

Against Temporal Nihilism: Overcoming
Impermanence in Friedrich Nietzsche's
Birth of Tragedy

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

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Date of submission for examination: October 2025

Abstract

Much of the recent discussion of nihilism in Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly in the work of Bernard Reginster, has focused on the idea of a crisis of value or meaning, a collapse of the moral and cultural frameworks that make human life intelligible or worthwhile. I approach the problem from a different angle. Reading Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), I develop what I call temporal nihilism. The suffering that comes with life's transience, the irreparable losses that time brings, is not an accidental misfortune, but something built into the structure of any finite existence that cares about itself and its world. Since this suffering cannot be avoided and its losses cannot be undone, existence itself can appear undesirable.

In my reading, the *Birth* stages a historical encounter with this problem. Its point of departure is Silenus, the figure who, when asked what is best for human beings, answers that it would have been better not to have been born at all. Silenus is the first temporal nihilist. I argue that his verdict on existence follows directly from the inescapability of suffering from transience. Early Greek culture, both in its Homeric and tragic forms, overcame this verdict not by refuting it but by transfiguring it. Through mytho-poetic art, a perspective is made available from which irreparable loss is not merely something to be endured, but something that belongs to a life that can be worthwhile. The decline of tragedy marks a shift toward the attempt to exclude suffering from transience from a worthwhile life. Socratic rationalism, the plays of Euripides, Hellenistic Greek New Comedy, and the modern faith in progress all share in this corrective logic, and each grapples with the recurrent threat of temporal nihilism, structural to any life lived in time. We cannot outrun suffering from transience, and if that is so, we may need an art capable of transfiguring irreparable loss again, not by diminishing it, but by making possible a form of life in which suffering from transience does not become a verdict on having loved it. This, I take to be the key message of Nietzsche's *Birth*.

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Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Béatrice Han-Pile, whose patience and honesty have shaped the course of this work. Her guidance combined care with rigour, and she seemed to know when to intervene and when to allow me to proceed unaided, even when I was most likely to obstruct myself. This thesis owes much to her influence.

I am also grateful to Christian Arnold, who first directed my attention to questions that would eventually lead me here. Although my path diverged from Political Science, the years spent as his research assistant remain formative, and his example continues to inform my sense of what academic life can be.

This work has benefited from the engagement of many others. I am grateful to colleagues in the School of Philosophical, Historical and Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Essex who read portions of this thesis and offered thoughtful comments and advice: Daniel Watts, Wayne Martin, Steven Gormely, Elisif Wasmuth, and Joerg Schaub.

I have also relied on the support, criticism, and friendship of Plamen Andreev, Daniel Shipsides, Ronja Heymann, Jason Burrows, Daniel Hamilton Chakrabarti, Anna Hartigan, Marie-Claire Melia, Clara Moreton, Niclas Rautenberg, and Peter Tsoukkas.

I owe thanks to my family, whose support has been a constant presence throughout the uncertainties of this process. I am especially indebted to my partner Anna, whose advice and encouragement have sustained me at crucial moments.

This research was generously funded by the Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (CHASE), whose support I gratefully acknowledge

Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes¹.

— *Ecclesiastes*

[T]ime is the most profound and the most tragic subject that human beings can think about. One might even say: the only tragic subject. All the tragedies we can imagine return, in the end, to a single tragedy: the passage of time. [...] It is the source of the feeling that existence is nothing².

— Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*

¹ Michael David Coogan et al., eds, 'Ecclesiastes', in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.2-4.

² Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. Hughe Price (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 197.

Introduction

It is difficult to imagine what it was like for Nietzsche, at the age of four, to lose his father in 1849. He describes the experience of this loss nine years on:

Up to now happiness and joy had shone upon us always: our life flowed on unperturbed, like a bright summer's day. But now black clouds piled up above us, lightning flashed, and hammer blows were sent from heaven to strike us. [...] Although I was very young and inexperienced, I still had some idea of death: the thought that I would be separated for ever from my dear father seized me and I wept bitterly (KGW 1.1 4 [77]).

The following year, his baby brother Joseph died as well. In recalling these losses, Nietzsche writes that his family's 'grief knew no bounds' (KGW 1.1 4 [77]). Such loss is not merely a matter of change, but of something more fundamental. It is a rupture that cannot be assimilated or undone. When Nietzsche is forced to leave Röcken, the village that held both his childhood joys and his sorrows, he is compelled to confront the fact that what is lost is not simply a place, but a world of meaning, a nexus of relationships and memories: 'How painful it was to abandon a village where one had experienced joy and sorrow, where the graves of my father and younger brother lay, where the villagers always surrounded me with love and friendliness' (KGW 1.1

4 [77]). Jonathan Lear observes that while ‘[c]hange is impersonal [...] Transience signifies impermanence, but there is also the suggestion that our hearts are in it’³. Nietzsche’s experience, then, is not just of time passing, but of time as a force of loss, taking from us those people and places we love and that constitute our sense of belonging⁴. This speaks to a fundamental human predicament, that we find ourselves dispossessed⁵ by transience, compelled to reckon with the reality of irreparable loss⁶.

It is, then, not enough to say that time passes, but that, in its passing, it takes, and that in this taking we encounter a particularly human form of suffering. The suffering I have in mind here is not simply a matter of loss, but of a wound that arises from our experience of transience itself⁷. I want to call this temporal nihilism. This term refers to the thought that the losses entailed by transience can make human existence itself seem undesirable. My concern in this dissertation is to trace how Nietzsche, in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)⁸, explores the origins and the historical development of this stance. Nietzsche begins with the Ancient Greeks, who responded to transience through art and philosophy, to the modern Europeans of the nineteenth century, who sought answers in scientific progress. What emerges

³ Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End: Mourning and Ethical Life* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022), 36.

⁴ Philosophically, Nietzsche would have encountered the issue of transience in his early intellectual hero, Arthur Schopenhauer, whom he first read in 1865 and studied diligently. Schopenhauer writes that ‘the way in which this vanity of all objects of the will makes itself known and comprehensible to the intellect [...] is primarily *time*. It is the form by whose means that vanity of things appears as their transitoriness, since by virtue of this all our pleasures and enjoyments come to nought in our hands’ (Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt Als Wille Und Vorstellung*, Sämtliche Werke (Suhrkamp, 2021), 2:734).

⁵ Judith Butler defines dispossession as a fundamental, ontological vulnerability wherein the self is ‘beside itself,’ inextricably bound to others. In the context of transience, this dispossession is most acutely realized through grief, as the loss of the other reveals that the I was never a sovereign, autonomous unit, but was instead partially constituted by the now-absent presence (Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (Verso, 2004), 28).

⁶ This experience qualifies for what Karl Jaspers calls *Grenzsituationen* (Limit Situations), which are inescapable realities like death, suffering, and guilt that shatter our everyday routines, forcing a "shipwreck" of objective certainty that compels the individual into an authentic philosophical confrontation with their own existence (Karl Jaspers, *Einführung in die Philosophie: zwölf Radiovorträge*, 31. Aufl., Neuausg. 1971, (19. Aufl. dieser Ausg.), Serie Piper 13 (Piper, 1994), 18–23).

⁷ We should note a further distinction here. When I say that we suffer from time’s passage, we may mean either that we suffer from what passes away in time or that we suffer from the very fact that time passes. These two senses are distinct, yet internally related. Loss can sharpen our awareness of succession, and the acute experience of succession can awaken the recognition that everything is destined to pass.

⁸ Henceforth *Birth*.

is a picture of successive cultures struggling to redeem existence from its vulnerability to transience.

It is common to approach nihilism as a moral or cultural diagnosis, one that concerns the loss of value or meaning⁹. Yet the role of transience itself as a source of nihilistic suffering has, for the most part, remained in the background of these discussions. This is not to say it is wholly absent. Bernard Reginster's influential account, for example, is framed in terms of value and meaning, but it gestures, if only indirectly, toward this temporal aspect, without developing it. What I want to do here is to bring this dimension into clearer view, and to suggest that transience is not simply a feature of nihilism as the loss of value or meaning, but a source of nihilism in its own right. As I hope to show, this aspect cannot be fully accommodated within Reginster's framework.

Reginster distinguishes between nihilism as disorientation and nihilism as despair. He argues that disorientation arises when our highest values and meanings lose their objective standing after the death of God (GS 125)¹⁰. Human beings, Reginster thinks, require their lives to have purpose, and the need for meaning is not easily set aside. So much so, Reginster argues, that '[n]ihilistic disorientation is a consequence of the frustration of that need: human beings need their existence to have purpose or meaning, but it proves to be a pointless succession of events'¹¹. What Reginster seems to imply is that the frustration here is not exhausted by the

⁹ One locus classicus of such diagnosis is Nietzsche's note from 1887: "Nihilism is a normal state of affairs. Nihilism: there is no goal; there is no answer to the question 'Why?' What does nihilism mean? — that the highest values are devalued" (KGW 8.1 9[35]).

¹⁰ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 27; for similar views on nihilism as disorientation see Richard Schacht, 'Nietzsche and Nihilism', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (1973): 65; Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 217; Michel Haar, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, trans. Michael Gendre (State University of New York Press, 1996), 11; John Richardson, *Nietzsche's System* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 65–66; Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 6.2 (Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), 69; Karl-Heinz Volkmann-Schluck and Bernd Heimbüchel, *Die Philosophie Nietzsches: der Untergang der abendländischen Metaphysik* (Königshausen & Neumann, 1991), 147; I follow Reginster in making no difference between value and meaning (Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 23).

¹¹ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 27. F.W.J. Schelling offers a early diagnosis of this form of nihilism in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of Revelation* (1842/43). Observing that belief in the progressive unfolding of truth has been eroded, he writes: 'One generation passes away, the other comes only to pass away again [...] Everything that happens only happens so that something else can happen again, which itself becomes the past in exchange for another [...] Far then from man and his endeavours making the world comprehensible, he himself is

mere absence of value. Rather, it is the way in which this absence is experienced as an emptiness of time. Time no longer functions as a horizon of mattering, a space in which things can gather significance. Events continue to occur, but they do not accumulate meaning. The passage of time is felt as pure succession, moment after moment, leading nowhere. The suffering from transience, on this account, is not primarily the grief of losing something valued. It is the anguish of a desire for meaning that finds nothing to attach itself to, that watches time pass and feels its passage as futile. Transience becomes painful not because it takes something away, but because it gives nothing back, and the need for meaning persists precisely enough to feel that emptiness as an affront. Consequently, nihilistic disorientation may give way to a kind of numbness as Nietzsche describes through the figure of the last man (TSZ, 'Zarathustra's Prologue' 5, 9-10). The aspiration to a greater purpose fades, and with it, our concern for it. What matters contracts to what can be immediately attained, perhaps an increase of power, or the satisfaction of desire¹².

Reginster identifies a different kind of nihilism he calls nihilistic despair, and which, like the first, is, implicitly, structured by a particular experience of time. On Reginster's account, nihilistic despair arises from 'the conviction that our highest values cannot be realized'¹³. He takes these values, among them truth, unity, perfection and happiness, as paradigmatic of the Western tradition, and argues that they are life-negating insofar as they define worth in opposition to the conditions of earthly existence¹⁴. The 'Christian ideal of eternal life', he writes, for instance, 'takes permanence to be an essential feature of perfection'

the incomprehensible [...] It is precisely He, the human being, who drives me to the last desperate question: why is there anything at all? why is there not nothing?" (Friedrich Joseph Wilhelm Schelling, 'Erstes Buch. Einleitung in Die Philosophie Der Offenbarung Oder Die Begründung Der Positiven Philosophie', in *Ausgewählte Schriften 1842-1852*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), 609)). Like Reginster, Schelling articulates a loss of orientation that renders temporal succession meaningless. Time, untethered from any transcendent purpose or symbolic structure, becomes a restless circulation of events without closure.

¹² Wendy Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023), 11; Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 6.2, 124–25.

¹³ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 9; Manuel Dries, 'Towards Adualism: Becoming and Nihilism in Nietzsche's Philosophy', in *Nietzsche on Time and History*, ed. Manuel Dries (de Gruyter, 2008), 114–16.

¹⁴ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 44–49.

and therefore ‘aspires to a life free from change and becoming’¹⁵. In this light, transience is not merely a limitation but a deficiency, and so becomes a ground for condemnation. Reginster again locates the emergence of despair in the aftermath of the death of God (GS 125), who had previously served to guarantee the realisation of these higher values, whether in this life or the next¹⁶. With the collapse of this guarantee, the permanence demanded by our ideals is no longer achievable, either within time or beyond it. The nihilist finds himself in a position where the values he affirms cannot be realised within the flux of existence, and no transcendent horizon remains to secure their fulfilment. As with disorientation, the suffering here is not simply the pain of loss. In both cases, the subject stands in a frustrated relation to transience, feeling its passage as either futile or condemning. What distinguishes despair is the conviction that the very nature of transient existence precludes the permanence our highest values require, and that there is no possibility of redeeming this exclusion beyond the limits of earthly life.

Reginster’s framework, as I understand it, identifies two significant routes into nihilism: the loss of objective meaning and the conviction that our highest values cannot be realised. Yet Nietzsche’s account of Christianity, in my view, complicates this picture in ways that Reginster’s approach does not fully capture¹⁷. For the Christian, temporal life is situated within a providential narrative and guided by stable, objective values¹⁸. In such a context, the kind of disorientation Reginster describes need not arise, nor must the Christian experience despair in his sense, since the highest values are not only realisable but are, in fact, divinely

¹⁵ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 226–27. See further Michel Haar, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, 12; Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Blackwell, 1999), 94; Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford University Press, 2001), 210; John Richardson, ‘Nietzsche on Time and Becoming’, in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Blackwell, 2006), 222; Hans-Jürgen Gawoll, *Nihilismus und Metaphysik*, *Spekulation und Erfahrung* Abteilung 2, *Untersuchungen* 9 (Frommann-Holzboog, 1989), 174.

¹⁶ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 45.

¹⁷ Andrew Huddleston, ‘Nietzsche on Nihilism’, *Philosopher’s Imprint* 19, no. 11 (2019): 8.

¹⁸ See: ‘What actually arouses indignation over suffering is not the suffering itself, but the senselessness of suffering: but neither for the Christian, who saw in suffering a whole, hidden machinery of salvation, nor for naïve man in ancient times, who saw all suffering in relation to spectators or to instigators of suffering, was there any such *senseless* suffering’ (GM II.7. 44).

assured beyond temporal existence. At the same time, Christianity can condemn transient life as fallen and sinful, and so regard it as deficient, unworthy, and undesirable (TI ‘Skirmisches of an Untimely Man’ 21; AC 18, 20, 43, 58; EH ‘Why I Write Such Good Books’, 1; ‘The Birth of Tragedy’, 2; BT ‘An Attempt at Self-Criticism’, 5)¹⁹. This, I think, brings to light something that standard readings of nihilism sometimes overlook. Nihilism is not only a crisis of meaning or value but can also take the form of an objection to existence itself (TSZ I ‘Of the Preachers of Death’; GM III, 11; GM III, 28, TI ‘The of Problem Socrates’ 1, AC 7)²⁰. The Christian does not suffer from meaninglessness. Rather, he suffers from the conviction that transient existence, by virtue of its fallen character, is deficient and undesirable, merely a transition to another free of suffering from transience. In contrast to Reginster’s two forms, the Christian denial of life is not a response to the loss of objective value or meaning, or to their unrealisability, but a rejection of existence rooted in the experience of transience itself.

If I am right about the Christian case, then Nietzsche’s view suggests that the objection to existence can arise even where meaning is preserved. Despite the differences between the Christian and Reginster’s two forms of nihilism, I would argue that what they share is a metaphysical bias. Transience is rendered problematic because it is measured against the standard of metaphysical eternity. The condemnation of transient existence is understood to follow from its perceived deficiency relative to a transcendent, permanent world. The Christian, for example, judges life by the standard of the eternal afterlife, while Reginster’s nihilists remain oriented toward metaphysical ideals of permanence. In both cases, suffering

¹⁹ See further KGW 8.1:34[204].

²⁰ This is recognised by, for example, Gianni Vattimo, *Nietzsche: An Introduction*, trans. Nicholas Martin (Stanford University Press, 2002), 117–18; Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Klostermann, 2000), 115; Michel Haar, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, 12; Laurence Lampert, *How Philosophy Became Socratic* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 145; Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et La Philosophie* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 169; Strangely, Reginster discusses life-negation quite extensively, but this does not lead him to build this into a third nihilistic option, besides disorientation and despair (Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 44–49).

from transience is treated as secondary, as the result of a metaphysical comparison, rather than as something primary and immediate.

But if suffering from transience arose only from comparison with metaphysical ideals of permanence, then the removal of such beliefs would leave loss emotionally neutral. Yet this surely cannot be right. Transience, I would argue, is painful in its own right, regardless of any metaphysical framework. Nietzsche, in *The Genealogy of Morals*, states that suffering becomes unbearable, even to the point of what he calls ‘suicidal nihilism’, when it lacks meaning or purpose (GM III.28, 120)²¹. However, this claim itself presupposes that suffering is already present and already experienced as problematic, prior to any interpretive system. Nietzsche makes this explicit in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where he describes the will’s deepest misery as its inability to undo the past, which leads it to interpret its suffering from transience as a moral injustice and to condemn all that is transient (TSZ ‘On Redemption’, 111)²². For my part, I therefore take the direction to run from suffering to interpretive system, rather than the reverse. This is further supported, I think, by the fact that even within frameworks that affirm the ultimate goodness of existence, a residue of negative affect can persist. Figures such as Job and Christ cry out in abandonment within systems that guarantee divine providence. Their cry does

²¹ “[S]uffering itself was not his problem, instead, the fact that there was no answer to the question he screamed, ‘Suffering for what?’ Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does not deny suffering as such: he wills it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering. The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind, – and the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning! Up to now it was the only meaning, but any meaning at all is better than no meaning at all; the ascetic ideal was, in every respect, the ultimate ‘faute de mieux’ par excellence. Within it, suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism” (GM III.28, 120).

²² Nietzsche writes: ‘The will cannot will backward; that it cannot break time and time’s greed – that is the will’s loneliest misery’ (TSZ II, ‘On Redemption’, 111). As Martin Heidegger has noted, Nietzsche’s reference to time’s ‘it was’ does not merely designate the past as a temporal dimension; it draws attention to the experience that time irreversibly passes into what has been (Heidegger, 115). This is not simply the experience of change or succession. If it were, it would not explain why irreversibility becomes the will’s “loneliest misery.” The will suffers not because time moves on, but because what has been cannot be undone. This condition escalates into revengeful resentment: “this alone is revenge itself: the will’s unwillingness toward time and time’s ‘it was’” (TSZ II, ‘On Redemption’, 111). The decisive step occurs when the will does not merely suffer irreversibility but interprets it morally as injustice, a move Nietzsche dramatises as madness. Because the will cannot undo what has been, existence itself comes to be understood as punishment: ‘Everything passes away, therefore everything deserves to pass away!’ (TSZ II, ‘On Redemption’, 111). Nihilism, on this account, is not identical with suffering, but emerges when suffering hardens into a moral condemnation of transient existence as such.

not signal a failure of belief or a collapse of meaning, but rather shows that suffering can hold us in its grip in ways that no system of meaning can entirely dissolve. I do not mean to suggest that metaphysical values and meanings are irrelevant to the experience of suffering. They can offer relief or intensify suffering into systematic condemnation. My point is that suffering from transience is already sufficient to provoke protest²³, and that metaphysical views typically arise as responses to that protest, rather than as its source (TI ‘Reason in Philosophy’ 1; BGE 2)²⁴.

It is not immediately clear how the experience of suffering from transience is supposed to connect with the more radical objection to transient life itself. The inference from ‘I suffer’ to ‘life is bad’ seems, at least without further argument, to lack justification. Why should suffering from transience make human existence unbearable or undesirable, or render it not worth continuing? It is tempting to reach for the idea of permanence here. There is a sense, often implicit in what matters to us, that it ought not to be lost, that it should persist. When it is lost, this sense of ought is left without an object, and may become a protest against the fleetingness of life²⁵. On this view, our objection to existence would rest on the fact that what matters to us does not endure, and so all is ultimately in vain²⁶. But this answer faces a significant difficulty. It is possible to acknowledge the possibility of permanent meanings and

²³ Jon Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 2–4.

²⁴ See further KGW 8.1:9[60].

²⁵ A vivid literary expression of this condition that Nietzsche would have known appears in Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, where the narrator’s melancholy intensifies not merely because things pass, but because their passing fails to yield anything lasting. He laments: “Can you say: That is! since everything passes by? [...] There is not a moment that does not consume you and those around you” (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Leiden Des Jungen Werther* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 61–62). What Werther seems to suffer is not impermanence per se, but a deeper metaphysical expectation that something enduring should arise from the flux. His horror stems from the absence of such permanence, revealing what Nietzsche would later diagnose as the modern pathology of transience, not the fact of passing, but the unbearable experience of it in the absence of myth or metaphysical grounding. Werther’s vision of nature as an ‘eternally devouring, eternally ruminating monster’ (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Die Leiden Des Jungen Werther*, 61–62) reflects a world in which time no longer redeems but only consumes. Goethe’s text thereby anticipates the modern configuration Nietzsche critiques, one where the passage of time becomes intolerable precisely because it no longer delivers lasting meaning.

²⁶ In Sigmund Freud’s essay *On Transience*, the poet exemplifies the need for permanence by lamenting the fleeting nature of beauty, a view Freud identifies as a defensive rebellion against the painful but inevitable reality of loss (Sigmund Freud, ‘On Transience’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XIV, trans. James Strachey (The Hogarth Press, 1957); see also Jon Stewart, *A History of Nihilism in the Nineteenth Century*, 272–74).

values in our lives, and yet still find ourselves condemning the transient nature of existence. The crucial point, then, cannot simply be the absence of permanence.

What, then, drives this transition? I want to suggest that it is irreparability. Permanence is a matter of what endures, whereas irreparability is a matter of what cannot be undone. These are related, but they are not the same. It is possible to accept that nothing lasts forever and still live well, provided that loss can be integrated into a meaningful whole, that what was lost mattered while it existed, and that its having mattered is not negated by its passing. But the experience of irreparable loss resists this integration. It is not simply that no framework is available to redeem or transfigure it. Even where such frameworks exist, even where one believes in resurrection, in eternal life, or in the persistence of meaning beyond death, the experience of irreparable loss can retain its full devastating weight. The Christian mourner might not only feel the loss as a temporary deprivation pending reunion. She also feels, and may feel overwhelmingly, that something has been taken that should not have been, that the world is diminished in a way that no future compensation can fully address. What gives transience its devastating force, then, is not simply that things fail to last, nor that no redemptive framework is available, but that some losses present themselves as absolute, as wounds that persist regardless of what we believe about them. Nietzsche, describing his experience of his father's death as a child, realises that he 'would be separated for ever' from his 'dear father'²⁷. Life without him is not simply altered, but marked by a wound that cannot be repaired or compensated. It is not just that something good has passed, but that what has passed cannot be recovered. This experience is not unique to Nietzsche. It names something that any finite being who loves and cares in a world governed by time must eventually encounter.

