face to face with the finite and absurd reality of temporality. The Dionysiac worldview exalts the irrefutable permanence of flux and chaos. Dionysiac ecstasy is, therefore, the gateway towards tragic wisdom.

For Nietzsche, the dithyramb or Dionysiac lyric poetry grants Attic tragedy with its most powerfully penetrating gaze into the abyss. It is in the Dionysiac satyr-chorus where “man is stimulated to the highest intensification

to be complete” (*Irrational Man*, 83). Although there are contextual differences between these two images, it might be helpful for those interested in writing about Nietzsche’s influence in Asian thought and vice-versa. Graham Parkes’s edited collection on the subject might help open possibilities of research in this area: *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

²³Nietzsche, *The Birth*, 18.

of his symbolic powers; something that he has never felt before urgently demands to be expressed: the destruction of the veil of *maya*, one-ness as the genius of humankind, indeed of nature itself."²⁴ In Attic tragedy, the artistic, lyrical and ecstatic convulsions of the chorus expose man to the abyss, where he is consumed, destroyed, and in the end, renewed. Through the intoxicated frenzy and mystical union with being reached through ecstatic existence, man is exposed not just to the horrifying void, but to the *sublime*. Nietzsche explains that just when one is at the brink of effacement by ontological resignation after experiencing the abyss, "Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can redirect those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live; these representations are the sublime, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means and the comical, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means."²⁵

Through art, the incomprehensibility of the absurd is transformed into the sublime. The lyric poetry of Attic tragedy exposes the primordial "evil" of individuation (Socratic objectivity and conceptual clarity) and salvages human history from the temptation of nihilistic resignation by restoring people's oneness with life. In other words, tragedy shows people that it is only by losing themselves in the ecstasy of Dionysiac sublimation that they can begin to face the horror of existence with a smile—the smile that Sisyphus used to become one with his rock, consequently transforming his ontological burden into audacious levity. The fetters of Socratic obsession with knowledge, which once shackled and bounded Sisyphus and Prometheus to their respective fates, are destroyed by the ecstatic intoxication of the Dionysiac that delivers one back to primal oneness with the gravitational field of tragic existence.

THE TRAGIC AND UNHISTORICAL HISTORY

In "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Nietzsche provides a way of understanding the relationship between human existence and history. He believes that history must not be viewed in an objective manner as a chronology of monumental events or a repository of everything that is antique. Against the academic, scientific, and historiographical attitude that modernity has adopted in reckoning with the past, Nietzsche contends

²⁴Ibid., 21.

²⁵Ibid., 40.

that history must also be dealt with *unhistorically*. An unhistorical sense of history is a kind of happy forgetfulness that tempers the weight of the responsibility of memory. He writes:

The unhistorical is like an atmosphere within which alone life can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish. It is true that only by imposing limits on this unhistorical element by thinking, reflecting, comparing, distinguishing, drawing conclusions, only through the appearance within that encompassing cloud of a vivid flash of light—thus only through the power of employing the past for the purposes of life and of again introducing into history that which has been gone and is done—did man become man: but with an excess of history man again ceases to exist, and without that envelope of the unhistorical he would never have begun or dared to begin.²⁶

The unhistorical disposition emboldens man to act freely, as the burden of the past is momentarily lifted from his shoulders. It does not deny the relevance of the past but suspends this in light of the possibilities harbored by the present. People's historical consciousness, their calculated reckoning of possibilities for the future circumscribed by what has been must be tempered and even overridden by the child-like disposition of the unhistorical sense that acts without deliberation—a transcendence of the ensnarement of consequence through blind and reckless abandon.²⁷

Nietzsche thought that it was the Greeks, specifically those who were exposed to Attic tragedy, who were able to keep “a tenacious hold on their unhistorical sense.”²⁸ Their sense of the tragic allowed them to give in and revel in the horrifying momentum of history. Instead of seeking sense in the procession of random events in history, the tragic Greeks heroically stood their ground and allowed themselves to be swept away by the tides of fate (*Moirai*). With a diminished historical sense, people can afford more room for an unhistorical capacity to embrace the abysmal truth of existence. This is what allows them to artistically create the meaning of their lives, transcending the “moral” lessons of the past and gleefully projecting themselves into the ether.

²⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 63–64. Hereafter, this work will be cited as “On the Uses.”

²⁷Peter Berkowitz, “Nietzsche's Ethics of History,” *The Review of Politics* 56, no. 1 (Winter 1994), accessed March 23, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/11407565>.

