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Nietzsche's "Toys of Desperation"  
*or*  
*The Birth of Tragedy* as dramaturgical alternative

by

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Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a close reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, with particular attention paid to his use of the "principle of individuation." The major question this thesis confronts is whether Nietzsche's text might provide illuminative insights for the study of contemporary dramatic literature. Another question addressed by the thesis is whether Nietzsche's text may offer dramaturgical alternatives to the strictures of naturalism. These questions are considered in relation to the play *Dead Man's Cell Phone* by Sarah Ruhl. In considering how Ruhl's play might be reflective of Nietzsche's own ideological and artistic investments, the author found that a deeper philosophical engagement with Nietzsche's notion of the tragic helped to suggest new avenues for the study and the production of current dramatic literature.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Introductions: Origins.....	1
Section I: Nietzsche's Dramaturgy.....	3
Section II: Individuation Anatomized.....	8
Section III: Sarah Ruhl's consolations of this world.....	19
Works Cited.....	29

## Introduction: Origins

This past summer I was enjoying a visit from my brother and his family, including the pleasantly exhausting task of following my niece and nephew's toddling up and down the paths of Riverside Park on Manhattan's west side. As my nephew and I admired the boats on the Hudson, a child-bike-rider-in-training whizzed by and skidded out quite painfully about ten yards ahead of us. As the rider shook off the embarrassment and discombobulation of his fall, the pain set in on his face and his eyes widened at the blood running down his knees. He began to wail. My nephew Oliver, witnessing the accident and registering the boy's reaction, ran to his side and began to cry along with him. I laughed and thought how adorable it was, though a bit odd. Flash forward to the summer's end, where I sat alone in the very same park reading Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (hereafter *BT*). In the brief biographical remarks which preceded the text proper, I came upon an anecdote (perhaps apocryphal) that just prior to Nietzsche's mental breakdown in 1889 on the streets of Turin he witnessed a horse being flogged. Apparently in sympathy with the animal, Nietzsche threw his arms around its neck to protect it from further abuse.

As I began working on this thesis, these two anecdotes danced together in my mind and I can now see that the two are not entirely unrelated. They both involve, in some way, a return to an earlier, more primal state of being, and the lament associated with the irrevocable loss of that state. For Nietzsche, the equine stands in for the return to nature he sought, and at least for a time believed he had found in the work of Richard Wagner. For my nephew, the return was to the recently abandoned state of undifferentiated sensory experience. In such a state, one touches a tree without knowing

that the tree is *other* than the hand that touches it, the eyes that see it, and the ears that hear the rustling leaves, and so on. The revelation of otherness, the hewing out of a “self,” and the concomitant memory of and desire for an earlier state of being, are in many ways what this thesis is about.

While it will in some ways incorporate psychologized readings of Nietzsche’s *BT*, the function of what follows is mainly dramaturgical and therefore hopefully suggestive. A more historicized reading of the genre of tragedy has been provided by earlier scholars and practitioners since the time of Aristotle and continues to illuminate works from Aeschylus to Shakespeare to Miller and beyond. So, rather than add a meager offering to a veritable mountain of research and theory on existing tragedy, this thesis seeks to engage with what Nietzsche—and other scholars who enter into dialogue with *BT*—believed to be essential to tragedy. This essential ingredient crosses metaphysical and aesthetic borders and therefore provides flexible material and perhaps even tools for interpreting contemporary dramatic literature and the performance thereof. The search for alternative varieties of dramaturgy was nothing new to Nietzsche and continues today as practitioner and scholars seek to stem the constantly rising tide of naturalistic impulses and practices within the theatre. Current frustration with these limitations finds an unusual ally in the young Nietzsche’s *BT*, seeking refuge from the constraints of long established dramaturgical modes. The first section of the thesis will explore Nietzsche’s resistance to these modes and how *BT* may offer alternatives to the “naturalistic” dramaturgy—with the aesthetic and philosophical investments subsumed therein—of so many dramatic texts and performances, both past and present.

## Section I: Nietzsche's Dramaturgy

In *BT* Nietzsche seeks to re-open an inquiry into Greek art, and specifically Greek tragedy much discussed by earlier philosophers, philologists, and classicists. The interaction of the Dionysian with the Apollonian, Nietzsche claims, constitutes the central exchange of all artistic production—though his work focuses mainly on Attic tragedy—which works toward the “mystery of that union.”<sup>1</sup> Phrases such as the one just quoted prove shifty ground upon which to build any sustained argument about the nature and substance of tragedy. So within Nietzsche's text I sought firmer philosophical ground upon which to explore the philosophical, psychological, and, most importantly, dramatic efficacy of *BT* to the larger world of dramatic literature and performance. The solid philosophical foundation that Nietzsche himself builds upon, through the work of Arthur Schopenhauer and others, is the latter's principle of individuation which forms the “irreducible kernel of Nietzsche's allegory in *The Birth of Tragedy*.”<sup>2</sup> The second section of the thesis takes as its leaping off point that “irreducible kernel.” Nietzsche's exploration of this principle, circumscribed by his larger ruminations on Hellenic tragedy, provides illuminative implications for the study of later theatrical production and literature. In the last section of the thesis, these implications will be explored through Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (hereafter *DMCP*). Before tracing this shift, however, extended consideration of Nietzsche's aversion to Euripidean tragedy—and more recent anti-naturalistic sentiments—will help create a bridge to what could animate contemporary playwrights in re-invigorating a connection to tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> *BT* 33

