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Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism (Book Review)

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Sloterdijk, Peter. *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism*. Translated by Jamie Owen Daniel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. 106 pp. \$29.50 (cloth); \$12.95 (paper).

Nietzsche's hostile critics are almost unanimous in condemning him for the hyperboles of his self-dramatization, whether under the mask of Zarathustra, in the exorbitant claims of the philosopher pointing to himself with a cry of *Ecce Homo* (New York, 1967), or in his polemics against other histrionic figures like Wagner. The recent French readings of Nietzsche, most prominently those by Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, have sought to undercut such a psychologizing tendency by reducing Friedrich Nietzsche to the texts that bear his signature and by dissolving the persona in the play of language; in doing so they can point to Nietzsche's frequent criticism of the illusions of consciousness, personality, and the ego. Peter Sloterdijk sees Nietzsche as the emblem of a new way of thinking and philosophizing that sets the stage for productive, many-sided writers ("centaurs," the author calls them) who refuse to be confined within the restrictive categories of art, literature, science, or philosophy alone; so Nietzsche's accomplishment is read retrospectively insofar as he is a precursor of Freud, Musil, Valéry, Paz, Benjamin, Adorno, Foucault, and Barthes.

The ostensible focus of Sloterdijk's compact study is *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (New York, 1967). Yes, Nietzsche dramatizes himself, on this reading, but he does so precisely because he is incomplete, constantly confessing, if we hear him with care, that he is not quite there yet. When Nietzsche committed academic suicide, excommunicating himself from the priesthood of German philology with *The Birth of Tragedy*, he launched a new style of philosophizing in which he was compelled to assume a variety of masks.

Sloterdijk thinks that most readers have exaggerated the place of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* and, indeed, in Nietzsche's later thought as well. He suggests that we take seriously Nietzsche's insistence on the duality and balance of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Nietzsche stages the confrontation of these gods in the very texture of his performance as well as describing their meetings in the Athenian theater. Indeed, as soon as the Dionysian is introduced at the beginning of Nietzsche's text, he is careful to distinguish the Greek Dionysian from the barbarian version with its crude orgies and violence. For Sloterdijk, such gestures constitute "a clandestine doubling of the Apollonian. Bracketed within aesthetic parentheses and dramaturgical quotation marks, the singing he-goats are no longer libertines who regress to bestiality" (pp. 25, 30).

Sloterdijk is making a case for a Nietzsche who combines Dionysian enthusiasm with cynical materialism, issuing in a philosophy of the body. As in his earlier *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis, 1988), Sloterdijk aims at renewing a tradition of practical, materialist philosophy in which every action and gesture is significant. For him, Nietzsche's Socrates is a cynic, and the deep meaning of *The Birth of Tragedy* is not the eternal opposition of Apollo and Dionysus but "Dionysus Meets Diogenes; or The Adventures of the Embodied Intellect" (the title of one of his chapters). This is true of the practice of thinking itself: "His 'theory' is an oral guerrilla campaign. There is no longer anything holy, only heartbeats; no longer any spirit, only breath; no longer a god, only the movements of a mouth" (p. 63). I can imagine an existential Christian who would present Nietzsche's materialism (as Sloterdijk understands it) as a radical version of incarnation, thus deconstructing the challenge of the last words of *Ecce Homo*, "Have I been understood? *Dionysus versus the crucified!*" To this Sloterdijk replies that incarnation is "merely an episode within the eternal linguistic and spiritual resplendence of the *physis*, which has been going on ever" (p. 67).

The tone of Sloterdijk's writing is in many ways an echo of the manifesto on which he comments. The writing varies from the richly suggestive to the vague and the repetitious, inviting us to ask where his own self-dramatization is going. In a final chapter, Sloterdijk makes some helpful observations on "Pain and Justice" in response to those who see Nietzsche's thought as asocial and apolitical. Here he suggests that "Dionysian therapeutics" (enlightened by Diogenes?) may be what we need to deneutralize politics and to free the political realm from the search for "guilty parties" or scapegoats. While the young Nietzsche pinned his analogous hopes for Dionysian therapy on Wagner, it is not apparent who the postmodern artists-or theatrical thinkers-are who are capable of giving a radical embodiment to the aims of this manifesto in the Nietzschean vein.

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