²⁸Nietzsche, “On the Uses,” 79.

An excess of historical sense results in ossification and decline. An excess of historical sense transforms the human person into a passive receptacle of retrospective and romantic ideals that prematurely circumscribes and measures his every thought and his every act. The past, after all, is the foundation of conscience. The past is the wise and oftentimes vindictive counsel of the present that warns it against the travails of both repetition and originality. An obsessive preoccupation with the past shackles the human person and paralyzes him, petrifying his otherwise vivacious corporeal and spiritual existence.²⁹

It is by acquiring what Nietzsche termed as a "suprahistorical vantage point" that people can overcome the temptation to romanticize the past, begin to discover historical possibilities for the future, and be delivered from the clutches of the lamentable idealization of what has been, to the atmosphere of historical creative possibilities. The suprahistorical perspective sees through historical events and is able to intuit the eternal recurrences that ground the narrative of history. Nietzsche explains, "With the word 'the unhistorical' I designate the art and power of forgetting and of enclosing oneself within a bounded horizon; I call 'suprahistorical' the powers which lead the eye away from becoming towards that which bestows upon existence the character of the eternal and stable, towards art and religion."³⁰

We may speculate that the suprahistorical man is Nietzsche's early term for the overman—the man that has gained insight and has accepted the eternal recurrence of the same. The suprahistorical man is a descendant of Heraclitus—a man who recognizes the flux of existence that destroys and creates from the abyss. He undercuts the moralizing power of the historical sense and lays bare the tragic character of time, that is, its eternally absurd nature. Instead of fixating his eyes on the idol-worship of monumental history or languishing in the romantic idealization of the past by antiquarian history, Nietzsche says that the suprahistorical man criticizes history and "sees no

²⁹Ibid., 102.

³⁰Ibid., 120. Berkowitz illumines this point further: "Accordingly, great deeds—every beautiful work of art, glorious battlefield victory, and passionate love—require a studied ignorance, a self-imposed blindness to obligations and dangers (UD 1, p. 64). But a few rare individuals, Nietzsche anticipates, will rise to a 'suprahistorical vantage point' [*ühistorischen Standpunkte*] from which they will discern 'the essential condition of all happenings—this blindness and injustice in the soul of him who acts . . .' (UD 1, p. 65). The 'suprahistorical man' [*überhistorischen Menschen*] suffers nausea as a result of his correct perception that history is a meaningless series of equally valueless moments. Contrary to the historical man who is deluded about the 'meaning of existence,' the suprahistorical man knows that existence rules out salvation, and that despite the great variety in the history of nations and individuals, existence is always the same, a perennial flux devoid of intrinsic significance" (13–14).

salvation in the process and [is one] for whom, rather, the world is complete and reaches its finality at each and every moment.”³¹ Suprahistorical man, therefore, is also the son of Dionysos.

Instead of saturating people with historical facts and calculating the incipient possibilities in our present acts, the suprahistorical vantage point challenges humanity to live without restraint and engage in a “forgetful” reckoning of history. For Nietzsche, the ecstatic fluidity of the absurd harbors a greater truth than the idealizing and arrogant musings of a philosophical malcontent. This truth, however, is not found in the incisive method of the historian; it is a truth analogous to the erratic melody of lyric poetry, perpetually transforming its non-imagery in every repetition. Suprahistorical man has “the capacity to develop out of oneself in one’s own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds.”³² Nietzsche envisions the suprahistorical man as someone who lives dangerously, unfettered by the measure of the past and liberated from the pangs of conscience. He is indeed someone who has transcended the linear character of history and allowed himself to be absorbed, dissolved and recreated by the abyss.

Nietzsche, however, does not discount the value of historical sense. In fact, he says that, “*The unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture.*”³³ For Nietzsche, the suprahistorical standpoint represents the transgression of the delimitation of historical sense by the unhistorical sense. This movement provides the human being with a springboard towards authentic ecstatic existence. Although the Apolline drive towards form, stability, and clarity is an indispensable tool in schematizing the projected path of history, in the end, the will to destroy and to lose oneself in the ecstatic frenzy of the absurd is still the wellspring of abysmal truth. The march of history, its dialectical progression, is only a moment, a freeze-frame, a snapshot of an otherwise fluctuating, erratic and absurd recurrence of being.