<sup>2</sup> Staten 29

In the production of tragedy, performers and directors often become mired in questions of character motive, fatal flaws, and methods of psychologizing which obscure what Nietzsche unpacks within tragedy—and which I hope this thesis further illuminates. Investigating tragedy in rehearsal, production, and even actor training as ultimately a question of identity formation—with all that this implies with respect to the principle of individuation (i.e. the birth of the individual is, in a sense the birth of the “world” as a perceivable, knowable object)—would go a long way to re-capturing what Nietzsche believed to be essential in Greek tragedy.<sup>3</sup> In charting the fate of tragedy post-Aeschylus, Nietzsche elucidates, with respect to Euripidean tragedy and after, what many other theorists and theatre practitioners also believe to be the glaring limitations of naturalistic theatre—past and present alike. In a recent interview in *American Theatre Magazine*, playwright Edward Albee considers these limitations:

There’s that notion, that whole 19<sup>th</sup>-century notion, which carried over into American playwriting in a lot of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that a play should provide lots of questions, and answer them all, so the audience doesn’t have to worry about it after the play is over... Taking the—what is it, the catharsis out of the body of the play is the only thing that makes a play interesting.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of which Albee speaks represents a powerful artistic inheritance, even at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The dramaturgical uses of this thesis relate mainly to the shifting focus, whether that means practically or methodologically, of script analysis and

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<sup>3</sup> In the second section of this thesis, attention will also be paid to the communal or “original Unity” as Nietzsche calls it which must be rent if the individual is to exist (*BT 23*). The implications of this diffusion go beyond the coalescence and eventual definition of the self, and will receive extensive attention below. I will first turn to the aesthetic and dramaturgical paths Nietzsche eschews and draw analogies to more contemporary expressions of the frustrations and anxieties of such limited and limiting dramaturgies.

<sup>4</sup> *American Theatre* Dec. 2010 (pg. 61)



explorations of the text away from discerning the internal logic of said text. The alternative involves a deeper philosophical investigation of the tragic as articulated by Nietzsche and inflected in the work of current dramatic literature.

One of the great virtues of Nietzsche's text, which he actually acknowledges in the prefatory "Attempt at a Self-Criticism," is the re-vitalization of what he calls an "artistic metaphysics."<sup>5</sup> In shifting toward an artistic metaphysics, Nietzsche signals for a different kind of dramaturgy, one which relies less heavily upon a nearly scientific dramaturgical approach, as early Realisms also surely did. The salient features of Nietzsche's dramaturgy, somewhat by his own design, defy facile category. Still the break which Nietzsche gestures towards shifts the focus of tragedy from the march toward *catharsis*, to something more philosophically—as opposed to psychologically or morally—provocative and profound. In Aristotelian approaches to tragedy, *catharsis* functions as one of the forms central efficacies. In the whole of *BT*, the term *catharsis* appears only once in reference to what Nietzsche calls the "pathological" function of tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche's lack of engagement with notions of *catharsis* signals that his notion of self may be quite distinct from Aristotle's architecture of the self. The Nietzschean self, the individual as posited by *BT*, will be associated below with the Apollonian, and this association proves fruitful only when considered alongside the Dionysian. In fact, much of what Nietzsche decries in later tragedy is the neglect shown to the Dionysian, along with all it represents—unity, nature, lack of differentiation. In *BT* Nietzsche considers the encounter of the Apollonian with the Dionysian and suggests that the

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<sup>5</sup> *BT* 5

<sup>6</sup> *BT* 119 among other precedents, Nietzsche is referring to Aristotle's notion of *catharsis* as purgative both for the individual and society (Aristotle 1457-1458). This function animates many psychoanalytic approaches to tragedy which enlist trauma theory, theories of psychosis, and Lacan's mirror stage (among many others) as interpretive and explicative tools.

generic distinction “tragedy” has a more extensive philosophical pedigree than the purgation of negative or fearful emotions and impulses, often associated with catharsis, can encompass and enact.

In *BT* Nietzsche laments the nearly immediate demise of tragedy following Aeschylus, in the form of Euripidean tragedy:

So, now that we have acknowledged that Euripides failed utterly to provide an exclusively Apollonian basis for drama, and its un-Dionysian tendency developed rather into a naturalistic and unartistic aberration, we may approach the essence of *aesthetic Socratism*, whose highest law runs approximately as follows: ‘In order to be beautiful, everything must be intelligible’: as a counterpart to the Socratic principle ‘Knowledge is virtue’. With this doctrine in mind, Euripides measured all the individual elements of drama and rectified them accordingly: language, characters, the dramatic structure, the music of the chorus. What we are so often accustomed to considering in comparison to Sophoclean tragedy as poetic shortcoming and regression on Euripides’ part is to a large extent the product of that penetrating critical process, of that audacious intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