²⁷ It is worth noting that Nietzsche's description does not make him a temporal nihilist. He articulates the experience of irreparable loss that temporal nihilism draws on. But not everyone draws the same conclusion from that experience. To feel the force of 'for ever' is not yet to condemn existence. The temporal nihilist is one who moves from that encounter to a structural verdict: that because irreparable loss is unavoidable, existence as such is undesirable. Nietzsche, as we shall see, is deeply preoccupied with this move, and with the question of whether it can be resisted.

What leads to temporal nihilism is the recognition that irreparable loss is not an occasional misfortune, that such loss is a structural feature of existence, one that no form of human life can escape. To be human is, necessarily and inescapably, to suffer from transience. The temporal nihilist does not simply accumulate too many losses. Rather, she comes to see that transience is not an accident but is intrinsic to the human condition. Irreparability is not a contingent feature of particularly unlucky lives, but a structural consequence of living a finite, caring existence. Given enough time, wounds that do not heal are unavoidable. It is this recognition, I think, that can transform suffering from transience into condemnation. Temporal nihilism does not deny that life contains goods. Instead, it judges that those goods are structurally undermined by inevitable and irreparable loss, and that a life so constituted is, for that reason, undesirable. No metaphysical picture is required here. It is enough to recognise that transience is inescapable and that the suffering it brings can be unbearable. This, I want to suggest, is what the temporal nihilists understand. Their verdict is not merely that life contains suffering, but that a life in which irreparable loss is unavoidable is not worth having in the first place. This conclusion, Nietzsche thinks, is a recognition that any honest reckoning with finite existence must at some point confront, and it is one that cannot be easily dismissed or argued away. For this reason, temporal nihilism is not merely a philosophical position, but a recurring human threat, structural to any life lived in time. Nietzsche's *Birth*, I want to suggest, can be read as one of the most searching engagements with that threat in the philosophical tradition, tracing its historical expressions and testing the resources available to meet it.

Transience and Nihilism in the *Birth*

It may seem at first glance an unusual choice to focus on the *Birth*. The book is not generally taken as a text on temporality, nor is it standardly read as a systematic engagement with nihilism. When Nietzsche wrote the *Birth*, he had not introduced the term nihilism, and the work is more often approached through its aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions, above all

the opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and its relation to Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will²⁸. Nevertheless, I want to show that the problem later named nihilism is already present in Nietzsche's earliest book, even if not yet named as such. Several commentators have recognised this. Bernard Reginster, for instance, argues that the 'theme of nihilism—despair over the unrealizability of our highest values—lies at the heart of Nietzsche's earliest book, *The Birth of Tragedy*'²⁹ and that "[n]ihilism is simply a new term for an old idea, encapsulated starkly in 'the terrible wisdom of Silenus'"³⁰. Julian Young, similarly, maintains that the "Greeks had a problem—the threat of 'nihilism'"³¹, locating it likewise in Silenus' verdict that it is best for human beings not to be (BT 3, 23). For my purposes, what is striking is that Silenus' verdict, so often cited as a response to the suffering and absurdity of human life in general, is addressed specifically to the Homeric Greeks as an 'ephemeral race' (BT 3, 23). In the first chapter, I try to show that it is because existence is essentially ephemeral, and so always exposed to irreparable loss, that Silenus finds it undesirable. In this sense, Silenus emerges not only as the first nihilist in Nietzsche's narrative but as the first temporal nihilist, and the figure who establishes the point of departure for the history that follows.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that Nietzsche does not set out an explicit theory of time in the *Birth* either. Joan Stambaugh is right to observe that 'time still

²⁸ See, for example, Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (University of Chicago Press, 1991); James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford University Press, 2000); Béatrice Han-Pile, 'Nietzsche's Metaphysics in the Birth of Tragedy', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2006): 373–403, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00231.x>.

²⁹ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 51.

³⁰ Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 52, 227; see further Bernard Reginster, 'Art and Affirmation', in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford University Press, 2014), 27; Michel Haar, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, trans. Michael Gendre (State University of New York Press, 1996), 167–68; Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4. ed., 20th pr (Princeton University Press, 2011), 122; Ken Gemes and Chris Skyes, 'Nietzsche's Illusion', in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford University Press, 2014), 81; Eike Brock, *Nietzsche Und Der Nihilismus* (de Gruyter, 2015), 127, 169; Katie Brennan, 'The Wisdom of Silenus: Suffering in The Birth of Tragedy', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49, no. 2 (2018): 174–93, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.49.2.0174>.

³¹ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 170.

plays no constitutive role in the *Birth*, but is mentioned only in passing³². I do not mean to claim that the *Birth* presents a fully developed philosophy of time. My concern is rather with the temporal dimension of its historical narrative, a dimension that, I think, has not received sufficient attention. What moves the narrative from one cultural moment to the next is not simply a shift in aesthetic form or philosophical outlook, but a transformation in how transience is experienced. Each cultural moment in the *Birth* is characterised by its own mode of temporal experience, and it is this succession that, in my view, gives Nietzsche's narrative its existential depth and links it to what is widely acknowledged as a central concern of the *Birth*: the overcoming, or failure to overcome, of suffering through art, philosophy, or science.

I take the experience of time's passage to be central for understanding the *Birth*, and this becomes apparent when we consider the decisive historical turning point of the West, which Nietzsche identifies as the death of tragedy. In my reading, this event marks a transition from mythical temporality to historical time, a shift in how human beings experience and relate to transience. Nietzsche describes a key function of myth as its capacity to open a perspective through which experience appears timeless:

the Greeks had been compelled to connect everything they experienced, immediately and involuntarily, to their myths, indeed they could only understand their experiences through this connection; thereby even the most immediate present was bound to appear to them straight away *sub specie aeterni* and, in a certain sense, as timeless (BT 23, 110)³³.

³² Joan Stambaugh, *The Problem of Time in Nietzsche*, trans. John F. Humphrey (Associated University Press Inc., 1987), 34. A few further authors who note the role of temporality in the birth see Robin Small, *Time and Becoming in Nietzsche's Thought* (Continuum, 2010), 11, 36, 49–53; Espen Hammer, *Philosophy and Temporality from Kant to Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 125–43; Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Der Abschied: Theorie Der Trauer* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2014), 424–45.

³³ This function has been stressed by Peter Poellner, 'Myth, Art and Illusion in Nietzsche', in *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Peter Poellner and Michael Bell (Rodopi, 1998), 64; see further Peter Poellner, *Value in Modernity: The Philosophy of Existential Modernism in Nietzsche, Scheler, Sartre, Musil* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 25.

It is easy to misread this passage as if Nietzsche were simply repeating the familiar Platonic-Christian contrast between transient life and a timeless beyond, where transience is seen as a deficiency in need of redemption. However, such a reading conflates myth with the metaphysical tradition it is meant to be distinguished from. In the *Birth*, Plato is already set in opposition to the mythic culture of tragedy (BT 14, 68-69), and in his early lectures on the pre-Socratic philosophers Nietzsche accuses Anaximander of fleeing from the transience of life into metaphysics (PTAG 4, 48)³⁴, a charge that anticipates his later critique of Platonic-Christian metaphysics as nihilistic. For Nietzsche, myth and metaphysics are not the same.

What distinguishes myth from metaphysics, for Nietzsche, is that myth opens a perspective of eternity upon transient life, from which mortal existence can appear desirable rather than something to be rejected. This already signals a reversal of the metaphysical reading. Mythic temporality does not promise eternal life or permanent meaning, nor does it offer an escape from transience. Rather, it provides a perspective from which suffering can be seen as constitutive of human greatness rather than as a deficiency to be eliminated. This transformation of the experience of transience itself is what I trace across the Homeric and tragic cultures in the first three chapters, where the mechanism remains constant even as what it must accomplish changes. In chapter one, the Homeric Greeks confront suffering from transience in its most immediate form, the fate of dying young, and the epic opens a perspective of eternity upon that fate, from which the hero's finitude is not a lack but the very source of his life's beauty and desirability. Chapters two and three turn to the tragic Greeks, where suffering

³⁴ Nietzsche imagines Anaximander asking: "How can anything pass away which has a right to be? Whence that restless, ceaseless coming-into-being and giving birth, whence that grimace of painful disfiguration on the countenance of nature, whence the never ending dirge in all the realms of existence? From this world of injustice, of insolent apostasy from the primeval one-ness of all things, Anaximander flees into a metaphysical fortress from which he leans out, letting his gaze sweep the horizon. At last, after long pensive silence, he puts a question to all creatures: "What is your existence worth? And if it is worthless, why are you here?" (PTAG 4, 48) One might read this as an early expression of the metaphysical impulse to escape transience by relocating into the realm of timeless being, from whose perspective, transient life seems deficient and unworthy of life. On this metaphysical denial see further Klaus Heinrich, *Parmenides Und Jona* (Suhrkamp, 1966), 61–128; Michael Theunissen, *Negative Theologie Der Zeit* (Suhrkamp, 2015), 89–130.

from transience has changed into the loss of the ethical self through the passage of time. In chapter two I reconstruct this experience of suffering and in chapter three I show how tragedy overcomes it, opening a perspective of eternity from which the destruction of the hero is not simply loss but an expression of the primordial life that underlies and exceeds the individual. In both cultures, mytho-poetic art overcomes suffering from transience not by denial or escape but by transforming the experience of transience itself, and so dissolving the grounds from which Silenus' verdict on existence was issued.

The death of tragedy, as I understand it, marks the transition into what Nietzsche calls history: 'The opposite of this [mythic transfiguration] occurs when a people begins to understand itself historically and to demolish the metaphysical buttresses surrounding it' (BT 23, 110; cf. 10, 53). In structural terms, historical temporality lacks a perspective of eternity and instead perceives suffering from transience '*sub specie saeculi*' (BT 23, 111), from the standpoint of the present. When suffering is seen from within time, it acquires a history, a cause, and what has a cause can, in principle, be identified and corrected (BT 15, 73). It is not simply that tragedy is criticised and then dies, with historical existence arising in its place. Rather, Socrates and Euripides already embody this historical mode of experience, and it is this mode that proves incompatible with myth, and it is the conflict between these temporal experiences that leads to myth's demise. Socrates opposes tragedy because it presents suffering from transience as an inevitable fate, something that can only be endured or, at best, consoled through myth. In contrast, for him, suffering is not fate, but a result of ignorance, and its true cause can be identified and eliminated through rational self-cultivation. Euripides brings this logic into tragedy itself. Suffering now arises not from fate but from the reasoning of heroes overcome by passion and caught in unintended consequences. With this shift, the perspective of eternity disappears from the art form, and the gods persist only as empty mechanisms of compensation rather than as perspectives on transient life. Tragedy ends when its mythic

foundation is denied, and with it, the only mode of temporal experience capable of integrating suffering from transience into a desirable life is lost.

Each of the historical strategies that follow assumes that suffering from transience is a problem to be solved rather than an experience to be transformed, and it is this assumption that I take to be the origin of temporal nihilism in its later and more pronounced forms. In chapter four, I examine this corrective structure in its most explicit form in Socrates, where the self that knows itself rationally is, in principle, immune to dissolution by time. This strategy succeeds on its own terms, but only by closing off the experience of transience rather than integrating it, and it is this foreclosure that, in my view, sets the stage for what follows.

In chapter five, I consider what happens when the Socratic corrective logic, initially the preserve of the philosopher, is extended to the lives of ordinary people. In the tragedies of Euripides, we find reasoning entering the everyday, but it does not bring about the rational self-mastery that Socratic optimism might have promised. Rather, it seems to introduce a new kind of suffering, one that arises from the awareness of transience, and which the old mythic structures can no longer transform but only attempt to compensate for. The Hellenistic Greeks, as I read Nietzsche, inherit this diminished framework, but even the possibility of compensation is lost. Suffering appears as something that ought to be correctable, yet proves resistant to correction and eludes compensation as well. What remains is a tendency toward suppression, a kind of superficial cheerfulness that serves only to hold off, for a time, the threat of temporal nihilism. This, I argue, marks a significant moment in the history of Socratism, when its logic reaches those it cannot ultimately serve.

In chapter six, I shift my attention to Nietzsche's account of modernity, where the corrective logic is no longer confined to the individual but becomes the organising principle of an entire civilisation. The modern commitment to historical progress, as I understand it, rests on the belief that existence can be improved by continually correcting its conditions in pursuit

of a better future. Yet whereas Socrates corrects to inhabit the present more fully, the logic of progress seems to devalue the present altogether, orienting us toward a future that remains perpetually out of reach. It is here, I think, that modernity becomes nihilistic in a sense that is distinct from anything in Socratic thought. Progress, on this view, does not integrate the suffering that comes with transience but rather seeks to avoid it, so that the present moment is always already set aside before any genuine attachment can be formed or lost. Nietzsche, as I read him, finds this experience most fully realised in Goethe's Faust.

What is at stake in Nietzsche's historical narrative, as I read it, is not only a diagnosis but a question about how one ought to live. The question Nietzsche asks is whether suffering from the transience of existence can or should be part of a desirable life, and, if so, how such a life is achievable. For him, the answer lies in art, and more specifically in mytho-poetic art, which opens a perspective of eternity upon transient life, from which that life can appear desirable. This response is stronger than avoidance, which reduces investment to limit exposure to loss, and stronger than resignation, which accepts loss but quietly devalues the transient world. It does not blunt caring or relocate value to a realm beyond this transient life. Instead, it sustains attachment to life while fully acknowledging its transience.

In the 1886 Preface, 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism', added fourteen years after the *Birth's* first publication, Nietzsche turns a critical eye upon his first work, and in particular upon what he names its artist-metaphysic. Nietzsche has become critical of his earlier view that art opens a metaphysical perspective on the suffering of life, disclosing a reality beneath appearances that redeems suffering by anchoring it in something unchanging. He now regards this view as a kind of escape, a consolation that avoids rather than affirms the realities of existence. This prompts a question for any reader of the *Birth*. What, if anything, remains after Nietzsche's own critique? For my part, I do not find the metaphysical doctrine that Nietzsche himself later rejects to be the most significant aspect of the work. Instead, I am drawn to the

insight that persists despite it. Nietzsche's account suggests to me that art can open a transfiguring perspective on transient life, and, as I hope to show, this requires a metaphysical foundation to be effective. Kathleen Higgins' work on aesthetic practices, which enable a 'reengagement with life'³⁵ after loss, not by erasing suffering but by transforming the way it is lived, seems to me to illustrate this point. It is this capacity of art to make even suffering from transience appear as part of a life that can still be desired, rather than a ground for nihilistic rejection, that I take to be the central achievement of Nietzsche's in the *Birth*.

Reaching the Mind Through Its Works

Here, I want to clarify the methodological approach I take to the *Birth*. My interest lies in tracing the, in a broad sense, genealogical and phenomenological roots of temporal nihilism. I am concerned with the ways in which, according to Nietzsche, transience is experienced in different cultures throughout history. The method I adopt requires that I attend both to the experiential content of Nietzsche's claims and to their interpretive and evaluative dimensions.

Phenomenology, in the broad sense, is concerned with the 'what it is like' dimension of experience. With how the world manifests itself to us, and with the structures that underlie and shape that manifestation³⁶. Peter Poellner has argued persuasively that Nietzsche is an important precursor to the phenomenological movement inaugurated by Edmund Husserl³⁷, and that it matters greatly for Nietzsche how the world manifests itself as significant to us because significance fundamentally determines our practical relation to self and world³⁸.

³⁵ Kathleen Marie Higgins, *Aesthetics in Grief and Mourning* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), 2.

³⁶ Alexander Schnell, *Was ist Phänomenologie?* (Vittorio Klostermann, 2019), Introduction, ch. 1; Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Reprinted (Routledge, 2004), Introduction; Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge university press, 2000), ch. 4.

³⁷ Peter Poellner, 'Phenomenology and Science in Nietzsche', in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Blackwell, 2006), 298; Rudolf Boehm, 'Husserl and Nietzsche', in *Nietzsche and Phenomenology*, ed. Élodie Boubilil and Christine Daigle (Indiana University Press, 2013).; For a Nietzschean critique of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, see Didier Franck, *Nietzsche et l'Ombre de Dieu* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2010); see further Élodie Boubilil and Christine Daigle, *Nietzsche and Phenomenology: Power, Life, Subjectivity*, Studies in Continental Thought (Indiana University Press, 2013).

³⁸ Peter Poellner, 'Phenomenology and Science in Nietzsche', 307.

Nietzsche's writing in the *Birth* suggests itself to a phenomenological reading³⁹. In the 1886 Preface, Nietzsche proposes to understand the theoretical culture of science not as a neutral epistemic achievement but as springing from the world of lived experience: 'what indeed is the meaning of all science, viewed as a symptom of life?' (BT 'Attempt at Self-Criticism' 1, 4). He goes further, questioning whether science is at its core a fearful response to a world that manifests itself to the Socratic subject as pessimistic: 'Is scientific method perhaps no more than fear of and flight from pessimism? [...] Socrates, Socrates, was that perhaps your secret?' (BT 'Attempt at Self-Criticism' 1, 4). The question Nietzsche poses in the *Birth* is therefore phenomenological at its root. How have people throughout history, people like Socrates, experienced their self and world? And, more specifically, how are art, philosophy, and science rooted in, and expressions of a life?⁴⁰

Yet Nietzsche is not simply interested in providing neutral descriptions of experience. He evaluates what he describes, praising the pre-Socratic Greeks while criticising those that came after. This might seem to complicate a phenomenological reading, but I want to suggest that it does not. Hermeneutic phenomenology holds that there is no neutral description of experience in the first place. Any attempt to describe experience already involves

³⁹ I also considered a more psychological reading suggested by Peter Sloterdijk, for example, for whom *The Birth of Tragedy* provides psycho-archaeology (Peter Sloterdijk, *Der Denker Auf Der Bühne: Nietzsches Materialismus* (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986). Although, Nietzsche characterised himself as a psychologist, but it is not clear that he was committed to any naturalistic view of psychology as Brian Leiter has argued (Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality* (Routledge, 2015). Martin Heidegger and Alexander Nehamas, for example, provide non-naturalistic readings of Nietzsche (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 6.2; Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche Life as Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1994). Through a psychological reading I would commit myself to hard claims about human psychology (in particular psychological functions) which is methodologically and substantively contentious. The phenomenological method it is more deflationary and sufficient to adequately establish the arguments I seek to make.

⁴⁰ Overall, the historical focus of my work my therefore responds to the late Edmund Husserl's urge for phenomenology to become historical, that is, to pay attention to the ways in which experience is itself historically constituted (Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis Der Europäischen Wissenschaften Und Die Transzendente Phänomenologie*, 19). However, my aim is not only historiographical in the above sense but also critical. By looking at the prehistory of nihilism I hope to excavate important critical resources for addressing our modern experience of nihilism and transience. Phenomenology can be especially helpful here as it helps to make explicit what is often implicit in experience.

interpretation, shaped by prior commitments, perspectives and concerns⁴¹. Nietzsche's evaluative stance is not a distortion of phenomenological description but an instance of what hermeneutic phenomenology takes all description to be. This means that taking his descriptions seriously as phenomenological claims does not require bracketing his evaluations. It requires interpreting them, asking what understanding of experience they express and whether that understanding is adequate to what it describes.

This has a direct consequence for how I read the *Birth*. Nietzsche is not simply recounting what past peoples experienced. He is making evaluative claims about the adequacy of their responses to transience, whether they truly overcame temporal nihilism or only postponed, avoided, or concealed it. In this sense, the *Birth* treats cultural products such as epic, tragedy, myth, philosophy, and science as expressions of underlying modes of experiencing existence, and it interprets those modes by asking whether they allow life to remain genuinely desirable. My reading must therefore be hermeneutic in a double sense. It reconstructs the experiences Nietzsche describes, examines the evaluative framework through which he interprets them, and brings both into critical engagement. I do not simply report what Nietzsche says. I treat his descriptions and his judgments as interpretive acts that call for reconstruction, evaluation, and, where necessary, critique.

My approach introduces a further methodological difficulty. As Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it, 'mind of man is in his works,' and 'cannot be separated from them; it can only be reached through them'⁴². But if experience can only be reached through its cultural expressions, and if those expressions are always already interpreted rather than neutral, then the hermeneutic circle tightens in a particular way when we turn to the past. To reach the mind through its works risks reconstructing the inner lives of authors or original audiences, and this immediately raises

⁴¹ Alexander Schnell, *Was ist Phänomenologie?*, 46–46; 65–80; Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 74–89.

⁴² Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Religions, histoires, raisons*, Bibliothèques 10-18 (10-18, 2006), 68.

the problem of anachronism. Bernard Williams reminds us that while ‘[c]ertain materials and elements are universal; what is local and various are the ways in which the materials are arranged, emphasised and interpreted’⁴³. Suffering from transience may be universal, but the experience and expression of that suffering are culturally specific. Any interpretation of past experience risks importing its own cultural assumptions unless it remains attentive to the particular contexts and the embedded, culturally conditioned forms in which experiences of transience are expressed.

This problem is real, but it does not undermine the approach I am taking here, for a reason that follows directly from the hermeneutic phenomenological framework. I am not reading the *Birth* as a historical reconstruction of what Homer meant or what an Athenian audience felt during the performance of Sophocles’ tragedies. Rather, I am treating it as a sequence of staged encounters with the problem of temporal nihilism, where each historical figure or cultural product serves as a point of entry for philosophical reflection on the existential possibilities that certain cultural forms open up or close off. History is not the end but the medium. Williams’ caution about cultural specificity remains important and shapes my reading throughout, but the idea of staged encounters provides the more basic methodological safeguard. It shifts the question from what past actors experienced inwardly to what modes of existing in time certain cultural forms make available, a question that is philosophical rather than historical, and one that a hermeneutic phenomenological reading is equipped to pursue.