The unhistorical sense provides suprahistorical man relief from the delimiting and circumspecting tendencies of the historical sense. In this state of absolution and convulsion, this person realizes and experiences freedom and releases the creative capacity to love, that is, to produce an original act of kindness towards the absurd by way of positive joyful acceptance. It is not

³¹Nietzsche, “On the Uses,” 66.

³²Ibid., 62.

³³Ibid., 63. Nietzsche’s italics.

acceptance borne of *ressentiment* or disappointment, but a creative acceptance generated by the ecstatic union of the self with the tragic wisdom proffered by the abyss and chaos of history. It is equivalent to the tragic insight found in Attic tragedy, a knowledge that can transcend the illusion of boundaries and individuation towards the joyful recognition and acceptance of the absurdity of existence and one's union with it.

CONCLUSION: TRAGEDY, ECSTASY, AND HISTORY

Nietzsche constructed a fluid and dynamic version of authentic personhood. While the momentum of the Socratic imperative of self-reflexivity and order brought the Enlightenment scientific and technological progress, it had also arguably petrified the spiritual vitality and ecstasy latent in the individual's organic bond with life and every joy and horror that constitutes it. Reason does not fully define the human being. Against the pervading rationalism of his time, it may therefore be argued that Nietzsche's ideas pertaining to selfhood and its relation to tragedy and history are indeed both radical and revolutionary.

This call for continual self-renewal and creative recreation is, for me, the prominent theme of *The Birth of Tragedy* and "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." Instead of allowing the timeless monuments of the past to define the present, Nietzsche, through these works, and the ensuing philosophical tradition which followed and owed a great debt to him (existentialism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism), paved the way for a revolutionary change in the way human beings would understand themselves in relation to history and to life. The ecstatic joy of realizing and accepting one's finitude in the face of the tragic far outweighs the salvific promise of dialectical reason.

Nietzsche's untimely ideas concerning authentic selfhood are grounded upon the abyss. Tragic wisdom consists in the obliterating rapture of Dionysiac ecstasy that energetically resists and overcomes the individuating and clarifying tendency of Apolline representation. Tongue in cheek, the Dionysiac man willfully and joyfully submits himself to the formlessness of union and loses himself in the eternal whirl of absurd existence. In this sense, one can argue that Socrates was more modern than Nietzsche. Socratic wisdom is nothing but the persistent claim of fortification of a ground in the "I," which rejects the illusory flux of vital and formless being. Nietzsche, on the other hand, believes

in the inalienable and transformative power of subjective dismemberment that seeks wisdom not from an individuated and idealized self, but from the mystical and musical union with the All. In the musical convulsions of the chorus in Attic tragedy, Nietzsche establishes an original and seminal locus for selfhood. Dionysiac lyric poetry liberates people from the unnecessary preoccupations of egocentric mindfulness and gratuitously throws him into the fray, to be torn apart, extinguished and, in the end, transformed by tragic wisdom. Nietzsche's early ideas reveal modernity's obsessive preoccupation with measure, control and individuation as essentially the by-products of a tradition that sought to alienate persons from the truth of tragic existence. For Nietzsche, a deeper truth is revealed in Attic tragedy of which Socratic logic remains oblivious.

The delight in the destruction of the individual that occurs in tragedy transcends the axiological polarity of emotions and morality and brings people to the threshold of an intuitive and unmediated insight into the mystery of life. Greek tragedy exposes the radical unity and likeness of all when viewed within the horizon of the flux and the absurd. Dionysiac wisdom shows people that life is indeed worth living, not because it is a portal towards salvation or a "better life," but because and only because people have no other choice but to live, suffer, laugh, and die *in* life. Through the artistic mediation of the artist (the lyric poet, the tragic playwright), this terrifying fate is transformed into a profound insight into the sublime, where life and death, joy and suffering are revealed to be nothing but temporal fluctuations in the eternal sea of history.

It is in this context where Nietzsche challenges us to suprahistorically arrive at tragic insight by unhistorically forgetting ourselves, our individuality in the ecstatic rapture of the Dionysiac. By exceeding the limits of history projected by the past to the present, rendering it predictable and progressive, the suprahistorical standpoint rebukes the romanticized expectations of what has been by forgetting history. In this childlike state of amoral forgetfulness, the self is allowed to play, that is, to reckon its possibilities in its own terms. Unburdened and unfettered by the wisdom of the antiquarian and monumental greatness of the ancients, the self is afforded full rein to its being as it dives into the abyss—the only place where it can see itself for what it truly is.