The conflation of beauty with intelligibility, and Nietzsche’s characterization of Euripidean drama as a “critical process,” hearkens back to Albee’s charge that many contemporary plays “provide lots of questions, and answer them all.” It also feeds into Nietzsche’s disavowal of “inclinations and intentions” as fundamental to the authentically tragic.<sup>8</sup> The more coherent and complete the character becomes, the further we tread from that which is uniquely tragic—i.e. abyssal, awesome, and terrifying all at once. In

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<sup>7</sup> *BT* 70

<sup>8</sup> *BT* 71

the meta-artistic sense, perhaps we have moved toward realistic performance conventions as a matter of avoidance, as we sublimate our fear of the tragic into a naturalistic spectacle of causation, complete with character development and exploration, and ultimately character fixity. The process of the tragic is after all a process we are all familiar with, whether we care to admit it or not. The ways that we imagine ego formation and other methods of identity construction often try to obscure how provisional, cancelable, and therefore fraught with anxiety such methods really are. Tragedy uncovers what has been sublimated, and so simply negotiating the terms of this sublimation—which is the purview of much realistic actor training and script analysis—misses the salient, profound, and ultimately sublime features of tragedy. These features will be explored through an excavation of one of the foundational philosophical concepts upon which Nietzsche builds in *BT*: the principle of individuation.

## Section II-Individuation Anatomized

Amidst the aesthetic theories of German Romanticism, replete with metaphor, allusions to earlier poetic, dramatic, and literary works, and steeped at times in the revolutionary rhetoric of emerging constitutional democracies, it can be difficult to find stable philosophical ground upon which to explore. The principle of individuation provides just such a foundation and will be the subject of this section of the thesis. The principle itself has very deep philosophical roots, reaching back—as Schopenhauer often did—to Kant and other German Idealists, and even further back as far as Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* when he offers his rebuttal to Plato’s theory of Forms.<sup>9</sup> It is outside the welkin of this thesis to uncover the extensive genealogy of this philosophical principle. A bit of background, however, may help to foreground Nietzsche’s use of the principle, while reinforcing its durability and longevity. The principle itself is decidedly flexible philosophical material. Aristotle first articulates the principle as that which allows for differentiation within a species or group. While the group shares characteristics, their differentiation is assured by physical “otherness.” Much of Aristotle’s philosophy rests upon this notion of individuation—animating his larger philosophical process of cataloging and categorization. The implications of this principle are significant because the phenomenal world is only perceivable as individuated pieces—i.e. the sky is different than the trees, the clouds, the hair on my head, and so on. Without this principle, and its categorical function, the world would remain an unknowable (and perhaps not even an “experienceable”) congregation of perceptions. Such is the Kantian innovation which Schopenhauer inherits and which Nietzsche pushes further into his metaphysic-artistic

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle 803

project. Where Nietzsche ventures with this principle in *BT* is the subject of this section. In unpacking this principle, I hope to furnish tools to for analyzing and exploring Sarah Ruhl's *DMCP*.

Nietzsche borrows liberally from Schopenhauer, expounding upon the Apollonian as the “apotheosis of the *principium individuationis*.”<sup>10</sup> This last term refers to the individual being (Apollonian) that arises out of “original Unity” (Dionysian)—as mentioned above. As such, Nietzsche's characterizations and figurations of the Apollonian may be taken as an expansion and elaboration of the principle of individuation, and vice versa. Despite the strong endorsement by Nietzsche (cited above) of the centrality of the principle of individuation to his understanding of the Apollonian, he initially offers the principle only suggestively. For the seven years prior to *BT*, Nietzsche assiduously studied the works of Schopenhauer and tread for much of his early career in his forbearer's footsteps. Though Nietzsche takes great pains later in life to distance himself from his youthful zeal for Schopenhauer, *BT* could not function nearly as powerfully without Schopenhauer's influence. Despite this, Nietzsche himself tries to disavow any Schopenhauerian influence on *BT*. Writing in *Ecce Homo*, more than a decade and a half after the publication of *BT*, Nietzsche utterly rejects Schopenhauer, claiming that the latter “went wrong everywhere.”<sup>11</sup> In his essay “Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*,” however, Ivan Soll considers Nietzsche's defiant, posthumous (and in Soll's view unfair) rejection of Schopenhauer's influence on *The Birth of Tragedy*. Soll's explication of their philosophical similarity—both in antecedents and outlook—helps to chart what will

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<sup>10</sup> *BT* 31

<sup>11</sup> *Ecce Homo* 270

become the philosophical underpinnings of my more extended argument, which relates to the role of the formation, deterioration, and eventual demise of the *individual* within tragedy. Soll argues persuasively for acknowledging the abiding debt which Nietzsche owes to Schopenhauer in the *BT* stating:

It would be safe and conventional to remark...that Nietzsche's own assessment of Schopenhauer's influence upon him "must be taken with a grain of salt." It would be less cautious, but closer to the truth to counsel simply rejecting Nietzsche's assessment, which in fact grossly, even grotesquely, understates and represses the influence of Schopenhauer on *The Birth of Tragedy*. A careful comparative study of Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation* and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* would reveal the extent and nature of an influence, which is far more substantial than Nietzsche allows.<sup>12</sup>

I have quoted this section at length because it bears heavily upon whether the extent to which Nietzsche relies on Schopenhauer's principle of individuation might be overstated. If Nietzsche indeed could claim dissociation from Schopenhauer, and who better to provide perspective and genealogy on his work than the author himself, then the present project would prove even more difficult. Whether scholars who investigate Nietzsche's work—or indeed Nietzsche himself—associate his theories with Schopenhauer or not cannot change the philosophical latencies which abide in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The present thesis operates under the assumption that the principle of individuation that Schopenhauer articulated provides relevant if not profound possibilities for the durability and efficacy of Nietzsche's text for the study of tragedy and drama regardless of epoch.