This framing also clarifies the status of the figures Nietzsche places on that stage. When Nietzsche turns to Achilles, Oedipus, or Faust, he is not, as I read him, offering portraits of particular individuals, nor do I treat these figures as representing the lived experience of every member of their respective cultures. Rather, Nietzsche uses them as ways of diagnosing, in

⁴³ Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 68.

dramatic form, the shape of a culture's experience of transience, the dominant pattern that its art brings to expression. The situation of Socrates⁴⁴ and Euripides⁴⁵ is, in Nietzsche's account, intentionally distinct, and this distinction matters methodologically. While they too are taken as expressions of a broader cultural development, Nietzsche also treats them as historical individuals whose actions and choices serve to define and consolidate a new experience of time, and whose philosophical and artistic interventions shaped the direction of Western history. My argument proceeds within the framework of Nietzsche's reading, but I do not take a position on the question of historical causation. What I am concerned with throughout is the structure of the encounters Nietzsche stages, the forms of temporal experience they express, and whether the responses they embody are adequate to the problem of temporal nihilism that runs through them.

⁴⁴ On Nietzsche's complicated relationship to Socrates see Sarah Kofman, *Socrates: Fictions of a Philosopher* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1998), 221–42; Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 391–411.

⁴⁵ On Nietzsche's complicated relationship to Euripides see Paul Raimond Daniels, *Nietzsche and The Birth of Tragedy* (Acumen, 2013), 108–24.

1.

The Homeric Greeks: Suffering from Ephemerality and its Apolline Transfiguration

In the *Iliad*, Homer compares human beings to leaves: ‘Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men. Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth, now the living timber bursts with the new buds and spring comes round again. So one generation of men will grow while another dies away’⁴⁶. Although it is structured by a certain natural, cyclical temporality, the simile draws attention to the role of contingency. The wind, which brings the leaves to the ground, stands for this element of unpredictability⁴⁷. I cannot say in advance where the wind will carry the leaves, nor when it will begin or end. In this respect, the leaves seem to offer a figure for the limits of self-determination in human life. We may imagine ourselves as

⁴⁶ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.146-150.

⁴⁷ Jonas Grethlein, *Das Geschichtsbild Der Ilias: Eine Untersuchung Aus Phänomenologischen Und Narratologischer Perspektive*, 85; On the symbolism of wind in Greek poetry see further Michael Theunissen, *Pindar: Menschenlos Und Wende Der Zeit*, 429. See also Simonides captures this existential uncertainty well: ‘Men have no foresight, but from day to day they live like cattle, knowing not at all how God will bring each matter to its end; yet everybody feeds on hope and trust throughout his vain endeavour. Some await tomorrow, some the turning seasons; there’s no man does not think he’ll reach next year the Wealth-god’s darling, and society’s. But one is overtaken by old age before he makes his goal, others succumb to grim diseases, others slain in war Hades escorts below dark earth, while some die out at sea [...] So we are spared no ill, but numberless dangers and hurts for which we cannot plan exist for mortals (Simonides, ‘Fragment 1’, in *Greek Lyric Poetry*, trans. Martin L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16).

autonomous agents, but we are also subject to forces that lie outside our control. The moment of death brings this contingency into sharp relief. As Jonas Grethlein has pointed out, with the exception of suicide, the causes and timing of death are not matters we can determine for ourselves, just as the wind scatters the withering leaves unpredictably⁴⁸. In that fuller sense, the simile is an image of the transience of human life⁴⁹.

According to Nietzsche, the Homeric Greeks did not simply overlook the pessimism that might seem to follow from the recognition of transience. Rather, they confronted the possibility that life, given its transience, might not be worth the cost, a possibility mythically expressed in the wisdom of Silenus (BT 3, 22-23), which, I argue, takes suffering from transience as the ground for objecting to existence. Yet they did not turn away from this verdict. Through their Apollonian art, the Homeric Greeks emerged from the world that preceded them, the Titanic order, the primordial age of fate and Kronos, the world in which Silenus' wisdom belongs⁵⁰, and established a culture capable of desiring life⁵¹. It is this art that enables existence

⁴⁸ Jonas Grethlein, *Das Geschichtsbild Der Ilias: Eine Untersuchung Aus Phänomenologischen Und Narratologischer Perspektive*, 86.

⁴⁹ The importance of suffering from the passage of time for the Homeric poetry has widely been recognised in classical scholarship. See, e.g., Marion Tait, 'The Tragic Philosophy of the Iliad', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 74 (1943): 49–59; Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Von Homers Welt Und Werk* (K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1965); Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (University of California Press, 1984); Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Clarendon Press, 2009); Lorenzo F. Garcia, *Homeric Durability: Telling Time in the Iliad* (Center for Hellenic Studies, 2013); Michael Clarke, *Achilles beside Gilgamesh: Mortality and Wisdom in Early Epic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jan Assmann, *Tod Und Jenseits Im Alten Ägypten* (C.H. Beck, 2003).

⁵⁰ Nietzsche speaks of 'the wood-god Silenus' (BT 7, 40), a description that recurs in the context of the Titanic order the Homeric Greeks overcame: 'That enormous distrust of the Titanic forces of nature, that *moira* which throned, unpitying, above all knowledge, that vulture of man's great friend, Prometheus, that terrifying lot drawn by the wise Oedipus, that curse upon the family of Atreus which compels Orestes to kill his mother, in short that *whole philosophy of the wood-god*' (BT 3, 23; first emphasis mine).

⁵¹ Accessing the primordial strata beneath the Homeric worldview requires an imaginative leap rather than historical excavation. In both the *Birth* and 'Homer's Contest' (1872, HC), Nietzsche philosophically probes how the earlier Titanic state shaped experience prior to the Apolline order, inviting the reader to 'stride backwards into the pre-Homeric world, without Homer's guiding and protecting hand' and to 'imagine the air of Hesiod's poems' (HC 1, 175). But this invitation already concedes the difficulty. Hesiod belongs to the Homeric world, not the Titanic, and his poems are no less a poetic mediation than Homer's. The pre-Homeric world is not directly available even through Hesiod. Imagining it is already an imaginative act. Nietzsche acknowledges as much: 'But what lies behind the world of Homer, as the womb of everything Hellenic? In the latter, we are already lifted beyond the purely material fusion by the extraordinary artistic precision, calmness and purity of the lines: its colours, through an artistic deception, seem lighter, gentler and warmer, its people, in this warm, multi-coloured light, seem better and more likeable' (HC, 175). The effort to reach beyond Homer's aesthetic surface thus risks revealing a vision already refracted by the very poetic imagination one seeks to surpass.

to appear as something desirable, not by evading Silenus' wisdom but by transforming the experience of transience from which it arises. Nietzsche describes this process as a gradual development: 'under the influence of the Apolline instinct (*Trieb*), the Olympian divine order of joy developed out of the original, Titanic divine order of terror in a series of slow transitions, in much the same way as roses burst forth from a thicket of thorns' (BT 3, 23)⁵².

This overcoming is often taken to be the central achievement of Homeric culture. Nietzsche himself describes the Apollonian culture as having 'to overthrow the realm of the Titans and slay monsters, and, by employing powerful delusions and intensely pleasurable illusions, gain victory over a terrifyingly profound view of the world' (BT 3, 24). This language has led many commentators to interpret the Apollonian response as a form of self-deception. Julian Young, for example, claims: 'Self-deception is at the heart of the Apollonian solution to pessimism'⁵³. On this view, the Homeric Greeks are said to have covered over suffering with

⁵² Similarly, according to G.W.F. Hegel's classical interpretation, the Olympian order signals the overcoming of nature by spirit. It constitutes the 'turning point of the whole' (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen Über Die Philosophie Der Geschichte*, 12:299; see also Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen Über Die Philosophie Der Religion II*, 17:100). The Titans, as the elder powers, represent that which is still undeveloped and natural, 'beings of nature from whom dominion is wrested. Although they are still venerated afterwards, it is not as rulers, for they have been consigned to the edge of the earth' (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen Über Die Philosophie Der Geschichte*, 12:299). The succession of chthonic by the Olympian powers entails an overcoming that does not simply substitute what has been surpassed but rather transforms and preserves it (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen Über Die Philosophie Der Geschichte*, 12:300), a view Nietzsche shares. Like Nietzsche, too, (BT 2, 20), F.W.J. Schelling similarly thinks that Homer represents, 'a whole era, he is the predominant force, the principle of an era [*das Prinzip einer Zeit*]' (Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in Die Philosophie Der Mythologie*, Ausgewählte Schriften in 6 Bänden (Suhrkamp, 2019), 5:II/ 1, 19). For Schelling, Homer's and Hesiod's articulation of the Olympian order 'out of a past unfathomable' (Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in Die Philosophie Der Mythologie*, 5:II/ 1, 20) established Hellenic life full of youthful vitality: 'In the Homeric poetry everything glitters with newness, as it were; here this historical world of the gods is still in its first freshness and youth' (Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in Die Philosophie Der Mythologie*, 5:II/ 1, 20). Nietzsche, similarly, sees the significance of myth as restoring to a people 'their healthy, creative, natural energy' (BT 23, 108).

⁵³ Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 44, cf. 48: "'For what the solution offers as a way of overcoming pessimism, of avoiding the pessimist's judgment on life, is self-deception, telling oneself 'lies'"; Reginster further argues that Apollonian semblance is the 'avoidance or evasion, a deliberate ignorance of the true character of existence, or a disengagement from it' (Bernard Reginster, 'Art and Affirmation', in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford University Press, 2014), 200; Daniel Came, 'The Themes of Affirmation and Illusion in The Birth of Tragedy and Beyond', in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, First published in paperback, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford University Press, 2016), 211: 'The position of the later Nietzsche is basically the position of *The Birth of Tragedy*: one must falsify—whether by evasion or explicit falsehood—the horrors of life to some degree in order to affirm it'; and: 'epic poetry provide us with illusions that perfect the ugliness and confusion of everyday existence, making our own lives

beautiful illusions, making existence bearable, thwarting the draw of Silenus' wisdom, giving in to the intolerability of suffering. But it is worth asking whether this constitutes a genuine victory or merely suppresses the problem. If the Silenic wisdom is simply covered over by illusion, then the Titanic order is not overcome, but only deferred.

I offer a different account. Alongside the language of delusion and illusion, Nietzsche repeatedly uses the term transfiguration. He speaks of 'the aim of all art, which is to effect a metaphysical transfiguration' (BT 24, 113), of 'the Apolline power of transfiguration' (BT 25, 116), and, in the *Dionysian Worldview* (DW), an early draft of parts of the *Birth*, he speaks of the Homeric strategy as one of viewing 'its own existence in a transfiguring mirror' in order to 'protect itself with this mirror against the Medusa' (DW 2, 125, cf. BT 3, 24). The Medusa image is instructive. Perseus does not defeat the Medusa by closing his eyes, by refusing to see what would destroy him. He succeeds by finding a way to look that does not result in destruction. It is the mirror that allows for reflection without direct confrontation. This is not self-deception, but a change in perspective, a shift in how the threatening reality of suffering is experienced, not its suppression or denial⁵⁴. How this transfiguration operates, through the divine mirror, through semblance, through the dream-art of epic, is the subject of what follows.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first aims to clarify the nature of the Silenic verdict, arguing that it is not a response to suffering in general, but specifically to suffering

seem worth living' (Daniel Came, 'The Themes of Affirmation and Illusion in The Birth of Tragedy and Beyond', 214).

⁵⁴ As Richard Schacht rightly observes: 'If it is the case, however, that Apollinian art is thus 'called into being as the complement and consummation of existence' (ibid.), it follows that we have here to do with no mere illusion which leaves the reality of human life unaffected. It may not fundamentally alter the human condition; but if it is in some significant sense the 'consummation of existence,' it may be truly said to effect a significant transformation of 'existence,' or at least that portion of it which is the reality of human life. Art may be created by man, but man is also recreated or transfigured by art. This kind of experience and spirituality which become attainable in relation to the idealized images of Apollinian art may not constitute an elevation of those who attain to them entirely beyond the reach of the entanglements of ordinary life, and beyond the deeper harsh realities of existence in this world. Yet they do render the existence of those attaining to them qualitatively different from that of those who remain entirely immersed in the former, or who further succeed only in finding occasional respite through Dionysian experience. It is Nietzsche's appreciation of the magnitude of this qualitative difference that accounts for his celebration of the achievement of the archaic Greeks in their creation of Apollinian art' (Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 496).

from transience, the experience of irreversible loss that leads to the conclusion that existence is not worth living. The second part examines how the Homeric Greeks responded to this verdict through Apollonian art, and how the transfiguration of suffering from transience can render transience itself a ground for affirming existence.

The Silenic Verdict: Ephemerality and the Objection to Existence

Nietzsche draws our attention to a particular kind of suffering that comes from living transient lives which, as he sees it, lies at the heart of the Homeric Greek experience. He writes that ‘the real *pain* of Homeric man refers to his departure from this existence, particularly to imminent departure’ (BT 3, 24). The pain of ‘imminent departure’ highlights the suffering that comes with the anticipation of the irreversible separation from a life that is felt to be genuinely worth having. This presupposes attachment, that existence is valued enough that its loss is experienced as a genuine deprivation rather than a mere cessation. Nietzsche is clear that they did not wish to die, observing that ‘the very worst thing for them was to die soon, the second worst ever to die at all’ (BT 3, 24). He draws attention to a scene in the *Odyssey* in which even the greatest hero expresses a preference for continued existence, however diminished, over the status of the dead: ‘[i]t is not unworthy of the greatest hero to long to go on living, even as a day-labourer’ (BT 3, 24)⁵⁵. Even the humblest form of life retains a value that no condition of non-existence can match. The Homeric Greek does not suffer from transience despite valuing life moderately, but because she values it absolutely.

⁵⁵ Achilles laments: ‘O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying. I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on, than be a king over all the perished dead’ (Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), XI. 488-492).

Thus, Nietzsche, echoing themes in Homer's *Iliad*⁵⁶ and Hesiod's *Works and Days*⁵⁷, observes that the laments of early Greek poetry do not merely register a discomfort with change, but articulate a grief bound up with the loss of what is most valued. Nietzsche notes that '[i]f a lament is ever heard, it sings of short-lived Achilles, of the generations of men changing and succeeding one another like leaves on the trees, of the demise of the heroic age' (BT 3, 24). The image of leaves falling is a recognition that each life, or even an entire age, has a significance that makes its passing a source of genuine pain. Yet the suffering Nietzsche describes cannot be reduced to the bare fact of our own mortality, because lament is voiced by the suffering survivors. When Thetis laments her son Achilles, described as 'short-lived beyond all other mortals'⁵⁸, she is not simply reflecting on the brevity of his life. She is experiencing what I earlier called dispossession, the recognition that the person whose existence partially constitutes her own is being taken from her by time, and that this loss cannot be undone.

Nevertheless, the capacity to care deeply is continually undermined by inescapable fact of life's transience, a necessity mythologically expressed in through concept of fate. In his *Dionysian Worldview* (1870), he writes of 'the sombre sway of *moira* [fate], which determined Achilles' early death' (DW 2, 125)⁵⁹. For the Homeric Greeks, fate is not a decree imposed by

⁵⁶ Nietzsche draws on the leaf simile from the *Iliad* cited at the beginning of this chapter. Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 6.146-150.

⁵⁷ Hesiod tells of the loss of the heroic age as part of his narrative on the five ages. he explicitly expresses his wish that he did not live during the subsequent, degenerate Iron Age, which is marked by toil and hardship (Hesiod, 'Works and Days', in *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most (Harvard University Press, 2006), 161-81).

⁵⁸ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 1.505-506 see also 1.415-418, 18.96, and 18.458.

⁵⁹ In Hesiod's *Theogony*, the three Fates (*Moirai*) are named Clotho (the spinner), Lachesis (the allotter), and Atropos (the unturnable), who respectively spin, measure, and cut the thread of life, thereby determining mortal destiny (Hesiod, 'Theogony', 211). In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Moira is also a sibling of Moros, signifying Doom, and their familial connection suggests an intrinsic relationship between the concepts of fate and doom (Hesiod, 'Theogony', 211.) To the best of my knowledge, in the *Iliad*, the term Moira occurs forty-seven times and on thirty occasions it relates to the theme of death. For example, Menelaos proposes a duel with Paris with the word '[a]s for that one of us two to whom death and doom are given, let him die' (Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 3.101-102). In book four: 'Now his doom caught fast Amarynkeus' son Diore's' (4.517). Book five, 'the red death and destiny the powerful took hold of both eyes' of Hypsenor (5.82-83) and later Amphios is killed after his fate leads him to become a Trojan ally (5.612-614). In book twelve Poulydamas 'was not destined to evade the evil spirit of destruction nor ever to make his way back again to windy Iliion. Before this the dark-named destiny had shrouded about him through the spear of Idomeneus' (12.114-117). Peisandros attacks Menelaos 'but an evil led him toward death's end' (13.602). '[O]ver both [Kleoboulos'] eyes closed red death and the strong destiny' (16.333-334). The dying Patroclus taunts Hector: 'No, deadly destiny, with the son of Leto, has killed me' (16.849), further uttering

a god or a mechanistic sequence of events, but a supra-personal necessity woven into the fabric of the cosmos, one that even the Olympian gods cannot escape (BT 9, 49). Suffering from transience, then, is not just an individual's loss, but is rooted in a more primordial sense of destruction, reaching back to the age of the Titans. Nietzsche evokes this with his image of 'the Titanic forces of nature, that *moira* [fate]' (BT 3). Behind this image stands the myth of Kronos, the Titan king who devours his own children, and whose name the ancient world conflated with Chronos, time itself⁶⁰. The myth does not simply represent external violence but mythically figures what time does to all things, devouring what it brings into being. For the Homeric Greeks, the cruelty of time is not that of an external enemy, but—as Nietzsche observes in 'The Greek State' (1871), written around the same time as the *Birth*—a process that is simultaneously creative and destructive: 'procreating, living, and murdering are all one' (GSt, 167). Existence and destruction are inseparable parts of the same fateful process.

Nietzsche finds one expression of this struggle between the Homeric attachment to life and the necessity of suffering the death of what one loves in the wisdom of Silenus. Here, suffering, bound up with the transience of life, is taken as a reason to deny existence altogether. It is worth pausing over Nietzsche's own retelling of this wisdom, which I quote in full:

the premonition to Hector that '[y]ou yourself are not one who shall live long, but now already death and powerful destiny are standing beside you' (16.852-853). Again, 'over both [Echeklos'] eyes closed red death and the strong destiny' (20.476-77). Hekabe says about Hector's death, '[n]ow death and fate have closed in upon you' (22.436), and in book twenty-four, that 'the way at the first strong Destiny spun with his life line when he was born' (24.209-210). Eric Dodd observes that *Moirai* is invoked when individuals face inexplicable disasters: "since it has happened, evidently 'it had to be'" (E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 6). For an interesting etymological and historical discussions, Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Theunissen, *Schicksal in Antike Und Moderne* (Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, n.d.); R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); for an interesting philosophical discussion of fate in relation to human agency see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press, 1993), 130–67.

⁶⁰ See especially Hesiod, 'Theogony'. And, more subtly, Homer's epics. In the *Iliad*, for example, Zeus alludes to the fall of the Titans and his father Kronus in a typical argument with his wife Hera (Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), VIII, 18–24). Kronos (the Titan) and Chronos (the personification of time) are etymologically distinct figures, but their conflation has a long history in ancient thought, encouraged by the phonetic similarity of the names and developed especially in Neoplatonic and Orphic traditions. Nietzsche inherits this conflated image, using Kronos's act of devouring as a mythological figure for what time does to all things. The distinction is worth noting, but the conflation is itself ancient and philosophically productive rather than merely erroneous.

Wretched, ephemeral race [*Eintagsgeschlecht*], children of chance and tribulation, why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon (BT 3, 23).

When Silenus addresses the Homeric Greeks as ephemeral, the Greek *ephemeros* comes to mind, with its complex range of meanings. Its associations reveal something fundamental about the temporal vulnerability that, in Homeric thought, defines the human condition. As Hermann Fränkel has observed, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, ephemeral does not initially refer to the brevity of life in a strictly chronological sense. Rather, it points to the variability and instability that characterise the human state⁶¹. To be ephemeral, in this sense, is to be subject to whatever the gods allot for each day. Joy, grief, prosperity, or destruction may all arrive, and a human being becomes, in a sense, what the day brings. In this light, we should consider Odysseus' lament in the *Iliad*: 'when the blessed gods bring sad days upon him, against his will he must suffer it. For the mind in men upon earth goes according to the fortunes the Father of Gods and Men, day by day bestows upon them'⁶². Since fate sits, as Nietzsche puts it, 'unpitying, above all knowledge' (BT 3, 23), unknowable to mortals, each day is unpredictable, containing both happiness and suffering. From this perspective, the 'tribulation' and 'chance' that Silenus mentions make sense as references to this fundamental vulnerability to the changing fortunes of each passing day that mortals can only endure.

⁶¹ Hermann Fränkel, *Wege Und Formen Frühgriechischen Denkens* (C.H. Beck, 1955), 23–29; for a critical discussion see Michael Theunissen, *Pindar: Menschenlos Und Wende Der Zeit*, 45–53.

⁶² Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 18.130-137; See also Hesiod, 'Works and Days', in *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 483–85: 'But the mind of aegis holding Zeus is different at different times, and it is difficult for mortal men to know it'. And Robert Calasso observes: 'Whenever their lives were set aflame, through desire or suffering, or even reflection, the Homeric heroes knew that a god was at work. They endured the god, and observed him, but what actually happened as a result was a surprise most of all for themselves' (Robert Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 89).

⁶² Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 6.146-150.

Yet Nietzsche singles out a particular aspect of this fragility as most significant for the Homeric Greeks. They experience as painful ‘imminent death’, which, we must now say, is a certainty in life and can arrive, unforeseen, any day. This gives the notion of ephemeral an existentially weightier sense, and it is this possibility of dying any day that scholars such as Gregory Nagy⁶³ and Jasper Griffin⁶⁴ take as the defining feature of human existence in contrast to the immortal gods⁶⁵. Human ephemerality is not simply one characteristic among others, but the structural distinction that marks the difference between human and divine. When Silenus calls the Homeric Greeks an ‘ephemeral race’, he is, therefore, not merely noting their susceptibility to misfortune. He is highlighting mortality as the very foundation of their wretchedness. It is precisely this wretchedness that makes existence itself seem unworthy of desiring. In this way, transience becomes the central source of suffering and the grounds for Silenus’ harsh verdict. The relief Silenus offers is not consolation in any ordinary sense. By never being born, or by hastening death, one might escape the pain inherent in a transient life altogether. This is not a thought about how to live better within existence but a judgment that existence itself, given its transient structure, is not worth entering. Yet, for the Homeric Greeks who cherish life, such advice is truly “most profitable for you not to hear,” as it must seem only to deepen their suffering by revealing that an even shorter life is best. Yet, the Silenic verdict is not a sign of indifference to Homeric suffering. On the contrary, it takes the pain of their ephemera; existence with utmost seriousness, recognising life’s value so intensely that only non-existence appears merciful. This is especially so because even if the hero were granted a long, he would remain subject to the same vulnerability to transience, and therefore be condemned to lose even more of what he loves. long life, in this sense, does not resolve the

⁶³ Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 174–209; Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, Abridged Edition (Harvard University Press, 2019), 9–11.