POSTSCRIPT: NIETZSCHE, THE FIESTA, AND PHILIPPINE FOLK RELIGIOSITY

What might Nietzsche's views of authentic selfhood grounded in Dionysiac ecstasy and unhistorical history illumine for us in the Philippines in the twenty-first century? Filipinos are undeniably religious. Roughly 85 percent of the Philippine population is Roman Catholic.³⁴ This is, of course, mainly due to the three hundred year history of Spanish colonial rule over the islands. One of the most recognized expressions of this religious tradition is the fiesta. These jovial and colorful celebrations, however, were not originally part of Spanish colonization tactics, but were a strategic re-appropriation of pre-colonial practices of the natives. According to Hornedo, the Spanish missionaries "recognized the value of syncretic use of the native love for festification, and they instituted a plethora of religious fiestas to rival and eventually replace many of the indigenous ones."³⁵ Almost half a century after, the fiesta is still one of the most novel and impressive displays of Filipino folk religiosity.³⁶ From the famous Ati-Atihan festivities of Aklan to the equally renowned Moriones of Marinduque, all year round, fiestas are celebrated in literally every *barangay* of the archipelago.³⁷ Apart from being an expression of fervent religiosity, these festivities are also events that showcase the people's inimitable passion for corybantic and sometimes, seemingly senseless celebration. Philippine folk religiosity, as exhibited in the fiesta, is permeated

³⁴Florentino Hornedo, *Culture and Community in the Philippine Fiesta and Other Celebrations* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing, 2000), 5.

³⁵Ibid., 3.

³⁶Nick Joaquin provides a helpful way of situating the meaning of folk religiosity in the Philippines. In *Culture and History*, he writes: "Too much nonsense has been said about Catholics being passive in worship. In the West maybe; but not here in the Philippines, where our style of worship, on the contrary, approaches the extravagant. We chant or sob our prayers out loud; we walk on our knees; we dance in church; we carry holy images on our shoulders in howling procession; we flog ourselves on Good Friday. Outsiders to our culture find our style of worship distasteful and conclude that we don't 'understand' Christianity or true religion. Do they? Can Christianity, can religion, really be reduced to pure and simple ethics—to living by God's word, to doing and being good? That was the Puritan ideal—and we know how sick the Puritans ended up. Their mistake was in thinking, being no friends of exuberance, that they could reduce religion to its most common denominator and could take the *thu* out of *enthusiasm*, being too austere to care for a word that unites divinity and frenzy, though it perfectly expresses the religious impulse in man" (*Culture and History* [Pasig: Anvil Publishing, 2004], 105).

³⁷Other notable Philippine fiestas are of the Black Nazarene in Manila, Santo Niño in Cebu, San Isidro Labrador in Quezon, Mother of Peace and Good Voyage in Antipolo, Santa Clara in Bulacan, Peñafrancia in Bicol, and Manaog in Pangasinan.

with mystical, or, as I shall try to show, Dionysiac elements that may grant us a way of examining the phenomenon through Nietzschean lenses.

The fiesta is an exhibition of communal hysteria, as online footage of the annual January 9 celebration of the feast of the Black Nazarene in Manila attests. As the culminating event of the *pistang Quiapo*, the procession, or the *translación*, of the statue of the Black Nazarene draws a million or so devotees. The streets of Manila are flooded by men, women, and children, all praying, crying, and screaming barefoot, as they try to wipe with any piece of cloth or garment (mostly small towels) any part of the *ándas* (the transport chariot) bearing the two-hundred-year-old statue known to be miraculous. Apart from the obvious physical and psychological traumas that devotees are prone to suffer within the chaos of the fanatical crowd, some people actually die of extreme fatigue or of heart attack amid the frenzy of the procession. Aguinaldo provides a vivid description of the feast: “The fervor that only Quiapo feast yield[s] is also manifested by the bright lights that add glitter to the Quiapo church and the huge stage traditionally built in Plaza Miranda nine days before the feast. Add the familiar lines of sampaguita vendors, sweepstakes vendors, peanut vendors, herbs vendors, anything-that-can-be vendors, fortune tellers, cry-for-hires, howlers, lovers, pickpockets, students, employees, professionals, housewives, housemaids, and many more faces of life and one can have a complete picture of the sea of humanity. The buntings too, and the mini flag—like multicolored paper of all sorts[—]cannot escape observant eyes.”³⁸