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<sup>12</sup> Solomon 104

The principle of individuation, as Nietzsche utilizes it in *BT*, proves incredibly malleable as both an aesthetic and metaphysical principle. The interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian, according to Nietzsche, is not simply the liminal space in which artist production occurs, but the world itself—as appearance and eventually a knowable, touchable, “experienceable” reality—depends on this duality. In this process, the principle of individuation plays a central role. Nietzsche cites a passage from Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Representation*, which provides a rich and theoretically fruitful metaphor to embody the principle of individuation (here referred to as *principium individuationis*):

As a sailor in a small boat in a boundless raging sea, surrounded on all sides by heaving mountainous waves, trusting to his frail vessel; so does the individual man sit calmly in the middle of a world of torment, trusting to his *principium individuationis*.<sup>13</sup>

Paul Gordon, in his book *Tragedy after Nietzsche: Rapturous Superabundance*, further elaborates the *principium individuationis* and states that the “boat provides stability, solace, and a way of rescuing the self from its surrounding tumult.”<sup>14</sup> So, at the heart of individuation is the anxiety and fear of the limitless, and therefore dramatizes the desire to create limits. Schopenhauer’s use of the phrase “individual man” in the above passage proves suggestive to Nietzsche as he moves closer to distilling the Apollonian into the flexible, psychologized material with which he confronts Wagnerian music and with which I will be approaching Ruhl’s play.

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<sup>13</sup> *BT* 21

<sup>14</sup> Gordon 63

Though the Apollonian constitutes only one half of Nietzsche's philosophical and aesthetic formula for the development of tragedy, his further elaboration of individuation—which Nietzsche and others associated with this Greek deity—helps fill in the larger picture painted within *BT*. Elucidating that which Nietzsche suggests and eventually subsumes about the principle of individuation and the Apollonian allows for further expansion of the ground Nietzsche leaves unexplored (whether by choice or predilection). The role of individuation in the process of tragedy finds expression in the following passage in which Nietzsche expounds on the hero and his heroic impulse:

...the contradiction in the heart of the world reveals itself to him as a collision of different worlds, for example a divine world and a human world, each of which individually has right on its side, but must suffer for its individuation as an individual world alongside others. In the heroic impulse towards the universal, in the attempt to step outside the spell of individuation and to become the *single* essence of the world, the individual suffers within himself the original contradiction hidden in things, that is, he commits sacrilege and suffers.<sup>15</sup>

The above passage again illustrates how incredibly pliable the principle of individuation can be. Nietzsche's use of words and phrases such as "spell," "original contradiction," "sacrilege," "essence of the world," and "heroic impulse" could prove incredibly suspect without the already mentioned "irreducible kernel" which Nietzsche uses throughout, and often in spite of himself. The traces of that kernel, however, occur in the passage above and throughout *BT*—note the use of the words "individually," "individuation," and "individual." The return to state of unity (social, spiritual, cultural, and otherwise) lies at

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<sup>15</sup> *BT* 57



the heart of the Dionysian impulse, according to Nietzsche. The necessity of individuation, as both producer of perceivable reality and maker of identity, constitutes the tragic separation which tortures and in some cases destroys the tragic hero.

It would seem, based on Nietzsche's use of the phrase "heroic impulse," that the tragic protagonist chooses his or her fate, or struggle. By re-investing in the principle of individuation's role in the process and production of tragedy, however, we see that there is inevitability in the drive toward individuation. It is a necessary step on the path to truth-making and identity formation. So rather than seeing Nietzsche's "heroic impulse" as an idealization of the tragic hero, we see in it a re-statement of the principle of individuation as metaphysically foundational. This extrication of tragedy from issues of noble birth, grandeur of purpose, and perhaps other ethical considerations allows for a broader—and therefore much more useful—interpretation of tragic texts and tragic phenomena. It may help to trace this breadth in the following passage from Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, as it proves instructive to understanding how Nietzsche's self-described "furious and frenzied" imagery in *BT* rests on solid philosophical ground:

Will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world. Life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will. Therefore life accompanies the will as inseparably as the shadow accompanies the body; and if will exists, so will life, the world, exist. Life is, therefore, assured to the will to live; and so long as we are filled with the will to live we need have no fear for our existence, even in the presence of death. It is true we see the individual is only

phenomenal, exists only for the knowledge which is bound to the principle of sufficient reason, to the principle of individuation. Certainly, for this kind of knowledge, the individual receives his life as a gift, rises out of nothing, then suffers the loss of this gift through death, and returns again to nothing.<sup>16</sup>