⁶⁴ Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, 81–102.

⁶⁵ Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer’s Iliad*, 53–56; Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 27–49.

suffering of transience, since the trouble lies not in the brevity of life as such, but in the transient nature of mortal existence, which exposes every attachment to irretrievable loss.

If we look to Homeric culture, we find material that helps to illuminate why this experience of transience tends toward Silenus' pessimism. Emily P. Austin has observed that 'Achilles experiences Patroklos' death like a tear in the fabric of his life'⁶⁶. When Achilles is confronted with such a loss, he is not merely pained but brought to the edge of self-annihilation, lying in the dust and wishing for death itself: 'the spirit within does not drive me to go on living and be among men'⁶⁷. What is striking in this scene is not only the intensity of grief, but the way in which it threatens the very possibility of continuing to live. It seems to me that the Silenic verdict is therefore not best understood as an inference from the fact of transience, but rather as the logic of loss, experienced at its most acute. Silenus, in this sense, is not so much offering an argument as pointing to something that is already familiar to us. The depth of grief can reveal what might be best for human beings. The wisdom here is not formulated as a syllogism, but as a kind of recognition. Grief itself becomes the evidence.

However, Nietzsche presents Silenus as occupying a counterfactual position. If the Homeric Greeks had remained at the level of unmediated suffering in the face of transience, as we see in Achilles' grief, and if they had lacked the protective influence of Apolline art, then, according to Nietzsche, they would have been compelled to accept the pessimism of Silenus (DW 2, 125)⁶⁸. But he insists that this did not happen. Instead, he argues, that in for the Homeric

⁶⁶ Emily P. Austin, *Grief and the Hero: The Futility of Longing in the Iliad* (University of Michigan Press, 2021), 2; cf. Austin, *Grief and the Hero*, 49: the repeated scenes of weeping *in longing* for Patroklos reinforce the sense that Patroklos' death has shattered an entire world—the shared life that existed between Achilles and his closest comrade.'

⁶⁷ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 18.90-91. Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 18.22-27: 'the black cloud of sorrow closed on Achilleus. In both hands he caught up the grimy dust, and poured it over his head and face, fouled his handsome countenance, and the black ashes were scattered over his immortal tunic. And he himself, mightily in his might, in the dust he lay at length, and took and tore at his hair with his hands, defiled it'. See also 'III.5. The Weeping Body of Achilles' in Hélène Monsacré, *The Tears of Achilles* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2018), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.ebook:CHS_MonsacreH.The_Tears_of_Achilles.2018.

⁶⁸ If 'someone had removed the artistic semblance of that *middle world*, the Greeks would have had to follow the wisdom of the wood-god' Silenus' (DW 2, 125).

Greeks, ‘lament turns into a song in praise of being’ (BT 3, 24). As we will see, I do not take this transformation to be a movement from lament to consolation, or from grief to acceptance, but a transformation of the meaning of lament itself. The question I want to pursue is how the Homeric Greeks managed this transformation, and what form of art made it possible.

The Transfiguring Mirror: Semblance, Dream, and the Divine Perspective in Epic

To understand Nietzsche’s account of Apollonian transfiguration, I want to begin with the idea of the mirror, and more specifically, what Nietzsche refers to as a ‘transfiguring mirror’⁶⁹. A mimetic mirror simply reproduces what is placed before it, returning the same content in the same form. By contrast, a transfiguring mirror returns the same content, but in a changed form. This is not a matter of falsification, but of transformation—a shift in aspect, a way of seeing otherwise what was already present. In this sense, transfiguration is not a species of deception. It does not conceal suffering or substitute it with something more agreeable. Rather, it alters the form in which suffering is presented, the perspective from which it is apprehended.

According to Nietzsche, what the Homeric Greeks encountered in the Olympian gods was precisely this kind of transfiguring mirror. He remarks that the same impulse which brings art into being also “gave rise to the world of the Olympians in which the Hellenic ‘Will’ held up a transfiguring mirror to itself” (BT 3, 24). And it is this Olympian mirror that changes how suffering is illuminated: ‘under the bright sunshine of such gods existence is felt to be worth attaining’ (BT 3, 24). The transfiguring mirror reflects transient life in a different, brighter light, letting such existence appear desirable. This is what Nietzsche has in mind when he asks, in the *Dionysian Worldview*, how the Homeric Greeks, with their ‘brilliant talent for *suffering*

⁶⁹ Richard Schacht stresses the centrality of the notion of transfiguration for understanding the power of art in the *Birth* (Richard Schacht, ‘Making Life Worth Living: Nietzsche on Art in The Birth of Tragedy’, in *Nietzsche*, repr, ed. John Richardson and Brian Leiter, Oxford Readings in Philosophy (Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 192; Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche*, 484).

have been able to bear life, if that *self-same life* had not been revealed to them in their gods, suffused with a higher glory!’ (DW 2). The stress on “*self-same*” is key here. What is revealed in the gods is not a better life elsewhere, not a compensation for mortal suffering. Rather, the same transient life, with all its suffering intact, is revealed by means of the gods as suffused with a higher glory. The ‘in their gods’ is thus instrumental, not locative. The gods do not contain or lead a mortal life⁷⁰.

To understand this transfiguration, we should keep in view that the immortality of the gods is not a Platonic eternity situated outside of time. It is a realm of static forms accessed only by turning away from the world of change. Nor is it a Christian eternity functioning as the antithesis of suffering from transience, where earthly torment is finally superseded. Nietzsche’s mythic framework offers an entirely different orientation. Here, the temporal suffering of transience is not a lack of eternity but its fullness, that is, a unique quality of time disclosed whenever the immediate present is bound, ‘immediately and involuntarily’, to myth (BT 23, 110). Because the Olympians are immortal, these gods lack inherent weight. For an undying being, no choice is truly irreversible, no stakes are absolute⁷¹. Consequently, it is the mortal condition, defined by beings for whom every attachment carries the guarantee of loss and future grief, that possesses the existential weight the gods themselves covet. This asymmetry might explain why, in the *Iliad*, the Olympians refuse to remain distant observers. Instead, they plunge into battle, take sides, are wounded, grieve, and approximate mortality as closely as their deathless nature permits⁷². The gods desire this terrestrial weight, seeking to inhabit the

⁷⁰ This rules out a misreading that might otherwise seem tempting. Nietzsche, trained as a classicist, would have been acutely aware that the fundamental ontological distinction of the Homeric world is precisely that between the mortal and the immortal gods. The gods do not share the human condition. What they provide is not participation in mortality but a vantage point upon it. And it is from that vantage point, the perspective of beings for whom nothing is staked absolutely, that mortal gravitas becomes visible as gravitas. The gods perceive what the mortal immersed in suffering cannot easily see from within: that the very capacity for irreversible loss, for having things matter absolutely, is not a defect of mortal existence but its particular dignity and the source of its most intense glory.

⁷¹ Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer’s Iliad*, 53.

⁷² Lorenzo F. Garcia, *Homeric Durability: Telling Time in the Iliad*, 159–229.

tragic density that finitude alone confers. As Nietzsche puts it, ‘the gods justify the life of men by living it themselves’ (BT 3, 24). It is precisely this divine recognition of what mortal life commands (and what immortality lacks) that transfigures and justifies ephemeral existence. As Richmond Lattimore observes, ‘the divine dimension sheds glory on the humans at Troy. That the gods are so intensely concerned with warriors and their fates elevates the mortals to a special plane’⁷³. Viewed through from the perspective of the immortals, the suffering born of transience ceases to be a defect of human life⁷⁴. Instead, such suffering becomes its distinct dignity, the very source of the grandeur that renders mortal life worth enacting, even in the crucible of pain.

This divine vantage point allows us to re-evaluate the thought experiment that previously seemed to validate the Silenic indictment. In that earlier scenario, a hero was imagined as long living yet still trapped within transience, condemned to endure a ceaseless cycle of losing those he loved. The initial conclusion suggested that the Silenic objection targeted the temporal structure of loss itself rather than the brevity of life, thereby deepening a pessimistic worldview. Even a longer life offered no salvation from grief. Yet, when we adopt the Olympian perspective, this same thought experiment points toward a radically different conclusion. An immortal life subject to transience would not be the nadir of existence. Rather, it would be the exact mode of being that the gods seek when they intervene in human warfare. The experiment originally seemed to confirm Silenus only because it was evaluated from the human standpoint, where irreversible loss is registered exclusively as a wound. Shifting to the Olympian gaze, however, reveals that this vulnerability to absolute, irreversible loss is the bedrock of existence’s most luminous beauty. One might ask whether this does not equally

⁷³ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 22–23.

⁷⁴ Griffin argues that the gods in the *Iliad* serve as a permanent audience. For him, the significance of a hero’s life is directly tied to the fact that it is observed by the immortals. The gods’ interest in Achilles does not just reward his death but validates the intensity and god-like quality of his living (Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, 179–204; cf. Tobias Myers, *Homer’s Divine Audience: The Iliad’s Reception on Mount Olympus*, First edition (Oxford University Press, 2019).

deliver the gods into their own form of suffering from transience. The response, I think, is that the gods' grief at losing beloved heroes is not a refutation of the account but its deepest confirmation. The gods do not desire mortal life despite the grief it brings them, but, in some sense, because of it. Their attachment to mortals, and the loss that attachment entails, is itself an expression of their desire for the gravity and finality that immortality cannot provide. The suffering from transience, such as it is, is a form of the *gravitas* they seek rather than a reason to reject mortal life. The Silenic verdict does not arise from the gods' not being immune to loss, but from their relationship to loss being itself an expression of desire rather than its defeat. Ultimately, therefore, the lamentation does not dissolve but is transfigured, held within the divine perspective that registers grief as an affirmation of human existence rather than its negation.

To clarify the aesthetic architecture through which this transfiguration takes place, I must now turn to the notion of beautiful semblance (*schöner Schein*; BT 1, 15; 25, 115), a concept Nietzsche takes up from Friedrich Schiller⁷⁵. For Schiller, and for Nietzsche after him, semblance is does not need to reproduce the world exactly as it ordinarily appears. A purely mimetic mode of art, one bound to mirror everyday existence without deviation, can only return suffering to us in its most immediate and untransformed form. Such mimesis lacks the resources to place the experience of suffering from transience in any new light. Semblance, by contrast, has a kind of autonomy. It is not bound to the actual, and so it can supplement it. Nietzsche points to this creative freedom when he claims that art does not simply copy nature but offers what he calls a 'metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, and was set

⁷⁵ Friedrich Schiller, 'Über Die Ästhetische Erziehung Des Menschen in Einer Reihe von Briefen', in *Schiller Theoretische Schriften* (Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2008). Timothy Stoll, 'Nietzsche and Schiller on Aesthetic Semblance', *The Monist* 102, no. 3 (2019): 331–48; see also Nicholas Martin, *Nietzsche and Schiller: Untimely Aesthetics*, Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs (Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996). I retain from Schiller only the concept of semblance, not his adjective beautiful. Schiller's beautiful semblance still implies a moral-aesthetic harmony of reason and sense. In my view, Nietzsche's semblance suspends, especially the moral dimensions of Schiller's position.

alongside the latter as a way of overcoming it' (BT 24, 113). This supplement is not, I think, an alien intrusion into human life. Rather, it opens a dimension that is not available from the ordinary human perspective, that is, the perspective of the divine. It is this autonomy that makes possible the above recontextualization of suffering, so that what appears as mere privation and loss from our mortal standpoint can be seen, from another vantage, as the very site of a kind of grandeur that even the gods might envy⁷⁶.

What, for Schiller, prevents autonomous semblance from collapsing into mere illusion or deception is honesty. Semblance is an appearance that acknowledges itself as such. This self-consciousness is not a flaw in the aesthetic experience but is, in fact, what gives semblance its distinctive value. I find it helpful to consider the example of a theatrical performance. When a glass prop stands in for a diamond, the success of the scene does not depend on the audience being fooled, but on a shared imaginative understanding that allows us to treat the glass as a diamond. Nietzsche, too, seems to insist on this point, drawing attention to the Homeric Greeks' ability to retain a sense of the art as semblance. While she sees in her art 'things which are grave, gloomy, sad, dark, sudden blocks, teasings of chance, anxious expectations', and 'lives in these scenes and shares in the suffering' she never loses 'that fleeting sense of its character as semblance' (BT 1, 16). The artistic medium, as engaging as it is, is never simply mistaken for reality but is persistently recognised as a semblance. This recognition ensures that the perspective opened by the divine gaze remains a way of seeing mortal life, not a means of fleeing from it. In Nietzsche's account, the viewer is not asked to leave behind their own. On the contrary, Nietzsche remarks that the dreamer 'lives in these scenes and shares in the

⁷⁶ Homeric transfiguration might entail what Sebastian Gardner, following Nietzsche calls, an 'Aesthetic State [which] is constituted by a cycle of projection and introjection: we invest the object with certain powers and properties, which it then restores to us in a heightened form. This sort of reciprocal structure again recalls BT's account of the structure of Homeric consciousness, in which a point of view—the gods' vision of us from Olympus—is projected outwards in order to be reinternalized. The crucial difference is that in the Aesthetic State as Nietzsche now conceives it, the structure has been brought down to earth and requires no conceptual step outside the orbit of subjectivity' Sebastian Gardner, 'Nietzsche's Philosophical Aestheticism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, First published in paperback, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford University Press, 2016), 614.

suffering’ and so encounters a vivid reflection of the ‘Inferno’ of human existence. And yet, Nietzsche, in his account of Apollonian art, cautions that ‘the image of Apollo must also contain that delicate line which the dream-image may not overstep if its effect is not to become pathological, so that, in the worst case, the semblance would deceive us as if it were crude reality’ (BT 1, 16). The Olympian deities populating the Homeric epic must operate within this bounded aesthetic frame of semblance without being mistaken for empirically real entities⁷⁷. What is at stake, then, is not the dissolution of the mortal standpoint, but its maintenance in a kind of productive tension with the Olympian perspective, both held together within the aesthetic experience.

There is then a tension built into the experience of transfiguration that needs to be examined carefully, because it is not a problem to be resolved but, I will argue, the very source of transfiguration’s power. On the one hand, the divine perspective must be affectively real, it must be felt, not merely understood, if it is to have any purchase on the Homeric Greeks’ experience of suffering. On the other hand, the awareness of semblance as semblance must be retained, or the divine perspective ceases to be a perspective on the “*self-same life*” and becomes a replacement of it. These two requirements might seem to pull in opposite directions. But it is their simultaneous fulfilment, I want to argue, that constitutes the aesthetic experience Nietzsche calls hovering.

Helen, as cited from Johann Wolfgang Goethe, ‘hovering in sweet sensuality’ (BT 3, 22), is set directly against the wisdom of Silenus, implying, I think, that hovering is the stance that overcomes Silenus’ conclusion. Nietzsche gives this its most concentrated visual form in

⁷⁷ Paul Veyne argues that, for the Greeks, truth is plural and historically contingent. For the Greeks, myths were not real in the sense of empirical history, but they were true within a specific program of truth that situated the gods in a distinct, heroic temporality. They occupied a space between fiction and fact, serving as the imaginative horizon that structured Greek reality without requiring the literalism of modern belief (Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination* (University of Chicago Press, 1988).

his reading of Raphael's *Transfiguration*⁷⁸, where 'a reflection of the eternal, primal pain' rises into 'a luminous hovering in purest bliss and wide-eyed contemplation, free of all pain' (BT 4, 26). What the lower half depicts phenomenologically is a mode of being 'trapped' (BT 4, 26), enclosed within suffering as it appears when the mortal standpoint is the only available vantage point. The figures below do not see the luminous world rising above them. They are imprisoned within a single register of experience, within suffering as pure privation, pressing down without relief, with no access to any other dimension. This is the condition the Silenic verdict both describes and, in its own way, enacts. When the mortal standpoint is the only available vantage point, suffering from transience can only register as a reason against existence. Yet, suffering rises to the status of semblance. This means that the semblance is not a foreign consolation imposed upon suffering but suffering's own higher register, the dimension latent within it that the purely mortal standpoint alone cannot release. Hovering, then, is the name for this experience, which is not a suspension between two worlds but the inhabiting of a single world that has opened up from within, revealing a dimension of itself that the purely mortal standpoint could not see.

This is what clarifies the meaning of Nietzsche's phrase 'the artistic *middle world* of the Olympians' (BT 3). The '*middle world*' is not a third thing located between the mortal and the divine, as if the Homeric Greeks were suspended halfway between two separate realities, pulled toward suffering on one side and toward Olympian glory on the other. That picture would reintroduce precisely the dualism that the structure of semblance refuses. The Olympians are not a separate reality competing with mortal existence. Instead, they are, as we

⁷⁸ Nietzsche's appeal to Raphael's *Transfiguration* is, of course, anachronistic. The painting depicts a Christian mystery of salvation in which suffering is transcended through divine grace, whereas Nietzsche invokes it as an analogy for a Homeric mode of aesthetic transfiguration in which suffering is redeemed through aesthetic form rather than overcome by faith. The difference is great. In Raphael's scene, Christ's transfiguration signifies a passage beyond human finitude, while in Nietzsche's reinterpretation, the hovering figure embodies the luminous suspension of mortal existence within art itself. Nietzsche's use of Raphael thus displaces a theological narrative of redemption into a Greek aesthetic framework, transforming transcendence into semblance.

saw, the medium through which the self-same mortal life is revealed as suffused with a higher glory. To inhabit the *'middle world'* of the Olympians is therefore not to occupy a position between two worlds but to experience one world with a doubled depth, the mortal and the divine as the lower and upper registers of a single field of experience, held together in the same intuitive grasp with which we hold together the two halves of Raphael's painting.

The ground for this transfiguration is, Nietzsche thinks, to be found in dream. Semblance first shines forth in dream, and it is, therefore, not accidental that he locates the origin of the divine perspective in dream: 'it was in dream that the magnificent figures of the gods first appeared before the souls of men' (BT 1, 15). The Olympians are not simply a cultural construction imposed upon dream from outside. Rather, they arise from within it. A dream is not only the vehicle for the timeless perspective, but also the original site where that perspective is discovered. The Homeric Greeks, as Nietzsche notes, recognised this necessity with a kind of joy, expressing it in their Apollo (BT 1, 16). Apollo, in this sense, is the cultural crystallisation of dream. What makes dream the appropriate ground is its capacity to loosen the self from its immediate, daylight reality, and so to open the possibility of inhabiting lives and perspectives other than our own. And, as Sigmund Freud argues⁷⁹, dreams are timeless. In dream, the self is no longer anchored in the purely mortal vantage point, no longer trapped within the immediate suffering or particular grief of the ego, but has entered a timeless world. If the gods first appear in a dream as semblance, then the dream seems to be the appropriate experiential ground for their timeless perspective upon mortal suffering. Crucially, dream, too, Nietzsche argues, does not collapse the condition of honesty condition of semblance. He writes that 'even while this dream-reality is most alive, we nevertheless retain a pervasive sense that it is semblance' (BT 1, 15). This is what makes dream the right vehicle for transfiguration.

⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. Ritchie Roberston, trans. Joyce Crick (Oxford university press, 2008).

Because dream is experienced as semblance, because I retain an awareness of the distance between the dream-world and waking reality, the shift in perspective is possible without deception⁸⁰. The loosening from the ego's grip, the detachment from the immediate pressure of my own suffering, depends on maintaining that distance. If dream were to collapse into crude reality, there would be no space for the perspective to become transfiguring. It is semblance, known as semblance, dream known as dream, that holds the space open, the space in which suffering from transience can be seen, genuinely and affectively, from the perspective of the divine.

I already noted that Apollo appears to be the cultural institutionalisation of dream, and it is through Apollonian art, Nietzsche claims, that the Homeric Greeks could enter the transfiguring dream state: 'the beautiful, semblance: these things delimit the territory of Apollonian art. It is the transfigured world of the eye which is artistically creative in dream, when our eyes are closed. *Epic poetry*, too, seeks to put us into this state of dreaming' (DW 2, 127). The epic does not describe the divine perspective from the outside but transmits the dream-state in which that perspective is lived. Nietzsche continues: 'the epic poet sees the same living figure and wants to let others see it [...] He has reached his goal when we see clearly before us the figure or group or image, when he has conveyed to us that dreamlike state in which he himself first engendered those representations' (DW 2, 127). The listeners are not so much told about Achilles. Instead, they are brought into the dream and its divine perspective through which Achilles' suffering from transience first appeared transfigured⁸¹. The epic is

⁸⁰ In an interesting convergence of vocabulary, Ernst Cassirer maintains that in mythical thinking 'there is a constant hovering transition between the world of the dream and that of objective 'reality'' (Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie Der Symbolischen Formen, Zweiter Teil: Das Mythische Denken* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2010), 44). Furthermore, according to him, , dreams and mythic images are not judged by empirical standards but are "endowed with the same 'truth' as what is experienced in waking life" (Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie Der Symbolischen Formen*, 45).

⁸¹ For an interesting study of how the poet draws the audience into the poem, see Ruth Scodel, *Listening to Homer: Tradition, Narrative, and Audience* (University of Michigan Press, 2010).

thus not merely an art form among others. It is the cultural institution through which the transfiguring timelessness of dream is made available as a shared, enduring experience.

