

Nietzsche's Aesthetics

Primary Sources:

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Sections 1-9, in Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, pp. 33 – 72.

Background:

From the *Routledge Online Encyclopedia*:

Appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel when he was just 24 years old, Nietzsche was expected to secure his reputation as a brilliant young scholar with his first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy*). But that book did not look much like a work of classical scholarship. Bereft of footnotes and highly critical of Socrates and modern scholarship, it spoke in rhapsodic tones of ancient orgiastic Dionysian festivals and the rebirth of Dionysian tragedy in the modern world. Classical scholars, whose craft and temperament it had scorned, greeted the book with scathing criticism and hostility; even Nietzsche eventually recognized it as badly written and confused. Yet it remains one of the three most important philosophical treatments of tragedy (along with those of Aristotle and Hegel) and is the soil out of which Nietzsche's later philosophy grew.

For more of an overview, skim though pp. 9-13. This is Kaufmann's Introduction, which is sufficient, though he unfairly pooh-poohs the Dionysian and Apollinian distinction – especially considering that Nietzsche himself continually returns to Dionysus in his later philosophy.

In Sections 1 – 9, Nietzsche distinguishes between the Dionysian and Apollinian in “nature” and art. He then traces the history of Greek art, while following these two forces, describing how they merge in Attic Tragedy.

Questions:

- What are the Apollinian and Dionysiac principles of art?
- Which forms of art are Apollinian, which Dionysiac?
- What does it mean that the Apollinian and the Dionysiac are artistic powers that occur in nature itself without the mediation of an artist?
- What does it mean that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified” (p. 52, also p. 22)?
- What was the function of the tragedy in the ancient Greek culture?
- How did tragedy develop out of the chorus in the Dionysiac cult, and how did the Dionysiac enter the Apollinian culture of the Greeks in the first place?