The “will” and “life” which Schopenhauer speaks of corresponds, respectively, to the Dionysian and Apollonian within Nietzsche’s *BT*. The above passage and much of Schopenhauer’s philosophy entails elaborating the foundational principle of individuation into various aesthetic fields such as music, theatre, and the visual arts as well. The use of “life” by Schopenhauer to refer to the world of perceivable phenomena proves suggestive when considered in light of Nietzsche’s phrase “spell of individuation.” Conflating these passages results in the notion that life itself (which to repeat is the perceivable world) is somehow a spell, an illusion, or perhaps a kind of hypnosis. The extent to which we doubt our senses and the representations they foster is also the extent to which the tragic protagonist suffers. The largeness too of Schopenhauer’s “life” redeems the Apollonian and individuation from folding under the weight of Nietzsche’s partiality to the Dionysian will and rapture. As mentioned before, Nietzsche surely subsumes the importance of the Apollonian as ultimately the redemption of the will, the redemption of that “original Unity” he is so fond of lionizing:

Apollo appears to us as the apotheosis of the *principium individuationis*, in which the eternally achieved goal of the original Unity, its redemption through appearance, is alone completed: he shows us with sublime gestures how the whole world of torment is necessary in order to force the individual to produce the

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<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer 190

redeeming vision and then sit in calm contemplation of it as his small boat is tossed by the surrounding sea.<sup>17</sup>

Nietzsche dovetails Schopenhauer's use of the "small-craft-in-vast-sea" metaphor with his own notion of the tragic self and struggle. The redemptive illusion of the Apollonian and individuation is a palliative to the terrible, awesome, and ultimately incomprehensible Dionysian annihilation of self.

In his extensive study, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin underscores the significance of Nietzsche establishing the "independence of the tragic from the ethos" and re-iterates Nietzsche's primary thesis that the world is only truly justified as an "aesthetic phenomenon."<sup>18</sup> This wraps back into Nietzsche's oft quoted phrase—twice stated in *BT*—that "only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* are existence and the world *justified* to eternity."<sup>19</sup> As Paul de Man discusses in "Genesis and Genealogy in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*," this phrase ought not to be taken as a statement about the indispensability of art—i.e. art makes life worth living and is its highest and most profound expression. Nietzsche wishes, as de Man maintains, to make an "indictment of existence rather than a panegyric of art." De Man stresses the metaphysical implications of Nietzsche's statement both to tie them to larger questions of representation and subject in Nietzsche's work, but also to stress the "protective nature of the Apollonian moment." This moment attempts fixity in a world of flux and chaotic life by using the individuating, differentiating faculties to create representation.<sup>20</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> *BT* 31

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin 193

<sup>19</sup> *BT* 38

<sup>20</sup> de Man 50

“category of the subject” arises from this attempt, thus intimately tying the self to the Apollonian power of appearance and eventually representation.<sup>21</sup> The coalescence of these “representations” into a unified self enacts the basic psychological (if this word is even appropriate for Nietzsche in 1872) trajectory of *BT*. This process may be best summarized as a constant process of becoming, or as Nietzsche ponders in the closing section of *BT*:

If we could imagine dissonance in human form—and what is man but that?—then this dissonance, in order to be able to live, would need a magnificent illusion to cast a veil of beauty over its own essence. This is the true artistic intention of Apollo: whose name summarizes all those countless illusions of beautiful appearance, which in each moment make existence worth living and compel us to live on to experience the next moment.<sup>22</sup>

So, the Apollonian and individuation function as the consolations provided to us through the phenomenal world. Life has measure and value commensurate with our ability to aestheticize our experience, which again renders the world beautiful and perceivable at once. The one cannot be separated from the other. To repeat, this ought not to be thought of as a bifurcation of aesthetics and more practical considerations but a statement of their abiding union.

Martha Nussbaum echoes de Man’s reading of Nietzsche concerning aesthetic phenomenon vis-à-vis metaphysics claiming that Nietzsche eschewed “detachment of the

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<sup>21</sup> de Man 50

<sup>22</sup> *BT* 130

aesthetic from the practical.”<sup>23</sup> In “The Transfiguration of Intoxication: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Dionysus,” Nussbaum provides a succinct distillation of Nietzsche’s profound revelation about practical, metaphysical, and ultimately aesthetic process and product:

Existence is bearable for us in the face of the collapse of otherworldly faith only if we can get ourselves to regard our lives, with pride, as our own creations: to regard them, that is, as we now regard fine works of art. *The Birth of Tragedy* adds a further twist: in this way and in no other, we find life *justified*: that is, having abandoned all attempts to find extra-human justification for existence, we can find the only justification we ever shall find in our very own selves, and our own creative activity.<sup>24</sup>

Nussbaum presses her point even further by indicating that Nietzsche’s rejection of the aesthetic as a mere diversion—rather than metaphysically foundational to our experience of the world, as Nietzsche imagines it—actually signals a break with Schopenhauer. Ironically, however, Schopenhauer’s *principium individuationis* inheres in Nussbaum’s mention of “our very own selves.” Her word choice suggests the notion which she discusses earlier in her essay that individuation and other “Apollonian activit[ies]” are not simply “detached and coolly contemplative, but a response to an urgent human need, namely, the need to demarcate an intrinsically unordered world, making it intelligible for ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> So the Apollonian and individuation do not simply function as instruments of control or even safety, but as the very concepts by which we are even *able* to perceive