The *Iliad* enacts the very structure of Homeric transfiguration in one single life, that of Achilles. Early in the epic, Achilles is confronted with a choice between a long, obscure life and a short, glorious one⁸². Nietzsche's observation that even the greatest hero would prefer to go on living as a day-labourer rather than reign among the dead captures the baseline orientation, the intense, unconditional desire for existence that constitutes the Homeric Greek's primary relationship to the world. From this baseline, Achilles would choose the long life. But the death of Patroclus is not a contingent misfortune that happens to befall Achilles. It is the structural consequence of loving anything in a transient world, the destination toward which Homeric attachment always tends. When Patroclus dies, Achilles does not merely grieve, but his world collapses. The shared life that constituted the form of existence he most desired is shattered, and what remains is the Silenic verdict felt in its full existential weight. Achilles is lying in the dust, longing for death. The long life, chosen from the baseline desire for existence, has delivered Achilles to the very point Silenus described, a point at which non-existence appears preferable to continued suffering. Yet it is only by passing through this point, only by feeling the full weight of the Silenic verdict rather than avoiding it, that the transfiguring movement becomes possible. The poem has prepared for this from its opening invocation. By appealing to the Muse from the outset⁸³, the epic situates the entire narrative within a divine frame, the perspective of eternity is structurally available throughout the poem⁸⁴, open to be inhabited even when, as in Achilles' grief, it appears to have closed entirely.

⁸² Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 411–16; see also Wolfgang Schadewaldt's interesting discussion of this scene. The key, for Schadewaldt is Achilles' willing submission to and alignment with fate because it is this acceptance that secures his heroic greatness (Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Von Homers Welt Und Werk* (K.F. Koehler Verlag, 1965), 234–67).

⁸³ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, 1.

⁸⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (Zone Books, 2006), 116–21.

It is the Heracles invocation in book eighteen that reopens the divine perspective, and what it does is not console but transfigure. Achilles says:

Now I shall go, to overtake that killer of a dear life, Hektor; then I will accept my own death, at whatever time Zeus wishes to bring it about, and the other immortals. For not even the strength of Herakles fled away from destruction, although he was dearest of all to lord Zeus, son of Kronos, but his fate beat him under, and the wearisome anger of Hera. So I likewise, if such is the fate which has been wrought on me, shall lie still, when I am dead. Now I must win excellent glory⁸⁵.

The speech begins with rage and the desire for revenge, and one might wonder whether this is transfiguration at all or merely grief finding an outlet. But something more is happening. Achilles does not return to battle because his grief has lessened or because he has argued himself out of the Silenic verdict. The loss of Patroclus is not undone. And yet Achilles does not choose the only other available alternative, to return home, to continue living the day-labourer existence, surviving without the world that made survival worth wanting, accumulating further losses over a long life without any frame that could transfigure them. That path would not be a Silenic choice but something in certain respects worse, a life that desires to continue but that, having passed through the Silenic crisis without transfiguration, can only endure transience rather than find such an existence desirable. What Achilles does instead is locate his situation within the mythic frame the epic has held open from its opening invocation. The Heracles invocation is the hinge of that relocation. Heracles does not offer consolation. His fate was no less terrible than Achilles'. What Heracles offers is a paradigm, and to understand what kind of paradigm, it matters that Heracles is part of myth, that is, from a Nietzschean standpoint, a semblance.

⁸⁵ Homer, 18.114-121.

Crucially, the content of that semblance does not hide or beautify away suffering. On the contrary, Heracles is a hero who suffers the full fate of transience, and the semblance of epic art presents not a world free of suffering but one in which suffering is its very substance. When Achilles invokes Heracles, he shares in that suffering as Nietzsche says the Homeric Greek shares in the “Divine Comedy” (BT 1) presented in art, and yet, as Nietzsche insists, never without the fleeting sense of its character as semblance. Achilles remains aware that Heracles belongs to myth and that his own suffering is his own, in this life, irreversibly. The invocation is therefore neither a disavowal nor an absorption in the beauty of the mythic frame that displaces the awareness of suffering from transience. What it does instead is change the frame within which the facts of Achilles' situation appear, and this change of frame is the transfiguration. Heracles' suffering, undergone in full sight of Zeus, entered the timeless perspective of myth as the form of existence the divine found most worth attending to. In invoking Heracles, then, Achilles locates his own grief, his own ‘imminent death’, within that same perspective, not changing what he suffers but revealing it as the very substance of what makes mortal existence irreplaceable rather than merely painful. The phenomenological signature of this transformation is the calmness with which Achilles accepts his own death, a composure that is not resignation but the lived form of hovering: suffering fully acknowledged, mortality fully faced, and yet from within the perspective the epic holds open, that same suffering and that same mortality revealed as the ground of existence's highest glory.

What exactly has been transfigured becomes clearer when we consider what the Heracles invocation corrects. Before it, Achilles sees his situation from entirely within the mortal standpoint. All he loves dies, he will die, the chain of irreparable loss simply continues, and the Silenic verdict reasserts itself with ever greater force. From within this standpoint, the short life chosen at Troy looks indistinguishable from Silenus' counsel to die soon. But this is precisely the misreading that the Heracles invocation corrects. Achilles is not choosing the

short life in order to escape a life found worthless. He is choosing the form of life in which mortality is most fully and most urgently inhabited, in which the absoluteness of every loss and the irreversibility of every choice are the very condition the divine finds most worth inhabiting. A long life offers the possibility of new attachments, of wounds that partially heal, of losses distributed across time and partially compensated. But it is also a life in which the confrontation with transience is deferred and managed rather than concentrated and fully inhabited. The short life forces the stakes to their maximum: everything matters absolutely and irreversibly, and it is precisely this that the immortal gods, for whom nothing is staked absolutely, desire and cannot possess. From a Nietzschean perspective, glory is therefore not a compensation for dying young⁸⁶, but the name for a mortal life as it appears from the standpoint of eternity, a life whose suffering and finitude are preserved as the very substance of what the divine finds compelling.

Conclusion

This chapter, I have traced the ways in which the Homeric Greeks responded to the suffering that arises from transience. My starting point was to clarify the nature of this suffering as not simply a matter of mortality, but of vulnerability to the inevitable and permanent loss brought by time's passage. The Silenic verdict takes this suffering as grounds for objecting to existence itself, on the grounds that life, by its nature, entails suffering from transience, and that this makes non-existence preferable. Against the view that sees the Homeric response as a form of self-deception, I have argued that it does not suppress Silenus's insight by cloaking it in blinding illusion. Rather, the Homeric art of semblance transforms the perspective upon transience by showing it differently. The divine gaze of the Olympian gods renders mortal

⁸⁶ As argued by Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 29; Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, 174–210.

suffering a source of gravity and beauty in existence, to be admired rather than condemned. I have then shown that, according to Nietzsche, this perspective is made available in experience through the dream transmitted through the epic.

If I now turn to what I have called temporal nihilism, we can see that, in this context, Silenus is the first temporal nihilist. He does not simply note that the Homeric Greeks suffer from transience, or, more specifically, ephemerality, but takes this suffering to be constitutive of human existence as such. To be ephemeral, to be the kind of being that loves and cares in a world governed by time, is necessarily to suffer irreparable loss through death. No form of human life escapes this suffering because fate, as a necessity, ensures it. It is this inescapability that gives rise to the verdict against existence. It is not merely that life contains suffering, but that it guarantees losses from which no recovery is possible. Temporal nihilism, then, is not an external threat to the Homeric world, but an internal one. The Homeric response to temporal nihilism does not refute Silenus' structural observation. It accepts its validity. Transience is inescapable, irreparable loss is guaranteed, and fate is a necessity. But it refuses the evaluative conclusion by opening mortals to a perspective from which these experiences appear transfigured. Temporal nihilism remains a threat, but it is not the final word. It is always a possibility, but not a conclusion.

Before I can proceed, I need to pause over a difficulty that arises from Nietzsche's own language. Nietzsche often describes Apollonian semblance using terms such as 'deluding images' (*Wahnbilder*) and 'deception' (*Täuschung*), even at times as a 'lie'. If I am right in claiming that aesthetic semblance is always recognised as such by the spectator, then it is not immediately clear how we are to make sense of this vocabulary of deception. It would be a mistake, I think, to take Nietzsche here as simply conceding to a kind of cognitive error. Instead, his language moves across existential, metaphysical, and philological register. On the existential level, this so-called deception is not a matter of error at all, but a vital necessity.

There is nothing in the nature of things that requires human suffering to appear as beautiful semblance. Yet for the Homeric Greeks, the transformation of suffering into such semblance was not optional. Only through the mediation of the Apollonian art could existence be desired, so that semblance became, for them, a precondition for life. When Nietzsche writes that ‘a lie is told [*hinweggelogen*] which causes pain to disappear from the features of nature’ (BT 16, 80), I take him to mean that this ‘lie’ is not a, epistemic failure, but a deep conviction that life must be lived through art. Here, the ‘lie’ is not a mistake, but a way of inhabiting the world.

Nietzsche also sometimes writes in a metaphysical register that is recognisably Schopenhauerian, where deception is figured as nature’s own strategy. He writes, for example, that ‘nature achieves its goal by means of this deception’ (BT 3, 25), and that ‘by means of an illusion [*Illusion*] spread over things, the greedy Will always finds some way of detaining its creatures in life’ (BT 18, 85). In this way of speaking, semblance becomes an instrument of the Will. But Nietzsche himself is careful to qualify this, noting that ‘in a certain sense, a lie is told’ (BT 16, 80). This qualification ‘in a certain sense’ already suggests that we should not simply equate semblance with metaphysical falsehood. Rather, it seems to me that, within the aesthetic experience itself, semblance is not so much a deception as something to be cherished for what it is. There is enchantment here, not delusion. The Homeric poet, Nietzsche tells us, is ‘completely enthralled in the beauty of semblance’ (BT 3, 24). The language of deception, then, may belong to Nietzsche’s Schopenhauerian inheritance, and to the metaphysics of the Will, but it does not capture the experience of the Homeric Greeks themselves.

Lastly, to fully understand why Nietzsche’s vocabulary does not simply refer to deception, we need to look more closely at his use of *Wahn*-compounds. Standard English translations tend to render terms like *Wahnvorspiegelungen* and *Wahnbilder* (BT 3) as ‘delusion’ or ‘illusion’, but this flattens important distinctions. The word *Wahn*, in its older Germanic usage, refers not just to error but to inspired madness or divine frenzy, something

akin to what Plato describes in the *Ion*⁸⁷ or in his account of the Pythian oracle. In this context, *Wahnvorspiegelungen* or *Wahnbild* (BT 3) are not merely deceptive images, but mirrorings and visions that reveal something sent by the gods. Nietzsche's choice of words, then, is pointing to the way the gods appeared to the Homeric Greeks in dreams. The vocabulary here is phenomenological, describing how, in the state of divine frenzy, a new perspective opened up for the Greeks. These terms, I would suggest, function as aesthetic teleologies. They do not misrepresent what is, but rather name forms that draw the Homeric Greeks forward, toward a life that is transfigured.

Ultimately, despite the grandeur of the Homeric achievement, Nietzsche observes that when myth ceases to be a living presence, when it is reduced to a historical fact, and Achilles becomes merely a figure of the past rather than a presence in a living world, the possibility of transfiguration is lost (BT 10, 53). The epic cannot sustain the dream-state if the world it evokes is no longer inhabitable. This fragility is, I think, best understood as historical and cultural, not simply psychological. The transfiguration of suffering fails not because the suffering is too great, but because the conditions that made its overcoming possible have changed. As I will discuss in the next chapter, this historical vulnerability leads to a renewed crisis of temporal nihilism for the Greeks, one that the Apollonian resources of the epic are no longer able to address, and that calls for the new response developed by the tragic Greeks.

⁸⁷ Plato, 'Ion', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. Paul Woodruff (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 534b.

2.

The Tragic Greeks I: Suffering from Transience as the Dissolution of the Ethical Self

Nietzsche sees the movement from Homeric to Tragic Greece as a transformation in the experience of suffering from transience. What was once the threat of early death becomes, in the tragic world, a more insidious suffering. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, the chorus addresses Oedipus with the words: 'Time who sees all has found you out against your will; judges your marriage accursed, begetter and begotten at one in it'⁸⁸. It is not simply that things pass away. Rather, time emerges as the power that retrospectively discloses the truth of the hero's actions. At the outset, Oedipus appears as the intelligent saviour and king of Thebes, but he is later revealed as the unknowing murderer of his father, husband to his mother, and father to his own siblings⁸⁹. In this way, time's disclosure renders the hero polluted, inverting the

⁸⁸ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', in *Sophocles I*, ed. Glenn W. Most and Mark Griffith, trans. David Grene (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1213–14; According to Jacqueline de Romilly, that time reveals the truth is the key characteristic of Sophocles' notion of time Jacqueline de Romilly, *Le Temps Dans La Tragédie Grecque* (Vrin, 1971), 79–99.

⁸⁹ According to Karl Reinhard's interesting interpretation of the Sophoclean Oedipus dramatizes the revelation of Being (*Seinsenthüllung*). He argues that the tragic process is the violent transition from human appearance

meaning of his life. Oedipus loses everything. His family, kingdom, happiness, and, most crucially, his identity as the good king and saviour. What I want to argue is that, according to Nietzsche, the tragic Greeks suffer not only the loss of external goods but the transience of their own ethical and heroic self-conceptions, of who they believed themselves to be, but perhaps never were, caught in a fate that unfolds across generations.

In my reading of Nietzsche's account, temporality is not ethically neutral. Time is the medium in which guilt and pollution come to light. It seems to me, then, that it is a mistake, as Young does, to claim that Nietzsche "fails to acknowledge the ethical, the "Hegelian", function of at least some major tragedies"⁹⁰. Hegel, of course, sees tragedy as the revelation of ethical life, exposing the contradictions within society⁹¹. He holds that society is structured by distinct ethical spheres (such as the family or the state), justified in their own right, and that tragedy arises when a hero's commitment to one sphere entails the violation of another. The spectacle of the hero's destruction is meant to lead the audience to a more complex understanding of their ethical life, one that transcends the opposition. Nietzsche, I think, is not engaged in this Hegelian project of tragic ethical conflict, but this does not entail that he is indifferent to what he calls the 'ethical foundation of pessimistic tragedy' (BT 9, 50).

While Hegel might offer us a tragedy of collision, one in which opposing rights or ethical commitments confront each other, Nietzsche is more concerned with a tragedy of entanglement. Here, the hero is not undone by a conscious commitment to one exclusive ethical principle, but by what he cannot help being. In *Oedipus the King*, the conflict does not, as in Hegel, arise from two opposed ethical stances, but rather from the tension between Oedipus'

(*Schein*) to divine truth (*Sein*), wherein the hero's internal nature is made visible through the destruction of their worldly status (Karl Reinhardt, *Sophocles* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1947). As we will see, this thought is very close to Nietzsche's.

⁹⁰ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 187.

⁹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen Über Die Ästhetik III* (Suhrkamp, 1996), 15:474–504; Robert R. Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 120–42.

self-understanding and what is gradually revealed about him over time. This suggests, at least to my mind, that ethical life is inherently precarious, precisely because it is constructed through a narrative that time may retrospectively alter. If time can transform the saviour into the polluted, then no ethical identity can be regarded as secure. For Hegel, the hero's guilt is intelligible, since it follows from a conscious commitment to a principle. Nietzsche, by contrast, draws our attention to a form of suffering that is not chosen and so cannot be regarded as deserved. In this way, Nietzsche complicates the ethical dimension of tragedy by focusing on a suffering that arises from the passage of time, a suffering that, as I hope to show, calls for a response other than Hegelian justice.

I have chosen to focus on Sophocles rather than Aeschylus, since it is in Sophocles that Nietzsche's understanding of the tragic dimension of suffering from transience seems to me most clearly at work. This focus is justified, I think, because Nietzsche claims that Sophocles expresses Dionysian truth directly, without excessive symbolism (DW 3, 132).

Turning to Sophocles' treatment of the Oedipus myth, I want to dwell on what seems to me the central existential question in Nietzsche's tragic vision. Whether it is possible to endure, or even to continue living, after suffering the loss of who one took oneself to be. In what follows, I will try to trace how Sophoclean tragedy stages this confrontation, and to consider, in the next chapter, whether, and in what sense, it might be possible to continue in the wake of such radical self-loss.

The first difficulty, as I see it, is to understand how the Homeric experience of suffering from mortality is transformed into the specifically tragic Greek suffering that arises from the transience of one's ethical identity. For Nietzsche, the arrival of Dionysus at the Greek shores marks a crucial turning point in this transformation. Dionysus is, in Nietzsche's account, a complex figure, but two aspects seem especially relevant here: the myth of Dionysus Zagreus, torn to pieces by the Titans, and the Dionysian rites in which participants are said to regress to

a state of animality. The suffering that emerges from this transformation, I would suggest, finds its most harrowing expression in Oedipus, where we are confronted with the question of how the titanic force of time can tear apart the hero's ethical identity by exposing his abhorrent animal nature.

From Homeric to Tragic Greece: The Arrival of Dionysus and the Animal Self

Nietzsche links the weakening of myth in the late Homeric world to a renewed prominence of Silenus's wisdom. By following this transformation, I hope to clarify how Nietzsche traces the evolution of suffering from the Homeric Greeks to the world of tragedy, and how this shift informs his understanding of suffering as bound up with transience.

Nietzsche's account suggests that, over the course of the three centuries separating the Homeric from the Tragic period, the Greeks underwent a significant transformation in their relation to myth. They ceased, as he puts it, to possess a '*feeling for myth*' (BT 10, 53). Rather than inhabiting myths as living realities, they began to treat them as historical curiosities, as a kind of 'historical-pragmatic *history of youth*' (BT 10, 53). The mythographers of the sixth and fifth centuries BC, by rationalising and systematising myth into something like a historical record, played an important role in this process⁹². For Nietzsche, this gradual historicisation of myth deprives it of its original force. The result, as he sees it, is that myth loses its capacity to help the Greeks confront the suffering that comes with ephemeral existence. When myth is no longer lived but merely preserved, its power to transfigure suffering is lost.

With the weakening of myth, Nietzsche claims, the wisdom of Silenus re-emerges. He associates this resurgence with the arrival of Dionysus from Asia into the Greek world.

⁹² Beginning as early as the 6th century BCE with Hecataeus of Miletus, who sought to correct the absurdities of Greek tales, the rationalising project reached its zenith with Euhemerus of Messene (c. 300 BCE). In his *Sacred History*, Euhemerus argued that the gods were originally powerful mortal kings or heroes who were deified by their subjects out of gratitude or fear. This tradition was later adopted by Alexandrian scholars like Palaephatus (*On Incredible Tales*), who stripped myths of their supernatural elements to uncover a logical historical kernel. Cf. Fritz Graf, *Griechische Mythologie: eine Einführung*, Albatros (Albatros, 2012), 117–37.

Nietzsche remarks that the Homeric world, which had itself emerged from an “‘iron’ age with its Titanic struggles and its bitter popular philosophy” (that of Silenus), was eventually overtaken by the Dionysian (BT 4, 28). The Dionysian, in this account, brings back into view the earlier, more sombre outlook of the Titanic age: ‘the earlier age of the Titans is subsequently fetched out of Tartarus and brought back into the light. The philosophy of wild and naked nature gazes with the undisguised look of truth at the myths of the Homeric world as they go dancing past: they grow pale, they tremble’ (BT 10, 53). The late Homeric Greeks, Nietzsche claims, came to see that the apparent victory over the Titans was not a final settlement, but rather a temporary suspension of the wisdom of Silenus, who now “‘called out “Woe, woe!” to the serene Olympians”” (BT 4, 27). What I take from this is that, for Nietzsche, the return of Silenus’ wisdom reopens the question of how this ‘wretched, ephemeral race’ (BT 3, 23) of the Greeks might live or choose not to live with the transience of life.

Yet, if the Homeric Greeks are haunted by the imminent death, Dionysus, as Nietzsche presents him, introduces a different register of suffering. I want to distinguish here two aspects of this experience. First, the suffering that arises from individuation itself, and second, the realisation that a primitive, animalistic nature persists at the core of one’s being. Nietzsche draws our attention to the myth of Dionysus Zagreus, describing the ‘suffering Dionysos of the Mysteries’ as the god who endures the torments of individuation, torn apart by the Titans as a child and later venerated as Zagreus’ (BT 10, 52). In this figure, the individual (Dionysus) fragmented by Titanic forces. Such destruction of the individual seems to pose a particular freighting challenge to the Greek conception of ‘Apollo as the deification of the *principium individuationis*’ (BT 4, 26). And consequently, Nietzsche argues that, under the sway of the Dionysian, the Greeks come to ‘regard the state of individuation as the source and primal cause of all suffering, as something inherently to be rejected’ (BT 10, 52) because it as individuals that they are exposed to Titanic forces. If individuation is experienced as deeply vulnerable to

be torn apart, then the Greek impulse to reject it seems to echo the wisdom of Silenus. On this reading, the Dionysian myth does not simply oppose the Apollonian ideal, but signals that with an overwhelming experience of the Dionysian, the wisdom of Silenus is once again at work: ‘*Silenus*, companion of Dionysos’ (BT 3, 22).

A second, related aspect of suffering that I find Dionysus introduces, as I read Nietzsche, is a regression of the individual into animality that threatens to dissolve the ethical order. Nietzsche claims that Dionysus brought with him ‘a cult of nature which, amongst the peoples of Asia, had meant the crudest unleashing of the lower drives, a panhetaerical animality which sundered all social ties for a certain period of time’ (DW 1, 121). In the *Birth*, he reiterates this point, emphasising that ‘[a]lmost everywhere an excess of sexual indiscipline, which flooded in waves over all family life and its venerable statutes, lay at the heart of such festivals’ (BT 2, 20; DW 1, 123⁹³). This regression, in which ‘the very wildest of nature's beasts were unleashed’, is for Nietzsche “the true ‘witches’ brew” (BT 2, 20). I think that the suffering of individuation is illuminated by this regression. When Nietzsche writes that during the Dionysiac festival, ‘every political and social bond was torn apart’ (DW 1, 123), I take this to mean that individuals are seized by a titanic force that tears apart the ordinary ethical world. From the standpoint of ‘ethical divinity Apollo,’ who ‘demands measure from all who belong to him,’ such regression and ‘excess are seen as the true hostile demons of the non-Apolline sphere, and as features of the pre-Apolline period, the age of the Titans, and the world of the so-called barbarians’ (BT 4, 27). In my reading, Dionysus reveals to the Greeks the fragility of their ethical world, exposing it to temporary but profound disruptions that can lead to grave ethical transgressions. The Greeks are confronted with the possibility of becoming ‘Dionysiac Barbarians’ (BT 2, 20). The tearing apart of the individual by titanic forces, as I understand it,

⁹³ ‘[D]uring five-day-long festivals, every political and social bond was torn apart; but the centre of the cult lay in the absence of all sexual discipline, in the destruction of all family life by unrestrained hetaerism’ (DW 1, 123).

is the tearing apart of the ethical self, and the suffering that results is the recognition that beneath the ethical self lies an animalistic self capable of the gravest transgressions. In this way, and since the arrival of Dionysus Zagreus, the Greek ‘could not conceal from himself the fact that he too was related inwardly to those overthrown Titans’ (BT 4, 27). Dionysus, arriving as a new god, thus comes to symbolize not only the vulnerability of the ethical self to overwhelming titanic forces, but also the more unsettling realization that at the heart of the self lies a dark, animalistic core, and that the suffering brought by these forces is, in the end, the self-realization that this darkness is inescapably part of what it is to be Greek.