From an outsider’s point of view, the whole phenomenon appears almost like an act of nature—a swarm of bodies, swaying in all directions, its movement similar to a typhoon wreaking havoc on everything in its path as it snakes its way through the narrow streets of the city. The atmosphere is replicated at other major fiestas in the Philippines. Alejandro Roces describes the festivities of the Ati-Atihan in Aklan as an entire mass of humanity “running mad for its own sake.”³⁹ He adds further, “The Ati-Atihan is an audience-participation festivity. And no one remains a spectator long. You don’t see an Ati-Atihan; you experience it; you are part of it. Like a maelstrom, it sucks everything into its vortex.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Ma. Jovita Zarate’s study on the feast of San Clemente in Angono, Rizal, and Respetto’s research on the

³⁸M. M. Aguinaldo, *A Study on Filipino Culture: The Devotion to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo* (Quezon City: MMA Publishing, 2002), 6.

³⁹Alejandro Roces, *Fiesta* (Hong Kong: Vera-Reyes and Toppan Printing Ltd., 1980), 243.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 243–45.

Turumba of the feast of the Virgin of Sorrows in Pakil, Laguna illustrate how the chaos and frenzy of religious fiestas dramatically affect the inward and outward dispositions of those taking part in the celebrations. Zarate describes her own experience of joining the fluvial festivities of San Clemente as terrifyingly unnerving because of the sheer density and frenzy of the people in the procession.⁴¹ Respeto likewise observes this theme of frenzied delirium in his work on the Turumba in Laguna.⁴²

Bracketing the obvious sociological, anthropological, and theological presuppositions and implications of these phenomena, it might be interesting to see whether Nietzsche's reflection on the Dionysiac elements found in Attic tragedy can serve as a novel framework for interpreting Philippine folk religiosity exhibited in fiestas. Given the multi-dimensional possibilities for interpretation latent in the fiesta and folk religiosity, it may be presumed that theologians, sociologists, and social psychologists have done their part in studying the hermeneutic implications of these events in their respective fields. A philosophical (Nietzschean) perspective on the matter may harbor

⁴¹What follows is Zarate's personal account of the experience in Angono, Rizal: "Kagulo ang lahat. Taong 2009 nang una akong sumama sa prusisyon at wala pa akong masyadong inaasahan sa magaganap sa prusisyon ng pagoda. . . . Napahiwalay ako sa mga kakilala, at napadikit sa mga lalaking lasing na, kahit pa alas siyete pa lamang ng umaga. Hindi ako makalipat ng posisyon dahil lubhang masikip na, balikat sa balikat ang mga tao, wika nga'y hindi na mahulugan ng karayom ang paligid. Nakakatakot dahil isang pagkakamali lamang—isang masamang loob na mangugulo o isang paputok na babagsak sa mga tao, ay tiyak na magkakaroon ng *stampede* at may masasaktan. Napaghalata ng mga lasing na kinakabahan ako at tila natatakot sa kanilang amoy-alak na gayong kasisikat pa lang ng araw. 'Ate, ayos lang iyan'" ("Patron ng Biyaya: Ang Prusisyon sa Pagoda para kay San Clemente sa Angono, Rizal," in *A Reader in Philippine Theater: History and Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Chua and Rosario Cruz-Lucero [Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014], 125–26).

⁴²Respeto, in an interview with Inigo Vito, discovered that the word "turumba" traces its roots from the Spanish "tarum," which means being possessed (*sinasapian*) or being delirious (*nagdedeliryo*). He provides a description of the procession itself: "Hindi na nagaganap sa kasalukuyan ang anumang pagdedeliryo o karahasan sa Turumba. Sa prusisyon, ipinapahayag nang mga deboto ang kanilang pananampalataya sa pamamagitan ng pagkanta, pagsayaw, pagpalakpak, at pagtalon. May mga pagkakataon ng isinasayaw ng mga kabataan sa Turumba ang nauusong sayaw na napapanood nila sa telebisyon. Katangian din ng Turumba ang pagkakaroon ng ispektakulo, gaya ng paghahanda ng magarborg korona ng Birhen, makukulay na damit ng mga santo, at pag-aadorno sa may pilak na andas. Dito isinasakay ang birhen upang iprusisyon habang isinasayaw at ipinapaling-paling sa iba't ibang direksyon. Nagmimistulang isang karnabal din minsan ang prusisyon dahil sa kinaugaliang kalsa, kung saan masasaksihan ang pamumusó ng mga lalaking nagdadamit sanggol, buntis, at mangkukulam" ("Ang Pagtatanghal ng mga Banal na Gawain sa mga Topograpiya ng Bayan ng Pakil," in *A Reader in Philippine Theater: History and Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Chua and Rosario Cruz-Lucero [Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014], 141–42).