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<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum 101

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 102

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 95

the world. The implications of the breakdown of this concept signal both an epistemological and metaphysical crisis of the highest order for the tragic hero, fighting not simply for justice, revenge, redemption, or otherwise. Nietzsche's text indicates that a crisis of representation, and the dire implications this signals for identity formation and stability, lies at the very heart of tragedy. According to Nussbaum, our "selves" are somehow linked to our "creative activity." This connection is possible only through individuation, painful as that process can prove to be. As noted above, "life" (as opposed to "will") or phenomenon is associated with the Apollonian, as is the notion of self or individual. When considered with Nussbaum's assertion above, our lives and indeed "selves" represent "fine works of art," born from "our own creative activity." This conclusion merely pushes Nietzsche's consideration of the principle of individuation to its logical—and incidentally metaphysical and aesthetic—conclusion.

### Section III-Sarah Ruhl's consolations of this world

Playwright Sarah Ruhl, in an essay on the work of Maria Irene Fornes, provides provocative parallels to contemporary drama when speaking about what she calls the “Age of the Disordered Will” which Ruhl defines as “a turning away from the concept of the will to the concept of intention.”<sup>26</sup> Her choice of language could not be more suggestive. Nietzsche, following Schopenhauer and others, associates the “will” with the Dionysian. Regardless of the reasons for this “turning away,” it parallels the turn which Nietzsche believes occurred beginning with Euripides. Ruhl continues:

Intention seems safer than will. Intention retains the illusion, if not the force, of moral content. Intention can be analyzed scientifically. And intention can be thwarted by reason before it takes the shape of action, whereas will is a full-blown assent to impulse.<sup>27</sup>

Ruhl's mention of the “moral” re-iterates the discussion above of Nietzsche's extrication of ethos from considerations of the tragic. By eschewing intention as dramatically useful, Ruhl inches closer to accepting Nietzsche's notion that much of theatre is animated by a fundamentally “critical process.” None of the above is meant to pigeon-hole the work or thought of Sarah Ruhl, but rather to demonstrate that she shares some of the same frustrations which led Nietzsche to re-consider the tragic and write *BT*. Ruhl's work, both dramatic and otherwise, proves dynamic and decidedly difficult to categorize. Categorization is not, however, the primary function of this thesis. I do not seek to place

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<sup>26</sup> *Six Small Thoughts* 199

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* 199

the stamp of “tragedy” upon *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*, much the way Arthur Miller attempted with his play *Death of a Salesman*.<sup>28</sup> What I will pursue in the remainder of this thesis is how Ruhl’s play is inflected with the tragic—as defined by Nietzsche.

The above-mentioned idea of “self-as-work-of-art” proves provocative in the work of Sarah Ruhl. In her play *DMCP*, Ruhl confronts questions of grief, memory, and identity with humor, pathos, and a good bit of whimsy. In a review of the 2008 South Coast Repertory Theater’s production of the play, J. Chris Westgate characterizes Ruhl as “a writer of insouciant though nevertheless trenchant comedies.”<sup>29</sup> It might seem odd, therefore, to suggest that Ruhl’s play bears a striking resemblance to Nietzsche’s meditations on the tragic, and specifically individuation, in *BT*. Though Westgate suggests a simultaneous trenchancy and insouciance in Ruhl’s work, Christopher Isherwood describes Playwrights Horizon’s production as a “lament for the supposed coziness of predigital culture.”<sup>30</sup> Conflating these two descriptions, we might arrive at something resembling Nietzsche’s injunction in *BT*: “[y]ou should first learn the art of consolation of *this world*—you should learn to *laugh*.”<sup>31</sup> The strange joys of *DMCP* constitute a kind of comedic lamentation, one characterized by the pain of separation and loss, but also the hope of connection and unity. It is just such a dynamic which typifies Nietzsche’s vision of the tragic: the Apollonian impulse moves—as shown above—toward diffusion, individuation, and the creation of limit and encounters the Dionysian desire for totality, unity, and ecstasy.

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<sup>28</sup> Miller 3-7

<sup>29</sup> Westgate 481

<sup>30</sup> Isherwood

<sup>31</sup> *BT* 12



One of the major themes rehearsed and replayed in *DMCP* is the diffusion and isolation at the heart of the modern world, which the eponymous cell phone symbolizes. Isherwood's choice of the term "predigital" to describe a forgotten cultural, social, and perhaps metaphysical milieu is apropos. The process of individuation, even from its Aristotelian beginnings, suggests a world catalogued, numbered, and therefore digitized. While Isherwood may be referring specifically to the encroachment of technology on earlier social relations, the metaphysical implications of this technology provide a link to the "artistic metaphysics" of *BT*. Pre-digital means unnumbered, whole and unified, much like Nietzsche's vision of the Dionysian. So the yearnings of Nietzsche's tragic hero may be roughly analogized to the longings of Ruhl's protagonist, Jean. Jean appoints herself the keeper of the dead man's—and owner of said cell phone, Gordon's—memory. Though she never knew him in life, she inherits his cell phone along with the emotional and metaphysical baggage attached to it. Out of his scattered acquaintances and occupational ambiguities, Jean wishes to help remember the less-than-admirable Gordon. The word "re-member" proves incredibly suggestive here, as Jean attempts connection and wholeness from the shards of information and conversation she collects and sometimes enacts. Jean wishes, through the act of remembrance, to participate in what Nietzsche called the "mysterious original Unity," where a communal impulse dissolves boundary and notions of individuation.<sup>32</sup> She claims to "want to remember everything. Even other people's thoughts."<sup>33</sup> This desire for an earlier, primordial state—before the individual coalesces and distinguishes itself from the collective—is