In light of these developments, I think Nietzsche’s claim that Silenus’ pessimistic outlook resurfaces now takes on a new significance. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, the chorus echoes his wisdom: ‘Not to be born surpasses thought and speech. The second best is to have seen the light and then to go back quickly whence we came’⁹⁴. A similar longing is expressed in *Oedipus the King*, where, upon discovering the truth, Oedipus cries out: ‘Cithaeron, why did you receive me? Why, having received me, did you not kill me straight?’⁹⁵ Yet it seems to me that Silenus now takes a different kind of suffering as the reason to reject existence. Whereas in the Homeric world, suffering from the fate of early death constituted the reason to reject existence, for the tragic Greeks, it is the loss of the ethical self that gives reason to object to life.

Time’s Disclosure: Fate, Recognition, and the Loss of Ethical Identity

It is already familiar that Nietzsche connects the dissolution of ethical identity with the suffering that attends individuation, and what I want to clarify now is how this suffering from

⁹⁴ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus at Colonus’, in *Sophocles I*, ed. Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1223–26. In the same play, the chorus speaking to Oedipus says, ‘you would be better dead than blind and living’ (Sophocles, 1368), and Oedipus also entertains the thought that if he had not been born or died young, he would have had it better (Sophocles, 1349–55).

⁹⁵ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1391–92.

individuation is especially a suffering from transience. Here, I want to approach this question by considering Nietzsche's reading of the Oedipus myth, as it appears in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. My suggestion is that individuation, for Nietzsche, is marked by a vulnerability. To be an individual is to be exposed to the effects of time's passage, and in this exposure, one risks the loss of ethical character. I should clarify what I mean by ethical. I do not have in mind a system of rules or duties, nor the Hegelian conception of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) as embodied in customs and institutions. Rather, I am thinking of the Greek ethos, which points to character. The ethical, in this sense, is the ongoing project of shaping and sustaining a coherent and admirable identity⁹⁶. On this view, the ethical problem is not simply a matter of law-breaking or of clashing moral perspectives but concerns the dissolution of the self as an ethical agent. When time exposes Oedipus as a polluter, it does not merely punish him for a transgression but unsettles the very ground of his character. Tragedy, as Nietzsche understands it, brings to light the fragility of the ethical, which is always liable to be undone by the inherited and temporal conditions in which the hero finds himself.

Nietzsche's tragic hero is thus marked by what might be called thrownness⁹⁷, the sense of being placed, without choice or agency, into a history that is already underway. The hero finds himself entangled in a fate that is not of his own making, and his existence becomes the site where inherited burdens are played out. Nietzsche remarks on 'an ancient thought, one that was also alien to the Olympians, that a whole family could be cursed' (DW 3, 131). Aeschylus'

⁹⁶ On the definition of *ethos* as a settled disposition or habitual character forged through moral choice, see Aristotle, 'Nicomachean Ethics', in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, The Modern Library Classics (Modern Library, 2001), 1103a14–25; In the context of tragedy, Aristotle subordinates character to the arrangement of incidents, suggesting that a coherent identity is always vulnerable to the temporal unfolding of the plot. Aristotle, 'Poetics', in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, The Modern Library Classics (Modern Library, 2001), 1450a15–20; For a sophisticated, yet vulnerable, Greek concept of agency and identity, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press, 1993); On the Greek project of maintaining a coherent narrative identity, see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed (Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁹⁷ For a classic account of thrownness, see Martin Heidegger, *Sein Und Zeit* (Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), §29.

*Oresteia*⁹⁸ offers a vivid example. Atreus's crime, the feeding of his brother's children to him, sets in motion a sequence of revenge and guilt that extends across generations, eventually ensnaring his grandson, Orestes, in a web of ancestral debts. What is crucial here is the temporal dimension of this tragic condition. For Nietzsche, fate in tragedy is not a single event but a cumulative process. To be thrown into a cursed lineage, then, is to inhabit a particular kind of temporality, one in which the past is not simply a background but an active presence. For the tragic Greek, the past accumulates and presses upon the present, narrowing the possibilities of the future. The hero does not simply move forward into open possibility. Rather, he contends with a past that increasingly constrains him. In this way, tragic temporality is experienced as a form of inescapable entanglement. The truth of the hero is not something he forges through his own actions, but something that time discloses. A truth that was already settled before he began.

Nietzsche next argues that the suffering from this entanglement in an intergenerational fate unfolding over time is undeserved suffering, highlighting the profound injustice at the heart of their fate. In a note from the same period of the *Birth*, he writes:

The undeservedness of fate in the individual seemed to them tragic in Oedipus.

The riddle in the fate of the individual, the unconscious guilt, the undeserved suffering, in short, the truly terrible of human life was their tragic muse. Here everything pointed to a transcendent higher world order: life no longer seemed worth living (KSA 2.3:10).

Nietzsche's reading of the Oedipus myth turns on this idea that Oedipus's 'unconscious guilt' is not the result of his own choices, but of his entanglement in a history he did not make. I take this to be a way of insisting that human striving, however intelligent or determined, cannot ultimately prevail against the forces of fate. Even the most resourceful mortal cannot escape

⁹⁸ Aeschylus, *Aeschylus I: The Oresteia*, ed. Glenn W. Most and Mark Griffith, trans. David Lattimore (The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

the fact of who he is, as revealed over time. Oedipus may solve the Sphinx's riddle by means of intellect, but the riddle of his own life is solved only as time unmask him, as the chorus in the passage cited at the beginning of this chapter observes. The sense of 'undeservedness', here, therefore arises from the hero's thrownness. He is held ethically responsible for a past that is not of his own making. On this view, the cosmos is so vast and impersonal that individual suffering is dwarfed by its scale. The power of the 'higher world order' Nietzsche describes means that a family curse can override any individual intention. For the tragic Greeks, 'the Titanic forces of nature, that *moira* which throned, unpitying, above all knowledge' (BT 3, 23) is 'transcendent' precisely because it is not subject to our ethical knowledge and categories of fairness. If the universe is indifferent and opaque, and if the hero's ethical identity can be both revealed and destroyed by the unfolding of fate, regardless of his choices, then it is not surprising that Nietzsche sees the Silenic response (better not to have been born or to die quickly) as a natural reaction to such undeserved suffering (BT 3, 23)⁹⁹.

If fate is as overwhelming and impersonal as Nietzsche suggests, it might seem natural to think of it as something that descends on the hero from outside, as divine punishment or mere accident. But, as Simon Critchley notes, '[c]haracters in tragedy are acted on by histories conveyed by a story, a riddle, a prophecy, or a command. They are acted upon, yet acting [...] the name of this space is fate'¹⁰⁰. While for the Homeric Greeks, fate is an external force that simply cuts life short, for the tragic Greeks, by contrast, fate is experienced as something much more intimate, unfolding through the hero's own actions. Oedipus himself comes to realise this: 'O god, I think I have called curses on myself in ignorance'¹⁰¹. The very intelligence that enables Oedipus to solve the Sphinx's riddle and become king is also what leads him to

⁹⁹ '*moira* [fate] which throned, unpitying, above all knowledge, that vulture of man's great friend, Prometheus, that terrifying lot drawn by the wise Oedipus, that curse upon the family of Atreus which compels Orestes to kill his mother, in short that whole philosophy of the wood-god' (BT 3, 23), whom Nietzsche identifies as Silenus: the 'wood-god Silenus' (BT 7, 40).

¹⁰⁰ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (Profile Books, 2019), 271.

¹⁰¹ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 744–45.

investigate Laius's murder, only to discover that he himself, having killed his own father (Laius), is the source of Thebes' pollution. In this sense, Oedipus's fate is not an external accident, but emerges as the necessity of his own being. R.P. Winnington-Ingram puts this succinctly, arguing that in Sophocles, 'character is destiny'¹⁰². 'It was like Oedipus,' Winnington-Ingram notes, 'to pursue his judicial enquiries with such energy'¹⁰³, but in being himself, Oedipus brings about his own downfall. When the chorus sings that the Fates 'never miss'¹⁰⁴, it is not because the gods possess flawless external aim, but because fate is inherently entangled with identity. To act exactly as one's character dictates is the very mechanism by which fate is realised. Oedipus cannot escape the web because the web is woven from his own virtues, from his civic duty, his sharp intellect, and his relentless pursuit of truth. In the ultimate tragic irony, his existential entanglement means that the closer he gets to executing his own autonomous will, the more perfectly he fulfils his fate. This is what makes Oedipus such a compelling example of what I would call the uncanny intimacy of the impersonal.

The irony, if it is irony, is that there is no real discrepancy. What appears as a contradiction between virtue and destruction is, in fact, their identity. To be fully what one is, to act from the highest ethical sources of one's character, is already to enact one's destructive fate. Virtue and vice, in this tragic world, are not opposites but two names for the same necessity. On Nietzsche's reading, Oedipus destroys nature by solving the riddle of the Sphinx. The power Oedipus wields is inseparable from his transgressions: 'the same man who solves the riddle of nature—the riddle of the double-natured sphinx—must also destroy the most sacred orders of nature by murdering his father and becoming his mother's husband' (BT 9, 48). It is for this offence against nature that the hero must also be destroyed. Yet Nietzsche's

¹⁰² R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, 177; see also the interesting discussion by Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 130–41; or an opposing view, see the chapter 'Schicksal und Character' in Walter Benjamin, *Sprache und Geschichte: philosophische Essays* (Reclam, 2015).

¹⁰³ R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, 177.

¹⁰⁴ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 472–73.

phrasing is worth pausing over. He writes, somewhat cryptically, that ‘whoever plunges nature into the abyss of destruction by what he knows must in turn experience the dissolution of nature in his own person’ (BT 9, 48). Nietzsche does not say that nature is destroyed by the hero and, in retribution, nature destroys the hero. Rather, the hero's dissolution of nature is also ‘dissolution of nature in his own person’. The destruction of nature and the destruction of the hero are not two events but one and the same process. Transgression against nature is thus always already a transgression against one’s own nature, a form of self-transgression.

This identity of virtue and the fate of destruction, if I am right, has a crucial consequence. If fate unfolds through the very depths of the hero’s character, it cannot announce itself in advance. Fate is intimate, but it is not transparent. To be thrown into such a world and, as Nietzsche puts it, ‘the fearful, destructive havoc of world-history’ (BT 7, 39) is, then, to live with a kind of dread whose source cannot be clearly seen or named. The chorus in *Oedipus the King* voices the bewilderment of a people caught in this intergenerational net, noting that the ‘oracles concerning Laius are old and dim’¹⁰⁵. These oracles refer to an ancient transgression. Laius, Oedipus’s father, committed a barbaric act by kidnapping and raping the son of King Pelops. He violated the sacred laws of hospitality and measure, and in doing so, triggered a curse upon his entire bloodline. Oedipus did not choose his father’s past. In the Greek tragic world, he is simply thrown into it. Laius’ crime happened so long ago that it is now a vague memory, and its meaning is opaque. And yet, for Oedipus, the ancient debt is not a distant abstraction but an immediate, chaotic pressure. He observes that Apollo’s Delphic ‘prophecies, ever living, flutter around his head’¹⁰⁶ and asks, ‘[w]hat have you designed, O Zeus, to do with me?’¹⁰⁷ The reference to Zeus here might seem to complicate Nietzsche’s view, since Zeus, the

¹⁰⁵ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 907–8.

¹⁰⁶ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 481–82. For Oedipus knowledge of the prophecy, see 787–93.

¹⁰⁷ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 738.

Olympian King, belongs to the Apolline order (BT 3, 22¹⁰⁸) rather than the Titanic realm of un pitying fate. Yet if we consider Apollo's role as the god of prophecy (BT 1, 16) and the principle of individuation, the issue becomes clearer. As an individuated subject, Oedipus reaches for Zeus, seeking a language he can understand. But there remains a gap between this individuated world and the Titanic realm of fate. Fate, as a Titanic power, sitting 'above all knowledge' (BT 3, 23), transcends the human world, and its meaning cannot be translated into Olympian language. The prophecies, then, do not arrive with clear meaning. they 'flutter' around the hero's head as opaque, disjointed signs.

This opacity, the impossibility of reading the signs that fate sends, should not be understood as a mere inconvenience in our knowledge. Rather, it seems to belong to the very structure of the tragic world. The chorus, in asking how one might 'best hit the god's meaning'¹⁰⁹, acknowledges the limits of human understanding: 'Zeus and Apollo are wise and in human things all-knowing; but amongst men there is no distinct judgment, between the prophet and me'¹¹⁰. The wisdom of Zeus and Apollo, even if it exists, does not translate into clarity for mortals. If even the 'prophet' cannot mediate between the divine and the human, then there is no standpoint from which the individual can appeal for guidance. What remains is a sense of dreadful isolation.

The effects of this disorientation are not confined to the sphere of understanding. They seem to reach into the experience of time itself. The chorus, in confessing 'I am in a flutter of foreboding; I do not see the present nor the past'¹¹¹, gives voice to a confusion in which the boundaries between past and present are no longer secure. It is as if the mind, caught in dread, cannot maintain its usual temporal orientation. The past, rather than being safely behind,

¹⁰⁸ The very same drive which assumed sensuous form in Apollo gave birth to that entire Olympian world, and in this sense we are entitled to regard Apollo as its father' (BT 3, 22).

¹⁰⁹ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 406–7.

¹¹⁰ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 498–501.

¹¹¹ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 483–88.

becomes a hidden force that continues to shape the present. Nietzsche remarks that ‘the fear that something might have happened affects the mind quite differently from the fear that something might happen’, and that ‘what has unchangeably happened is by its nature much more fearful’ (KSA 2.3:27). The fear of the future leaves open the possibility of agency. The dread of the past suggests a kind of entrapment. In the case of Oedipus, the acts that define him (killing his father, marrying his mother) are already accomplished, and yet they are only gradually revealed in their true meaning. The chorus’s paralysis before this realisation is not simply a response to what is to come, but to the recognition that the future is, in a sense, the disclosure of an unchangeable past that was always already determining the present. As Rita Felski notes, ‘[t]he weight of what has gone before bears down ineluctably on what is yet to come’¹¹². Jocasta’s claim that ‘human beings have no part in the craft of prophecy’¹¹³ points to this sense that one’s life is shaped by forces that cannot be known or controlled. The prophecies are dreadful not because they foretell a future that might be avoided, but because they reveal a past that cannot be changed. In this way, the tragic experience unsettles the distinction between past and present, and with it, the idea that one is the author of one’s own story.

The convergence of fate, temporal collapse, and existential uncertainty finds its expression in the chorus’s final articulation of disorientation and powerlessness: ‘I am stretched on the rack of doubt, and terror and trembling hold my heart [...] I worship full of fears for what doom you will bring to pass, new or renewed in the revolving years’¹¹⁴. The ‘rack of doubt’ here is not simply a metaphor for suffering, I think, but marks the difficulty of distinguishing between a new catastrophe and the recurrence of an inherited one. The chorus

¹¹² Rita Felski, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008), 2.

¹¹³ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 708–9.

¹¹⁴ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 154–57; See also Sophocles’ *Ajax* where Ajax laments: ‘Strangely the long and countless drift of time brings all things forth from darkness into light, then covers them over once more. Nothing so unexpected that anyone can say it surely will not be—strong oath and iron intent come crushing down. My mood, which just before was strong and rigid, like hardened steel, now has lost its edge’ (Sophocles, ‘Ajax’, in *Sophocles II*, ed. Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most, trans. John Moore (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 646–51).

presents fate as unfolding through ‘revolving years,’ suggesting that time is not experienced as a linear progression, but as a cycle in which the past and present are brought into uneasy proximity. The trembling heart, in this context, is then not merely a poetic image, but signals the lived experience of being caught in a temporal trap, the dread of realising one’s life is only the latest episode in a much older, darker cycle that resists resolution. What is at stake is not only the uncertainty of what is to come, but the recognition that one’s life is shaped by forces that precede and exceed individual agency. In this flutter of foreboding, hero and his community alike must face that they are entangled in a destiny as certain in arrival as it is unclear in meaning.

The relation between fate and the passage of time, as I have been tracing it, raises a further question: in what sense does time bring about the loss of the ethical self? I want to suggest that the answer lies in the structure of recognition, in the way that time’s revolving passage culminates in a moment of belated revelation. It is through the movement of time that the hero comes to suffer the inescapability of the past. The chorus, in the passage with which I began, expresses this: ‘Time who sees all has found you out against your will; judges your marriage accursed, begetter and begotten at one in it’¹¹⁵. This process of ‘finding out’ is not immediate, but takes the form of a delayed recognition, in which ignorance gives way to knowledge. Aristotle’s *Poetics* offers the primary framework for understanding recognition (*anagnorisis*)¹¹⁶, and although Nietzsche resists Aristotle’s moral interpretation of tragedy, he would, I think, agree on the structural necessity of recognition within the tragic plot. For Aristotle, recognition is central to the movement of tragedy, together with the reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) that drives the narrative toward catastrophe. While Aristotle treats recognition as primarily cognitive, Nietzsche regards it as a moment of loss, as the collapse of

¹¹⁵ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1213–1214.

¹¹⁶ Aristotle, ‘Poetics’, 1452a1–30.

lived, linear time into the deeper, darker time of fate. For recognition to have its full tragic force, it must be preceded by a period of ignorance. The character remains unaware, so that revelation can alter the course of events. In *Oedipus the King*, the process of discovery is internal to the plot. There is no external intervention to resolve the mystery. Because recognition is central to the play, the investigation proceeds gradually, allowing suspense and uncertainty to accumulate. Nietzsche notes that ‘the trial-knot of the story of Oedipus, which strikes the mortal eye as inextricably tangled, is slowly unravelled’ (BT 9, 47). Oedipus’s life in Corinth and his early years in Thebes rest on a foundation of mistaken identity. The moment of recognition comes when the testimonies of the messenger and the shepherd converge, revealing Oedipus’s true parentage at the end of his search¹¹⁷. This makes discovery not only structurally essential to the narrative but also deeply personal in its consequences. The revelation does not simply impart knowledge but calls into question the coherence of Oedipus’s entire life, and with it, the possibility of escaping the past.

I think that the temporal structure of recognition is best understood as a collision between two conceptions of time. One is the linear progression of the plot (moving from beginning to the middle to the end), experienced by the character, and the other is the cyclical, predetermined time of fate unfolding through the ‘revolving years’¹¹⁸. Oedipus’ struggle, as I see it, centres on a past that remains incompletely known or is perhaps deliberately avoided. It is at the moment of recognition that past and present converge. Characters move forward in what appears to them as linear time, assuming they can shape their destinies and that their words carry immediate, literal meanings. Fate, by contrast, operates in a cyclical time in which

¹¹⁷ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1182–85.

¹¹⁸ On how emplotment shapes our experience of time, see Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative. Vol. 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin (University of Chicago Press, 2009). Ricœur’s concept of the ‘discordant concordance’ of plot is particularly instructive here. While a narrative unfolds in a linear, forward-moving sequence, the structure of the plot allows for a retrospective look that reveals repetition. In this sense, linear progression does not escape the past but rather acts as the very mechanism that exposes and realizes the cyclical, inescapable return of ancestral fate.

the end is already inscribed in the beginning, and prophecy governs all outcomes. Recognition, then, synchronises these timelines. It is a moment in which what seemed controllable is revealed as already foreordained. For Oedipus, the realisation that he has unwittingly enacted the prophecy he sought to escape shatters his narrative, collapsing his entire life story into a single, devastating present. In this convergence, the past asserts itself, as ancestral actions and destinies continue to define and structure the present moment.

It seems to me that the experience of time in tragedy is, at its core, therefore, an experience of suffering from the transience of one's ethical self. Time's relentless passage is what dismantles Oedipus's ethical self. As Charles Segal argues, [t]ime is where the real nature of things and people finally comes to light. If ever a mortal experienced the tragedy of being in time, it is Oedipus'¹¹⁹. As time passes and the 'revolving years' turn, the chorus's laments mark the slow, inexorable unfolding of his fate. The present becomes a repetition of the past, experienced by the hero as time's judgment. Time's passage renders a verdict against his very identity. By the time the 'revolving years' have completed their course, Oedipus is reduced from a proud king to a polluted, guilty figure. This, I think, is, for Nietzsche, the essence of tragic loss. In looking back, the hero comes to see that the person he believed himself to be never truly existed. Because this 'finding out' by time is retrospective, it arrives only when the 'unconscious guilt' of Oedipus's deeds has become an irreversible fact of history. He can no longer negotiate with his past or seek reparation. Time has already rendered his ethical identity obsolete. The existential stakes are profound, since the hero is stripped of the illusion of autonomy and forced to inhabit a present defined by a loss that cannot be undone, justified, or forgiven.

¹¹⁹ Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (University of Oklahoma press, 1999), 228.

The Affective Form of Transience: Guilt, Shame, and Disgust

To understand the full weight of this loss, I now want to ask not only how the tragic Greeks suffer from transience, but also how that suffering is lived and what affective register it inhabits. I want to begin by drawing a contrast with the Homeric Greeks. For the Homeric hero, suffering from transience is expressed outwardly in grief, in lament, and in the rage of Achilles. When Patroclus is killed, Achilles' grief erupts into a consuming rage that drives him back into battle, knowing that doing so will cost him his own life. This is not a defiance of fate but a kind of heroic embrace of it. Achilles accepts that he will die young, and it is precisely this acceptance that makes glory possible. The condition of Homeric greatness, as I see it, is the willingness to be expropriated, to lose what is most dear, a beloved friend, one's own life, and to meet that loss heroically rather than with withdrawal, thereby testifying to the intense, sorrowful beauty of mortal life. The suffering of the Homeric hero thus retains a fundamental exteriority. Transience means being robbed, and the response is directed outward at the world. Achilles reconciles himself to fate, but it is a reconciliation achieved through action in the world, not by turning inward.