new possibilities for interpretation. It may seem odd at first that Nietzsche, a thinker most famous for the line, “God is dead,” could be useful in reflecting on the Filipino’s enthusiasm for religious festivals. A qualification is therefore in order. To use Nietzsche as a probe for folk religiosity necessitates that prospective research must make it clear at the outset that it shall limit its use of Nietzschean literature to two of the main ideas explored in this paper, namely, Dionysiac ecstasy and unhistorical consciousness. To refer to his later ideas concerning “slave morality” to say that Philippine folk religiosity represents a people’s blind and cowardly obedience to religious dogma would be to miss the point of the endeavor.

Almost all scholarly accounts pertaining to Philippine folk religiosity emphasize the frenzied chaos that rules over the crowd during the religious festivals that accompany the fiesta. Most of the personal accounts gathered from the participants show that it is the person’s devotion to God that drives him to risk life and limb in the parades. Some are motivated by desperation (hoping for a miracle), while some are merely observing tradition. Notwithstanding the differences in motivation, once a person jumps into the crowd, his personal identity vanishes. The chaotic embrace of sweaty and painted bodies absorbs and negates both agency and memory. Asked to explain how they are able to endure being in the crowd, people who join these festivals often reply that they cannot. One participant at the Quiapo fiesta said, “Hindi ko rin alam. Basta noong nandoon ako, lumalakas ako.”⁴³ This seemingly mystical union with both the sacred (the mystical figure of the saint) and the profane (the almost inhumane physical torture of being in the crowd) that participants experience in religious processions like the *traslación* is similar to Dionysiac ecstasy (*Rausch*) that Nietzsche found in Attic tragedy. The intense vitality and enthusiasm shared by the people in Philippine religious festivals, as recounted in the scholarly literature, parallel Nietzsche’s point on the transformative and rehabilitative power of Dionysiac rapture. As Marsden explains:

In the overwhelming and entrancing ecstasies of Dionysiac rapture, life differentiates itself transversally. Unlike Apolline rapture, which concentrates and proliferates forms of itself, Dionysiac rapture is trans-formative, both in the sense that it is a destructive, metamorphic power and in the sense that it seems to migrate between forms. Nietzsche suggests that Dionysiac ecstasy

⁴³For a comprehensive account of personal interviews with Black Nazarene devotees, see Teresita Obusan, *Mystic or Mistake: Exploring Filipino Mysticism in Quiapo* (Quezon City: Institute of Spirituality in Asia, 2008).

impacts as a "mystic feeling of oneness", a reconciliation with nature, but this sense of oneness is strangely non-unifying. Dionysiac ecstasy names a nomadic ubiquity⁴⁴

It may be said that participation in these religious festivities allows a person to transcend the fear of self-destruction and the correlative drive towards self-preservation for a chance at rebirth and absolution. The Apollinian illusion of individuation ("I have sinned. I am unworthy") succumbs to the overwhelming power of Dionysiac rapture ("We are all sinners. We are all unworthy"). In this contagion of spiritual fervor, one forgets and remembers at the same time. One forgets his loneliness in the face of condemnation and remembers his oneness with those who seek redemption. This unhistorical disposition, as Nietzsche explains, is an "art and power of *forgetting*."⁴⁵

Viewed from this perspective, Philippine religious festivities may be seen as grounded in the Dionysiac. They are celebrations that commemorate not only one's personal connection to the divine; more essentially perhaps, they are festivals that venerate man's primordial union with everyone and everything, with both the sacred and the profane. The dream of severance, of absolute individuation is an illusion. It is a fantasy grounded in the social and cultural insecurities bequeathed to us by a view of history which underestimates the value of forgetfulness, which effectively makes us believe that reason and reflexivity are the only paths to authentic selfhood. Placed within this context, it seems that Nietzsche and religion (at least Philippine folk religiosity) have more things in common than we think.

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⁴⁴Marsden, 39.

⁴⁵"On the Uses," 120. Nietzsche's italics.

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