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid* 22

<sup>33</sup> *DMCP* 47

born out of what Nietzsche calls the “agonies of individuation,” and finds referent in a monologue of Jean’s near the end of the play’s first act:

...when Gordon’s phone rang and rang, after he died, I thought his phone was beautiful, like it was the only thing keeping him alive, like as long as people called him he would be alive. That sounds—a little—I know—but all those molecules, in the air, trying to talk to Gordon—and Gordon—he’s in the air too—so maybe they all would meet up there, whizzing around—those bits of air—and voices.<sup>34</sup>

In Ruhl’s dramatic and poetic landscape, even the air we breathe desires cohesion and community. This desire folds into Nietzsche’s contention that “under the spell of the Dionysian it is not only the bond between man and man which is re-established: nature in its estranged, hostile, or subjugated forms also celebrates its reconciliation with its prodigal son, man.”<sup>35</sup> So, just as the will or original unity is redeemed by the representation, nature is redeemed and finds reconciliation through the individual, in this case Jean’s bricolage image of the absent Gordon.

Speaking at Gordon’s funeral Mrs. Gottlieb, his bereaved mother, expresses the separation which results from death, which finds referent in Nietzsche’s notion of reconciliation for the prodigal. In spite of her contention that she is “not a religious woman,” Mrs. Gottlieb is thankful that “there are still people who build churches for the rest of us so that when someone dies—or gets married—we have a place to—I could put all of this—(*She thinks the word grief*).”<sup>36</sup> The church remains the site where the prodigal may return after being sundered from the collective, just as wayward thoughts

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<sup>34</sup> *DMCP* 53

<sup>35</sup> *BT* 22

<sup>36</sup> *DMCP* 14-15

and voices escape through and from Gordon's cell phone, severed from their deceased progenitor. In this way, does Jean in fact become the site of this reconciliation, much as the church is the site of collective grieving? Is she the inheritor of so many Apollonian masks, behind which dances the ethereal and undifferentiated voices and cries of Gordon's acquaintances? She may be, as keeper of the cell phone, the repository for the tragic energies—Apollonian and Dionysian—instantiated as a desire to dissolve her “self” (after all, how much do we know about her other than what she constructs?) and yet fiercely clinging to her digital companion as an agent of atomization, and ironically disconnection.

Ruhl's protagonist alternately pursues and avoids the siren song of the Dionysian hymn. Later in the *DMCP*, Jean and Gordon's widow, Hermia, share a drink. Lamenting how distant she felt from her late husband, Hermia refers to a passage from Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities* which Mrs. Gottlieb mentions earlier and Ruhl actually places as an epithet prior to the printed text of the play: “What did Charles Dickens say? That we drive alone in our separate carriages never to truly know each other and then the book shuts and then we die...Two separate carriages and then you die! *Hermia weeps.*”<sup>37</sup> Hermia here meditates on Dickens contention that “every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.”<sup>38</sup> The salient word, with respect to Nietzsche's ruminations on the principle of individuation, is *constituted*. It is not necessarily the vagaries or vicissitudes of modern life which prove alienative. The alienation which occurs in *DMCP* is not only conditioned by technology, but by the inevitable alienation—with the promise of prodigal return—articulated by Nietzsche, and

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid* 71

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid* 5

steeped in our deeper metaphysics. Jean uses this promise in improvising Gordon's final words to Hermia, which she claims he scrawled on a napkin before he expired:

The joy between husband and wife is elusive, but it is strong. It endures countless moments of silent betrayal, navigates complicated labyrinths of emotional retreats. I know that sometimes you were somewhere else when we made love. I was, too. But in those moments of climax, when the darkness descended, and our fantasies dissolved into the air under the quickening heat of our desire—then, *then*, we were in that room together.<sup>39</sup>

In evoking darkness as a pre-condition for togetherness, intimacy, and perhaps unity, Ruhl also evokes the anti-Apollonian, the Dionysian. As Nietzsche points out, Apollo is the god of light. The visual, the sense most associated with representation, must remain unhindered in order for individuation to be possible. Bathed in darkness, however, the individual succumbs to desire—so often associated with Dionysus—which permeates all that has been henceforth alienated and diffused (including and especially the “self”). Shortly before improvising Gordon's final missive to his widow, Jean finds *herself* confronting the pains of individuation. These pains are often accompanied, as can be seen above, by the desire for union. Amidst Jean and Dwight's (Gordon's brother) “love haze,” following their ecstatic tempest of love-making and falling stationery, he gestures toward the union to which Nietzsche refers: “[w]e have exchanged little bits of our souls—I have a little of yours and you have mine.”<sup>40</sup> These bits of self to which Dwight refers are the aftermath of the tragic event, unity severed in the form of the dismembered Dionysus. Ironically, this moment is followed by the ringing of Gordon's phone, and

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid* 72

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* 63

Jean must choose between the possibility of engaging with the now, the promise of exchange, unity, and renewal, and the cell phone as an agent of further fracture and diffusion.