The tragic Greek, by contrast, cannot so easily locate the source of loss outside himself. Here, fate does not simply descend from without. Rather, it unfolds through character, so that what is lost is not merely something the hero possesses, but something he is. And, the source of destruction is bound up with the deepest layers of selfhood. As I have shown earlier, the Dionysian rites made visible to the Greeks a truth that lies beneath their ethical self, beneath the Apollonian self of measure and beautiful individuality. That truth was an animalistic core, capable of transgression, of the very boundary-violations that Nietzsche describes as the 'witches' brew' of Dionysiac regression. In my reading, what time exposes in Oedipus is not simply a moral failure, but this animalistic core brought to light, the creature beneath the king, the self capable of incest and parricide, which time has been drawing forth all along. This

inward turn, I think, transforms the affective texture of suffering. For the tragic Greeks, as Nietzsche sees it, the experience of transience is lived as guilt, shame, and disgust. Guilt, because the hero is held responsible for deeds that are expressions of his own being, however unwitting. Shame, because the revelation of time strips away the noble self-image and exposes a polluted truth beneath. And disgust, because the hero must now inhabit a self that has become animalistic and abhorrent, both to himself and to his community.

Oedipus feels guilty, ashamed, and deeply regretful about what he has come to recognise as his own pollution. The blind prophet Tiresias identifies this pollution before Oedipus himself can, telling Oedipus that '[y]ou are the land's pollution'¹²⁰. The accusation is initially met with rage and denial, but only because Oedipus has not yet seen what time is about to reveal. When the truth comes to light, Oedipus does not merely receive an external verdict, he bears witness against himself: 'To this guilt I bore witness against myself — with what eyes was I to look up people?'¹²¹ The messenger's catalogue of catastrophe confirms what has been unleashed: 'today groans and destruction and death and shame — all of the ills that can be named, not one is missing'¹²². Shame is not incidental to the tragedy but constitutive of it, the affective form in which the collapse of Oedipus's ethical self is lived.

Guilt, in this context, is not simply the recognition of having broken a rule, but the sense of having transgressed the ethical laws that structure both community and the most intimate bonds, the prohibitions against parricide and incest that, as I see it, define the very architecture

¹²⁰ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', in *Sophocles I*, ed. Glenn W. Most and Mark Griffith, trans. David Grene (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 353; Robert Parker's study demonstrates that pollution (*miasma*) operates with a fundamental indifference to motive, where pollution is an objective, contagious stain incurred by a breach of cosmic or social boundaries. Pollution is non-moral, meaning that it does not matter if Oedipus intended to kill his father. The fact that he did so makes him polluted regardless of his conscious choices and his character. The polluted person becomes a barbarian in the sense that they are an outsider to the human/divine order. They must be driven out to restore the purity of the state. See Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion*, Reprinted, Clarendon Paperbacks (Clarendon Press, 2003); for further interesting discussions, see E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (University of California Press, 2004), 35–37; Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 55–78; Ricœur et al., *The Symbolism of Evil*, 25–46.

¹²¹ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1384–85.

¹²² Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1283–85.

of human kinship. These prohibitions are not abstract, but constitute the concrete ethical fabric of a shared world. To violate them, even unknowingly, is to betray what Bernard Williams calls the ‘internalised other’¹²³, the figure of the community, the father, the mother, whose claims on us form the internal standard by which we measure ourselves. It is this sense of betrayal that, I think, transforms guilt into shame. If guilt is directed at the deed (the transgression of a law) shame is directed at the self, arising when the agent recognises that, in violating the internalised other, they have failed to be who they took themselves to be. Williams describes shame as the collapse of self-respect that follows such a failure, prompting a wish to hide or disappear¹²⁴. Oedipus’s cry, ‘May I be gone out of men’s sight before I see the deadly taint of this disaster come upon me’¹²⁵, expresses such a wish in response to tainted, polluted, shameful self that he has become. The self-blinding of Oedipus can be read as the literal enactment of this wish: ‘You [my eyes] will never see the crime I have committed or had done upon me!’¹²⁶ Unable to face his people, his children, or himself, he destroys the organ of through which the mutual economy of the gaze is transacted. He cannot bear to receive the look of contempt and revulsion from those who now know the truth, and he cannot bear to look at his children, his people, or eventually his parents in Hades, with eyes that will only see in them a reminder of his pollution. Oedipus refuses to be the agent of such a gaze. Blindness will protect him from the visible manifestations of shame. As public space is also a moral space, a blind Oedipus will not witness his own ethical ruin or his social degradation.

But I do not think Oedipus’s self-blinding redeems him. If anything, it intensifies the spectacle of his defilement. The chorus leader’s words—‘I cannot say your remedy was good’¹²⁷—make this plain. The eyes, which once served as instruments of knowledge, are now

¹²³ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 90.

¹²⁴ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 90.

¹²⁵ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 873–75.

¹²⁶ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1267–75.

¹²⁷ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1367.

lost, and in their absence, they come to stand for both what they have witnessed and what Oedipus himself has become. He is not simply pitiable. He is, in a sense, physically revolting. The act of blinding himself becomes the visible sign of an ethical defilement that calls forth revulsion. Disgust is the sense of oneself as contaminating, as something that, like the shameful being, must be cast out. The second messenger prepares us for this before Oedipus appears: ‘Soon you will see a sight to waken pity even in one who feels disgust or hatred’¹²⁸. The use of the word ‘disgust’ marks a shift from the registers of grief or pity to that of revulsion.

Aurel Kolnai argues that it is the way something appears (its *Sosein*), its sensory and material presence, that provokes disgust¹²⁹. Disgust, on this account, is not at first a moral judgment but a response to how something looks, smells, or feels, to its surface, its texture, its containment or its failure to be contained. When Oedipus emerges after blinding himself, his mutilated body arouses revulsion in the most literal way: ‘the bleeding eyeballs gushed and stained his cheeks; no sluggish oozing drops but a black rain and bloody hail poured down’¹³⁰. Oedipus’ body becomes the physical sign of his pollution. For Kolnai, however, the physical and the moral are not separate domains either. They are structurally continuous. It is the very appearance of something that gives it moral weight. Oedipus’s body, then, does not merely symbolise his guilt and shame but makes them present.

Kolnai singles out as objects of disgust those things that display excessive vitality, life that spills over its proper boundaries. He notes that “‘disordered sexuality represents for the sense of disgust, above all what is disorderly, ‘unclean,’ ‘clammy,’ the ‘unhealthy’ excess of life’”¹³¹. Incest, for Kolnai, is just such a disorder, a ‘soiling, a sullyng of life and its values’¹³². This is the register in which Nietzsche, too, describes the Dionysian regression, the ‘excess of

¹²⁸ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1295–96.

¹²⁹ Aurel Kolnai, *Ekel, Hochmut, Haß: zur Phänomenologie feindlicher Gefühle* (Suhrkamp, 2007), 21–24.

¹³⁰ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1276–79.

¹³¹ Aurel Kolnai, *Ekel, Hochmut, Haß*, 42.

¹³² Aurel Kolnai, *Ekel, Hochmut, Haß*, 42.

sexual indiscipline' that 'flooded in waves over all family life and its venerable statutes,' (BT 2, 20) the eruption of the animal self that Apollo's ethical order had sought to restrain: 'The individual, with all his limits and measure, became submerged here in the self-oblivion of the Dionysiac condition and forgot the statutes of Apollo. *Excess* revealed itself as the truth' (BT 4, 27). In this light, Oedipus's incest is not simply an aberration imposed from without but the return of a repressed animality that the ethical self was always struggling to contain. Oedipus's incest (which Nietzsche singles out; see BT 9, 47) is then not only a moral transgression but an expression of excessive, boundary-violating vitality that provokes moral disgust at its deepest level. Oedipus himself gives voice to this when he says: 'I pollute the bed of him I killed by the hands that killed him. Was I not born evil? Am I not utterly unclean?'¹³³ And again: 'The old house that I used to call my father—what fairness you were nurse to, and what foulness festered beneath! Now I am found to be evil and a son of evil'¹³⁴. The language of foulness here is telling. It reflects Kolnai's point that our talk of moral revulsion is shaped by the language we use for physical contamination and decay¹³⁵.

In my view, Oedipus' guilt, shame, and disgust capture what it is like to lose one's ethical self. The incest, after all, was committed in ignorance. At the time, it was not lived as incest, but as marriage, as a life within the ethical structures of Theban society. For many years, Oedipus inhabited the roles of king, husband, and father, and did so without any sense of guilt, shame, or disgust. The underlying reality, which we might be tempted, using Nietzsche's vocabulary, to describe as an animal or pre-civic aspect of his identity, was not something available to him. That aspect was present, but not felt or suspected, not yet brought into view. What interests me is how guilt, shame, and disgust are not just emotions that arise after the truth is revealed, as if they were responses to a fact now known, but how they seem to constitute

¹³³ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1357–59.

¹³⁴ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1395–98.

¹³⁵ Aurel Kolnai, *Ekel, Hochmut, Haß*, 41.

the very experience of that revelation, the way in which the time's gradual uncovering of what one is, beneath what one has taken oneself to be, is experienced. To experience the loss of one's ethical self is thus not to grieve, as one might grieve the loss of another person or a world outside oneself. It is, rather, to feel guilt, shame, and disgust.

When the truth comes to light, when dread becomes suffering from guilt, shame, and disgust, the consequence is a form of isolation from which no human, divine, or sensuous connection seems able to offer relief. The ties that once gave Oedipus his place in the world are undone, one after another. He cannot face his children: 'Would the sight of children, bred as mine are, gladden me? No, not these eyes, never'¹³⁶. He cannot return to the city he has polluted: 'And my city, its towers and sacred places of the gods [...] of these I robbed my miserable self'¹³⁷. And he finds himself cut off from the gods: 'now I am godless and child of impurity'¹³⁸. The pollution that attaches to him breaks every bond of reciprocity, a condition in which every avenue of belonging is closed. Oedipus's declaration that '[n]o man but I can bear my evil doom'¹³⁹ underscores how the suffering from the loss of his ethical self singles him out as polluted and isolates him. In that sense, I take it, Nietzsche thinks of individuation as the source of suffering.

But Oedipus' isolation is not only a matter of being cast out by others, but also of finding no standpoint from which one could continue as oneself. The self, marked by guilt, shame, and disgust, becomes uninhabitable: 'What can I see to love? What greeting can touch my ears with joy? Take me away, and haste — to a place out of the way! Take me away, my friends, the greatly miserable, the most accursed, whom the gods too hate above all men on earth!'¹⁴⁰. The desire to be hidden, to be taken away, even turns into a wish to be annihilated:

¹³⁶ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1375–1376.

¹³⁷ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1376–1381.

¹³⁸ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1360; Oedipus proclaims: 'The gods hate me' (Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1518).

¹³⁹ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1423–25.

¹⁴⁰ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1336–1346.

‘hide me somewhere outside your country, yes, or kill me, or throw me into the sea, to be forever out of your sight’¹⁴¹. Oedipus’ desire is not just a wish for relief from suffering, but a response to the impossibility of continuing as the person he has become. In this, Oedipus’ suffering marks the limits of what it is to persist as an ethical self, and the longing for non-existence becomes intelligible as a response to the loss of one’s ethical self and of every ethical order (family, city, and divine) in which that self might otherwise find a place.

Nietzsche, as I read him, situates Oedipus’ collapse of ethical self within a broader, existential horizon. When he writes that the tragic Greeks ‘have *acquired* [Dionysiac] *knowledge* and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things; they regard it as laughable or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint’ (BT 7, 40), he is not merely describing a psychological state but articulating a particular vision of agency. To act with the intention of rectifying the world, on this view, is already to have committed a kind of error. It is to assume the possibility of an autonomous agent who might stand apart from the cosmic order, diagnose its disorder, and marshal virtues such as intelligence and justice in the service of repair. I take it that this is, for Nietzsche, the distinctive form of tragic hubris, that is, not simply pride before a fall, but a misrecognition of one’s own entanglement within the very cosmos one seeks to amend. What tragedy discloses, then, is that human virtues and their ethical will to fix, to liberate, to heal, are not merely incidental to ruin but may be its very engine. The intention to repair the world is, paradoxically, what drives it further out of joint. From this perspective, catastrophic failure does not appear as a contingent accident, remediable by better knowledge, but as the form that ethical action in the world takes when its illusions are stripped away.

If we approach the affective triad of guilt, shame, and disgust through this framework, it becomes clear that these affects are not simply the psychological responses of an individual

¹⁴¹ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1410–1414.

confronted with their own wrongdoing. Instead, shame and revulsion emerge as the responses appropriate to the recognition of what acting in the world, even under the guidance of the highest virtue, inevitably reveals, namely, that the world is, at its core, structurally indifferent, and perhaps even hostile, to the demands of ethical human life¹⁴². The universe does not reshape itself to fit human ethical frameworks, and the belief that ethical agency finds a natural home in the world is, on this account, a profound delusion. To attempt, yet again, to repair or rectify, or to serve as the agent of justice, would be to repeat this blindness knowingly. The tragic impossibility of setting the world to rights arises, I think, because the acting subject is revealed as the unwitting vehicle of the world's own distortion. Within this dramatic logic, exile is not a matter of cowardly escapism but becomes the only gesture that refuses to perpetuate the hubristic stance of rectification. The tragic figure seeks to withdraw from the ethical register in which action is both expected and possible. In the passage above, Nietzsche thus seems to be articulating what he takes to be the fundamental ethical insight that Oedipus' tragedy offers its audience.

In tracing the destruction of the tragic protagonist, the audience is invited, as Nietzsche puts it, to 'understand the symbolism of Ophelia's fate' and 'grasp the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus' (BT 7, 40). If the impulse to act and to impose order is not a contingent human choice but constitutive of ethical life itself, then Silenus' indictment cannot be limited to a particular error or misdeed. What is at stake is the very structure of human being-in-the-world. It is this realisation, I would argue, that accounts for the abrupt transition from Oedipus' individual regret to a kind of cosmic will-negation. Once the illusion of an ethically hospitable world is broken, what follows is, as Nietzsche describes, 'an ascetic, will-negating mood' in which 'existence is denied' and 'experienced with a sense of revulsion' (BT 7, 40). In such a

¹⁴² Winfried Menninghaus notes that for Nietzsche, revulsion can reveal truth if the initial recoil is overcome (Winfried Menninghaus, *Ekel: Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung*, 3. Aufl, Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 1634 (Suhrkamp, 2011), 244–50).

world, fundamentally misaligned with ethical agency, the ethical self becomes impossible, unravelled by the passage of time.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to trace the anatomy of tragic suffering as it arises from transience, and to suggest that individuation and transience are not best understood as separate liabilities, but as two aspects of a single existential predicament. My first concern was to show how the dissolution of the Homeric mythic horizon brings into view a Dionysian insight: that the individualised ethical self is, in important respects, a fragile construction. When this civilised surface is torn away by overwhelming titanic forces, what emerges is not simply a loss of order, but the exposure of a more primitive, transgressive element within the self. In reading Nietzsche's interpretation of Oedipus, I have argued that the passage of time compels an inherited fate to unfold through character, leading to a recognition that comes too late, and in so doing, strips away the hero's ethical self to reveal this more primitive core. The tragic experience, then, is not simply a matter of personal regret, but involves a recognition that the active, ethical subject is, by virtue of time itself, implicated in its own undoing. The loss of this ethical selfhood constitutes the tragic experience of suffering from transience. This suffering does not, as in the case of Achilles, result in an outward, heroic grief, but rather in a collapse marked by guilt, shame, and disgust. The resulting exile and isolation intensify the suffering of individuation. What emerges is not a universe that accommodates human ethical life, but one that appears fundamentally inhospitable to it.

I want now to suggest that, for Nietzsche, tragedy is closely bound up with what I have been calling temporal nihilism (yet, as I will show in the next chapter, tragedy does not simply succumb to this threat). By temporal nihilism, I mean a stance in which the suffering that comes from the transience of what we love and care for leads us to conclude that human existence is,

in the end, not worth desiring. Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy, as I understand it here, shows that what is ultimately at stake is not merely the loss of something external, but the very coherence of the ethical self. In the context of tragedy, time becomes the medium through which we encounter the world's inhospitability to our hopes and projects. To exist in time is to be required to act, but the unfolding of time often reveals that our best intentions and highest virtues are, in retrospect, implicated in outcomes we could not have foreseen and might wish to repudiate. In such a world, the loss of the ethical self appears not as a mere failure of character or judgment, but as a fate built into the structure of temporal existence. When we come to see that ethical life cannot find a secure home in the world, but is always at risk of outliving its own innocence, a mood of resignation or even negation can arise. Temporal nihilism, in this sense, finds its force in the recognition that if our ethical agency is always vulnerable to this kind of self-undermining, then it becomes difficult to see how existence, as we live it in time, could be unambiguously desired.

It is natural to worry, however, that this reading risks overstating the loss of nobility. Are there not tragic figures (Antigone comes to mind) whose downfall elicits not disgust but solemn dignity, an austere endurance rather than polluted undoing? And even if shame and revulsion belong to Nietzsche's Dionysian world, do Oedipus's final acts (his assumption of guilt, his insistence on bearing pollution alone, his self-blinding, his continued speech) not suggest a form of heroic agency that survives collapse? Jacqueline de Romilly, for example, argues '[i]f time could ever be said to be conquered [...], it would be, in Sophocles, by the sheer action of the hero's will, as he boldly places himself beyond the grip of time'¹⁴³. Yet the final movements of the drama do not, in my reading, support what de Romilly calls Sophocles' 'vigorous and positive view of what man can achieve'¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴³ Jacqueline de Romilly, *Le Temps Dans La Tragédie Grecque*, 95.

¹⁴⁴ Jacqueline de Romilly, *Le Temps Dans La Tragédie Grecque*, 95.

In my view, Oedipus's final gestures seem to belong to a register quite distinct from what we might call Apolline self-assertion. The speech, the act of self-blinding, the plea for exile, do not strike me as affirmations of heroic striving, but rather as the visible movements of what Nietzsche describes 'purely passive behaviour', to which 'all his [Oedipus'] conscious words and actions in his life hitherto have merely led' (BT 9, 47). When Oedipus pleads to touch his sons and grieve with them¹⁴⁵, or when he senses himself abandoned by the gods, or when Creon offers his final advice—'Do not seek to be master in everything — for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life'¹⁴⁶—, these are not, I think, gestures of defiance. The chorus's final image is thus not one of heroic endurance, but of a drowning self: 'See him now, and see the breakers of misfortune swallow him'¹⁴⁷. Such an unfortunate self has no place within the world of Apolline heroism as Creon, commanding Oedipus to hide, makes clear: '[r]everence at least the flame that gives all life, our lord the Sun, and do not show unveiled to him pollution'¹⁴⁸.

There remains a question that I have not resolved. Temporal nihilism seems to depend on guilt, and more specifically on what Nietzsche described as 'unconscious guilt'. Oedipus does not, as I see it, take up responsibility for what fate has made of him in any reflective sense. Instead, guilt comes to him, arising from within the very fate he did not choose. This, I think, is what renders his situation genuinely ambiguous. The play shows him both as the victim of a misfortune sent by the gods and as the bearer of a guilt that is, in some sense, his own. The guilt is his own not because he freely chose his actions, but because he cannot dissociate himself from what those actions have revealed about him. It is this intertwining of fate and self that seems to give the Silenic verdict its force. If there were no guilt, Oedipus could perhaps maintain a distance between himself and what has happened to him, and the denial of existence

¹⁴⁵ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1466–67.

¹⁴⁶ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1524.

¹⁴⁷ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1527.

¹⁴⁸ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', 1425–26.

would appear merely intelligible. But when fate is experienced as inseparable from oneself, when what time discloses is felt as genuinely and intolerably one's own, point the denial of existence is not just a reaction to suffering but a judgment on the kind of being one essentially is. It is not that existence has been bad for Oedipus. It is that existence has revealed him to be the kind of being whose existence is itself a wrong. Nietzsche's account of tragedy, as I understand it, does not resolve this ambiguity but rather makes use of it. If Oedipus is simply the victim of fate, the basis for guilt disappears, and with it the justification for the verdict. Yet tragedy does not simply acquit him. What it offers, instead, is a perspective in which the framework of guilt and self-condemnation (within which the Silenic verdict appears justified) is neither affirmed nor rejected, but held in suspension. Whether such a suspension can be maintained, and what kind of art or way of life might be required for it, are questions I will take up in the next chapter.

3.

The Tragic Greeks II: Tragic Transfiguration of the Loss of the Ethical Self

‘Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain’¹⁴⁹ —so the chorus of *Oedipus the King* sings, echoing the wisdom attributed to Silenus (that it is best not to have been born, or, failing that, to die as soon as possible). In the previous chapter, I attempted to clarify the temporal structure underlying this verdict in the case of tragedy. The suffering of the tragic Greeks is not merely a matter of enduring misfortune. Rather, it involves being constituted as an ethical self whose very form is fleeting, shaped from the beginning by an inherited fate, enacted through one’s character over time, and ultimately exposed in a moment of recognition that reveals an abhorrent core at the heart of the ethical self. The dissolution of that self into something pre-ethical, a level beneath the noble identity, where transgression is not only possible but, unbeknownst to the hero, already at work, is not a sudden

¹⁴⁹ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, in *Sophocles I*, ed. Glenn W. Most and Mark Griffith, trans. David Grene (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1529–30. In the same play, the chorus speaking to Oedipus says, ‘you would be better dead than blind and living.’ (Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1368) Oedipus also entertains the thought that if he had not been born or died young, he would have had it better (Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1349–55).

event but a process that fate, unfolding through time, brings about gradually and irreversibly. Time, in this context, is not a neutral backdrop but the medium through which this dissolution occurs. It is this fate that strips the hero of his noble identity to the point where continued existence itself becomes questionable. Nietzsche takes this suffering from transience, the inevitable and irreparable loss of the ethical self to time's passage, as central to the tragic condition.

Yet, he maintains that despite the intensity of suffering depicted on stage, a kind of 'sovereign serenity' pervades *Oedipus the King*, and that by the play's end the tragic Greeks experienced 'the most profound human delight' (BT 9, 47). Nietzsche attributes this to the fact that 'tragic myth participates fully in the aim of all art, which is to effect a metaphysical transfiguration' (BT 24, 113). Through this transfiguration, 'tragedy sits in the midst of this superabundance of life, suffering, and delight' (BT 20, 98). The question I want to pursue here is, therefore, how this is possible. How can tragedy articulate the deepest suffering from transience and yet remain so compelling that this suffering is no longer regarded as a reason to reject existence?