Dismemberment is evoked throughout the play, as more of Gordon's "authentic" biography emerges. He was in fact a black market organ dealer, trafficking in anything from corneas to kidneys. He made his living from the dispersal of body parts, and it seems appropriate therefore that his own memory should scatter into the digital abyss in the form of condolence calls and business contacts. When Gordon's mother recounts a story from her son's childhood she stops midway through, realizing none of her auditors share the memory. So, memories themselves are disembodied and kinless, floating around the ether like incoming calls or air molecules. The collection of *mementos mori* finds poignant expression later in the same scene, as Jean distributes personalized gifts she claims Gordon wished his loved ones to inherit. From these ordinary objects—a salt shaker, a cup, and a spoon—Jean attempts to reconstruct Gordon's memory. The results are mixed, as Dwight and Gordon's widow Hermia are "moved," while Mrs. Gottlieb, overcome with emotion, retreats upstairs and makes a "strange unidentifiable sound from far away, like a door creaking, or a small animal in pain."<sup>41</sup> In itemizing Gordon's memory, Mrs. Gottlieb's loss and separation are felt afresh, just as Nietzsche believed that "we should regard the state of individuation as the source and original cause of suffering." Conversely, however, the objects Jean imparts to Gordon's family may in some way be taken for the Apollonian mask mentioned above. The mask may function protectively against the terror of Dionysian rapture, but it also consequently represents

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<sup>41</sup> *Idib* 49

the “sign of a perpetual wound.”<sup>42</sup> This irony helps to explain the various reactions these objects-as-masks elicit. They both limit the loss of Gordon (therefore rendering it bearable), but also signal to the aggrieved the limitless beyond which was lost as a result. In the case of Mrs. Gottlieb, the loss is the communion between mother and son whom she seeks. The surreal image of mother seeking her son in the flames—indeed Ruhl says she self-immolates—while carrying a steak (severed flesh) beautifully encapsulates the desire for Dionysian return from the painful inevitabilities of individuation.<sup>43</sup> The prodigal mother returns.

So ultimately, rather than reaching for the great elsewhere and seeking for our lost Dionysian unity, we ought instead to realize (in every sense of the word) the “consolations of this world,” and the redemptive and imminent phenomena which echo that unity. And so, in the play’s final moments in what Ruhl calls a “hymn to love,” Jean blissfully declares to Dwight:

Let’s start loving each other right now, Dwight— / not a mediocre love, but the  
strongest love in the world, / absolutely requited. / I want to be selfish with you. /  
I want to love you because of and not in spite of / your accidental charms. / I want  
to love you when you burn the toast / and when your shoes are awful / and when  
you say the wrong thing / so that we know and all the omniscient things of heaven  
know / too—let’s love each other absolutely.<sup>44</sup>

That Ruhl refers to this passage as a hymn fits nicely into Nietzsche’s assertions about the capacity of music to represent the unrepresentable. In this way, Ruhl confronts and nearly surmounts mere representation as an aesthetic tool. She sets the everyday, the

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<sup>42</sup> Winfree 62

<sup>43</sup> Lahr, *DMCP* 97

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid* 98

tangible, the individuated alongside the absolute, hoping for communion among “all the omniscient things of heaven,” much as the Nietzsche’s tragic narrative operates as a constant play—at once triumphal and terrible—between the Apollonian and Dionysian. Nietzsche’s meditations on a long forgotten set of artistic inheritances would seem an odd elixir to re-invigorate our contemporary theatre so infatuated with naturalistic conventions and the values it espouses. Nietzsche wrote *BT* neither to advance the field of classicism, nor encourage the production of Aeschylus. Similarly, I have not written this thesis as a contribution—albeit meager—to the already voluminous scholarship about Nietzsche and his work. I, like Albee, Ruhl, and many others, lament the loss of authentic mystery, challenge, and perhaps sublimity in the theatre. Nietzsche shared this disappointment and offered an unusual, though hardly novel, antidote. The work of Sarah Ruhl, among other contemporary playwrights, maps a very different metaphysics based on the ideas of metamorphosis, rather than the fixity of character. No wonder then that Ruhl prizes the Ovidian over the Aristotelian, stating that the former “is not the neat Aristotelian arc but, instead, small transformations that are delightful and tragic.”<sup>45</sup> These transformations lie at the heart of Nietzsche’s work and constitute the birth pains of both the aesthetic process and the development of “self,” neither of which should be taken to be mutually exclusive. Much of this thesis has to do with unsettling the facile (question and answer) arrangement inherent in much realistic dramatic literature nowadays. The irony of Realism, as Lyotard points out, “is that it intends to avoid the questions of reality implicated in that of art.”<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche’s *BT* seeks to re-engage with this question, and Sarah Ruhl’s *DMCP* echoes many of Nietzsche’s anxieties, while

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<sup>45</sup> Lahr 4

<sup>46</sup> Lyotard 75

sharing the pleasure of birth—artistic and otherwise.



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