Young has argued that tragedy renders life desirable by means of deception, though he locates the mechanism differently from his account of the Homeric Greeks¹⁵⁰. The tragic chorus grants access to a genuinely pleasurable Dionysian state, to an experience of the eternal, pre-individual life to which we are said to belong¹⁵¹. But this state is precarious. It cannot be sustained, and the return to individuated existence, with all the suffering that transience brings, risks making ordinary life even harder to bear. As Young puts it, 'having tasted the delight of the Dionysian state, one is reluctant to return to the terrors and horrors of the Apollonian

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Daniel Came, 'The Themes of Affirmation and Illusion in The Birth of Tragedy and Beyond', in *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*, ed. Ken Gemes and John Richardson (Oxford University Press, 2016), 215: 'The affirmation of life that tragedy produces, then, is not really an affirmation of life at all—the object of affirmation is not unvarnished reality—but rather an affirmation of a diluted and hence falsified image of reality'.

¹⁵¹ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 77.

world'¹⁵², much as a drug-induced high can render sobriety more intolerable¹⁵³. Apollo's deception resolves this danger. We are made to forget most of what we felt in the Dionysian state and to believe that what we witnessed pertained only to the fate of a particular individual, while retaining just enough of its pleasure to feel, as Young writes, 'strangely comforted and yet ready for action'¹⁵⁴. Thus, Apollo's "noble deception allows us to have our cake and eat it too"¹⁵⁵. The deception must be carefully balanced.

I have already argued against the self-deceptive interpretation of transfiguration in Chapter One, and I find it even less convincing when applied to tragic transfiguration. The difficulty with Young's account is not only that it misconstrues Apollo's function, but that it fails to identify what is at stake in the transfiguration that tragedy is meant to accomplish. Young treats the Dionysian experience of unity with primordial life and the desirability of individuated existence as simply opposed, and takes Apollo's role to be that of concealing this opposition through deception. Yet Nietzsche is clear that tragedy does not provide an Apollonian escape from the Dionysian. Rather, as he writes, 'as the objectification of a Dionysiac state, the vision [i.e., tragedy] represents not Apolline release and redemption in semblance, but rather the breaking-asunder of the individual and its becoming one with the primal being itself' (BT 8, 40). Apollo does not hide the dissolution of the individual in the Dionysian, but renders it visible in individuated, human form so that the destruction of the tragic hero on stage is the presentation of that dissolution, not a screen that purges Dionysus from view¹⁵⁶. As Nietzsche argues: 'all the famous figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus etc., are merely masks of that original hero, Dionysos' (BT 10, 51). What tragedy must accomplish, then, is not a deception about the Dionysian experience, nor a managed

¹⁵² Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 179.

¹⁵³ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 180.

¹⁵⁴ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 180.

¹⁵⁵ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 180.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. David Leo Tracy, 'Nietzsche's Apollo', in *Nietzsche's Gods: Critical and Constructive Perspectives*, ed. Russell Re Manning and Carlotta Santini (De Gruyter, 2022).

forgetting that leaves us insulated from suffering, but a transformation in the way suffering from transience is experienced.

An answer is found, I argue, by re-examining the notion of transfiguration in the context of Nietzsche's interpretation of tragedy as the result of the confluence of Apollo and Dionysus: 'a work of art which is Dionysiac and Apolline in equal measure: Attic tragedy' (BT 1, 14). The concept of transfiguration is not new. We encountered it in chapter one. There, it was an exclusively Apollonian achievement. For the Homeric Greeks, Apollonian transfiguration did not suppress or deceive them about their suffering from transience. Rather, transfiguration worked by shifting their vantage point for encountering suffering. The Olympian gods, in their serene contemplation of mortal struggle, disclose a perspective in which the weight and brevity of human life appear not as grounds for condemnation but as the very source of its beauty and gravity.

The transfiguration of tragedy, however, operates under entirely different conditions. The Olympian gods have grown frightful at the sight of Dionysus and the suffering he symbolises. Oedipus himself comes to feel that the gods do not admire him but hate him, a conviction that *Oedipus the King* does nothing to straightforwardly dispel. The Homeric mechanism of transfiguration therefore, appears simply non-existent here. From within the perspective of individuated ethical life, there is simply nothing in Oedipus' fate to idealise. In fact, Nietzsche writes that 'drama is the Apolline embodiment of Dionysiac insights and effects' (BT 8, 44). This means that in tragedy, Apollo does not project a heroic individual world over reality but gives symbolic, individual form to the Dionysian dismemberment by the Titans themselves. Transfiguration here cannot work by glorifying the hero's suffering from within the perspective of individuated life but must make the destruction of that perspective bearable, even pleasurable, from a standpoint that altogether exceeds it. For the transfiguration of tragedy to work, Apollo needs the reborn Dionysus.

I want to approach this chapter in two stages. First, I consider what might be called the Dionysian aspect of tragic experience. This aspect is the way in which the chorus, in its rapture and self-forgetting, seems to suspend the suffering that comes with being a distinct individual, allowing the self to dissolve, if only momentarily, into a more fundamental unity of life. Then I turn to the Apollonian element, which, as I see it, brings this Dionysian insight back into the world of individual forms, making it visible and intelligible. Here, the dissolution of the tragic hero is given a symbolic shape, one through which the spectator is able to perceive, even in the destruction of the ethical self, a kind of inexhaustible and primordial joy.

The Dionysian Dissolution: Suspending the Suffering Individual

To understand how tragedy transfigures the suffering that arises from transience, we need to keep in view what is at stake in that suffering. In the previous chapter, I argued that the suffering bound up with individuation is the loss of one's ethical self. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* presents this condition in its most extreme form. The passage of time reveals him to be a polluted self, driving him into exile, into a kind of isolation so complete that no bond, whether human, divine, or sensuous, can offer support in the world. In this sense, the suffering from transience individuates Oedipus as a lonely, alienated being in the world.

Nietzsche argues that the first effect of tragedy is a suspension of that isolation through an experience of returning from individuated suffering to the joy of unity. He claims that tragedy contains within itself 'the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, a premonition of unity restored' (BT 10, 52). For Nietzsche, Dionysus is not just Dionysus Zagreus, but the god also stands for the hope of overcoming the state of individuating suffering from transience. Thus, Nietzsche claims that

the cultivated Greek felt himself suspended [*aufgehoben*] in the face of the satyr chorus: and this is the immediate effect of Dionysian tragedy—that the state and

society, indeed all the clefts between one human being and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity which leads back to the heart of nature. (BT 7, 39; translation amended).

In tragic drama, the individual's suffering from transience is not simply erased or denied. Instead, Nietzsche argues, it is superseded by the chorus's vision of Dionysian unity, 'just as lamplight is superseded [*aufgehoben*] by the light of day' (BT 7, 39). He uses the German term *aufgehoben*, but I do not take him to mean the Hegelian idea of sublation, where suffering is preserved within a higher synthesis. Rather, what is at issue is the cancellation of the world in which the isolated individual suffers from transience, as the individual is lifted into what Nietzsche here calls the 'heart of nature'. Elsewhere, he writes that 'wherever the Dionysiac broke through, the Apolline was suspended and annulled [*aufgehoben und vernichtet*]' (BT 4, 27; Apollo, we remember, is the god of individuation). In other passages, Nietzsche's language moves toward the idea of elevation (*heben*). The Dionysian reveller, he says, 'walks about so enraptured and elevated [*erhoben*]' (BT 1, 18; translation amended), and in *Oedipus at Colonus* we encounter a serenity 'elevated [*emporgehoben*] into infinite transfiguration' (BT 9, 47). When I consider these passages together, it seems to me that Nietzsche uses *aufgehoben* to name a single operation, one in which elevation and annulment are inseparable. In this sense, the lamplight of individuation is not destroyed, but is outshone and shown to be limited when the fuller daylight of Dionysian vision appears.

The unity Nietzsche describes here is not, as one might initially suppose, a matter of social or political reintegration. He is clear on this point. The divisions that are overcome are not simply those of political or civic distance, differences of rank, boundaries of household and polis, but the more fundamental separations between one human being and another, the very structure of individuation itself. In this sense, Dionysian unity does not return Oedipus to the ethical order from which he was expelled. Instead, it dissolves the ethical order as the

framework within which he suffers guilt, shame, and disgust, and from the knowledge that he has transgressed the ethical boundaries of family relations. This suspension of the ethical is necessary because, as Edith Hall, '[m]iasma [pollution] is an organic phenomenon unaffected by legal or moral niceties. Oedipus' pollution has infected all Thebes with a contagious disease. Oedipus was polluted regardless of whether or not he had known what he was doing when he broke the taboos'¹⁵⁷. The issue of Oedipus' suffering in exile exceeds a resolution in terms of the ethical categories of the polis¹⁵⁸. Yet, the issue is not so much answered on another level as it is displaced, since the Dionysian experience does not (as Hegel would argue) reveal a deeper ethical principle, but a pre-cultural nature.

This, I think, brings us to a significant point in Nietzsche's phrase 'leads back to the heart of nature'. He is explicit that the unity achieved here operates on two levels at once. 'not only is the bond [*Bund*] 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' (BT 1, 18). The renewal of human bonds is, in this account, the lesser movement. The more profound is the reconciliation between humanity and nature, which presupposes and heals a prior estrangement. On Nietzsche's view, the human being has become nature's lost child—'there erupts what one might call a sentimental tendency in nature, as if it had cause to sigh over its dismemberment into individuals' (BT 2, 21) —cut off from the natural ground of existence by the very structures of ethical life (law, guilt, civic order, etc.) that give individuation its ethical form. The Dionysian festival, then, does not simply restore

¹⁵⁷ Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 303; for an interesting discussion of Oedipus culpability for non-intentional outcomes of his actions, see Béatrice Han-Pile, "'I Suffered My Deeds More than I Acted Them": Hegel on Sophocles' Oedipus Plays', *Hegel Bulletin* 46, no. 2 (2025): 213–42, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2025.14>.

¹⁵⁸ John Sallis argues that the Dionysian excess is fundamentally a disruption of the Apollonian *principium individuationis*, which relies upon fixed categories and the logic of the limit to maintain a coherent human identity. In the tragic space, this excess manifests as a monstrous hybridity that renders the Apollonian drive for order and ethical measure structurally inadequate (John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 55–57).

relations among individuals. It undoes the estrangement between the individuated human world of culture and nature from which the form has become emancipated¹⁵⁹.

The experience of the satyr chorus is the first disclosure of this nature, and Nietzsche's account of the satyr's vision is worth quoting at length:

What the Greek saw in his satyr was nature, as yet untouched by knowledge, with the bolts of culture still closed, but he did not for this reason equate the satyr with the monkey. On the contrary, what he saw in the satyr was the original image (*Urbild*) of mankind, the expression of man's highest and strongest stirrings, an enthusiastic celebrant, ecstatic at the closeness of his god, a sympathetic companion in whom the sufferings of the god are repeated, a proclaimer of wisdom from the deepest heart of nature, an emblem of the sexual omnipotence of nature which the Greek habitually regards with reverent astonishment (BT 8, 41).

Nietzsche, here, develops an essential contrast. The satyr is pre-cultural, but this does not make him a regression to mere animality. He is not the ape. He is the *Urbild*, the original image of mankind, not what the human being descends to when culture falls away, but what the human being most deeply is when seen from the perspective of nature itself. This distinction seems to

¹⁵⁹ Nietzsche's language of estrangement and reconciliation places him in a complicated relationship to two dominant ways of thinking about the nature-culture relation in the modern period. The Enlightenment narrative frames culture as progressive emancipation from nature, the liberation of reason from the blind forces of natural necessity. On this view, the structures of law, guilt, and civic order that Nietzsche associates with individuation are precisely the achievements of a humanity that has freed itself from its natural ground. Nietzsche's account cuts against this narrative, hearing in those same structures not liberation but a severing from something vital. In this respect his position carries a recognisably Rousseauian resonance. For Jean Jacques Rousseau, civilisation has alienated humanity from a natural wholeness it once possessed, and the structures of culture that appear as progress are also the source of a deeper impoverishment (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men or Second Discourse', in *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Yet Nietzsche is not a Rousseauian. He explicitly resists the back-to-nature view within the *Birth* (BT 3, 24), and, in my view, his account of the Dionysian does not call for a regression behind culture to some prior natural state. What tragedy restores is not nature against culture but a reconciliation that passes through culture, a momentary dissolution of the pretension of the individualised human world to self-sufficiency, without abandoning individuation itself. The overcoming of estrangement is aesthetic and festive rather than political or primitivist, which is precisely what distinguishes Nietzsche's position from the Romantic versions of the nature-culture critique he otherwise resembles.

me crucial for the transfigurative movement of tragedy. If the satyr were simply a figure of regression, culture stripped away to reveal the animal beneath, then the satyr chorus would confirm the Silenic verdict. The passage of time reveals an abhorrent nature beneath the noble surface of the ethical self, a regressive core that makes existence undesirable. But Nietzsche insists on the opposite. The satyr is the expression of man's 'highest and strongest stirrings.' What is revealed when the 'bolts of culture' are opened is not depravity but an excess of vitality that culture, by its very nature, must contain and suppress.

Nietzsche, as I read him, is alert to the risk of confusing the '*Dionysiac Greeks*' with what he calls the '*Dionysiac Barbarians*' (BT 2, 20), and his distinction between them seems to reinforce my point. The barbaric festivals, the Babylonian Sacaea, are characterised by genuine regression: 'human beings regressed to the condition of tigers and monkeys' (BT 2, 20). Against this, the '*Dionysiac Greeks*' festivals had 'the significance of festivals of universal release and redemption and days of transfiguration' (BT 2, 20). The contrast is not incidental. It marks two entirely different relations to the pre-cultural. One in which the dissolution of ethical form is a descent into bestiality, and one in which it is an ascent to a higher vision of what the human being most deeply is. Crucially, Nietzsche makes clear that the verdict of barbarism is itself the verdict of the Apollonian, ethical, which regarded the 'the extra-Apolline world [of the Dionysian as], that of the barbarians' (BT 4, 27). To call the dissolution of culture barbaric is already to be standing within the ethical, Apollonian frame, judging the pre-cultural by the standards of the individuated world it precedes and exceeds¹⁶⁰. In contrast, the positivity of the tragic Greek vision of the satyr, its insistence that what is disclosed is not the monkey

¹⁶⁰ François Hartog argues that the barbarian functions in Greek thought not as an objective ethnographic category, but as a 'rhetoric of alterity' used to define the boundaries of the Greek *polis*. By projecting an inverted image of their own venerable statute order onto the outsider, the Greeks used the figure of the barbarian as a negative mirror to visualize and affirm the coherence of their own ethical and political identity. To label a state of existence as barbaric is, therefore, a strategic act of translation that reinforces the observer's position within the civilized frame. François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (University of California Press, 1988).

but the original image, is therefore itself a signal that the ethical perspective of the individuated world has been abandoned. It is from the Apollonian perspective of ethical individuality that the satyr appears as a regression. Once that Apollonian perspective is suspended and one is elevated to the perspective of nature, what had appeared as regression reveals itself not as the animal beneath the human, but as the natural ground from which both the human and its ethical world have grown, and to which the Dionysian festival returns.

What, according to Nietzsche, the spectator therefore undergoes before the satyr chorus, is, however, not simply a matter of observing a perspective from the outside, but of entering into it. Nietzsche himself imagines what it is like to experience the perspective of nature:

we become one with the immeasurable, primordial delight in existence and receive an intimation, in Dionysiac ecstasy, that this delight is indestructible and eternal.

Despite fear and pity, we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose procreative lust we have become one (BT 17, 81).

There are, I think, several aspects of this experience that bear directly on the question of how suffering from transience is transfigured. The delight that appears here is not something the spectator produces, but rather something encountered. It is not a pleasure invented to compensate for suffering, but a recognition of something already operative at the level of existence itself, something in which the spectator participates rather than creates. The phrase ‘despite fear and pity’ is significant for this reason. Fear and pity, as Aristotle recognised, are the emotions proper to tragic witnessing, the responses appropriate to destruction when seen from within the framework of individual suffering and moral concern¹⁶¹. The Dionysian experience does not abolish these emotions, but instead subordinates them, holding them in abeyance. They remain, but they are no longer definitive. What is enacted here is not an erasure but a suspension that is also an elevation; the lamplight is not extinguished but outshone.

¹⁶¹ Aristotle, ‘Poetics’, 1449b.27-29.

Nietzsche presents the joy disclosed in this state as indestructible and eternal, and this, I take it, is the first ontological claim the passage makes. The delight operates at a level that transience does not reach, not because it stands outside time, but because it is the generative force that produces and dissolves individual forms without itself being subject to dissolution. In this state, the spectator is alive ‘not as individuals, but as the one living being’. This, I would argue, is what the suspension of the ethical world of the polis means from within, not a formal bracketing but a psychological and ontological event in which the self that suffers from transience is temporarily dissolved. The procreative lust with which the spectator becomes one is not simply an image of vitality but names the generative joy of primordial life, a joy bound up with the production of new individual forms. The demolition of individual forms is therefore not destructive in any final sense, but is the very condition of new creation. The joy is not in spite of the destruction but through it, since destruction releases the force that generates again. It is important to note, however, that what the spectator receives is an intimation of this delight, not the delight itself. This is access rather than fusion, and that distinction will matter for what follows.

What this intimation discloses becomes clearer when Nietzsche turns to Heraclitus:

Dionysiac phenomenon, one which reveals to us the playful construction and demolition of the world of individuality as an outpouring of primal pleasure and delight, a process quite similar to Heraclitus the Obscure’s comparison of the force that shapes the world to a playing child who sets down stones here, there, and the next place, and who builds up piles of sand only to knock them down again (BT 24, 114).

Nietzsche refers here to Heraclitus fragment 52, where the playing force is named *aeon*¹⁶². The term is usually translated as eternity, but its more precise meaning is vital force, life, or an indeterminate living duration¹⁶³. The distinction from Platonic eternity is, I think, essential. Platonic eternity is motionless, set over against the temporal world of becoming. For Nietzsche, the *aeon* is not outside time but is time in its most fundamental character, the living, generative, inexhaustible force that constructs and demolishes individual forms. This is the same primordial life disclosed in the above passage, now given its temporal name. Time, at this level, is not the destroyer that the ethical perspective experiences but the player.

The joy of play, I take it, is the linking thought between these two passages. The indestructible delight of primordial life and the primal pleasure of the playing child are, in this context, the same joy. What the first passage establishes experientially, the second establishes ontologically. The joy is not a response to what life produces, but the very character of the producing itself. Life plays, and its playing is joyous, including and especially the demolition. This is also an image of superabundance rather than economy. Primordial life does not construct and demolish individual forms at a cost to itself. It pours itself out in doing so, and it is precisely this that makes the joy inexhaustible rather than depleting.

I want to suggest that when we think of play, we are also drawn to the thought of innocence, and it is this connection that Nietzsche's image of the playing child brings into view. Hans Georg Gadamer remarks that play is characterized by a movement back and forth, a movement that is not directed toward any purpose outside itself¹⁶⁴. Play, in this sense, is not

¹⁶² Heraclitus, 'Herakleitos', in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. Erster Band*, ed. Walter Kranz, trans. Walter Diels (1996), 22 B 52.

¹⁶³ Michael Theunissen, 'Griechische Zeitbegriffe Vor Platon', *Archiv Für Begriffsgeschichte* 44 (2002): 8.

¹⁶⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 3rd edn (Mohr Siebeck, 1972), 97–105; For Johan Huizinga, play is a primordial human activity that precedes and underlies culture itself, characterised by freedom, by being set apart from the pressures of ordinary life, and by its own internal rules that are absolute within the play space but carry no validity outside it (Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Angelico Press, 2016)); play has been identified as a deeply rooted feature of animal life extending far beyond the human. Play behaviour has been documented across a remarkably wide range of species, including mammals, birds, reptiles, and even some fish, suggesting that it is not a cultural achievement but a biological given, rooted in the deep time of evolutionary history. Gordon

oriented toward an external goal, and so it resists measurement by standards of success or failure, or by the categories of right and wrong. When I consider the player who is wholly absorbed in play, I find that such a person is not standing apart from the activity, weighing it against some external criterion. The absence of purpose here is not a matter of triviality; rather, it signals a different mode of being, one in which the familiar categories of instrumental reasoning and moral assessment do not apply. If play is, by its nature, anterior to any external standard of judgment, then it is also anterior to the framework of guilt and responsibility, which depends on just such a standard. The innocence I have in mind here is not to be confused with moral blamelessness, or with being acquitted after judgment, or with the absence of wrongdoing as defined within an ethical perspective. It is, instead, a kind of innocence that precedes the very framework of guilt and responsibility. The child at play does not pause to ask whether it is right to destroy the sand pile it has just constructed. The question does not present itself. This form of innocence is, in a sense, more fundamental than acquittal, precisely because it does not operate within the framework that acquittal presupposes. Concepts such as guilt, shame, and disgust belong to the sphere of individuated, ethical life. They do not function at the level of what Nietzsche calls primordial life.

What the two passages together establish, then, is not only an ontological claim about the structure of primordial life, but also a transformation in the experience of time itself. The ethical perspective experiences time as the force of irreparable loss, the destroyer of the ethical self and the revealer of what we would rather not be. What tragedy's disclosure opens is, I think, a different experience of the same temporal force. Time is now experienced not as the

Burghardt, whose surplus resource theory remains one of the most influential accounts, argues that play emerges when an organism possesses resources, energy, time, and security, in excess of what immediate survival requires. Play is therefore the expression of surplus vitality, of life exceeding its own necessities and expending itself freely (Gordon M. Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (Massachusetts institute of technology, 2005)). The evolutionary depth of play suggests that it is not a late or contingent feature of living beings but something woven into the fabric of life itself, which makes an interesting parallel to Nietzsche's intuition that the playing child names something primordial about the character of vital force.

destroyer but as the player, not as the source of irreparable loss but as the expression of an inexhaustible, joyous vitality that constructs and demolishes with equal superabundance. This is not a denial of transience. Time still passes and individual forms still dissolve. But the passage is now experienced as the movement of a force that is never itself diminished by what it releases, and the innocence of that force retroactively transforms the meaning of what dissolution brings to light¹⁶⁵. The Silenic verdict is not answered by a counter-argument but dissolved by a transformation of the temporal experience from which it arose. This, I take it, is the first and most fundamental achievement of tragic transfiguration, though I cannot, as I will now go on to show, be the last.

To close this section, I want to ask how the Dionysian state suspends ordinary experience by examining to Nietzsche's notion of rapture: 'we catch a glimpse of the essence of the *Dionysiac*, which is best conveyed by the analogy of *rapture* [*Rausch*]. These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting' (BT 1, 17, translation amended). It seems to me that rapture is not best understood as a mood or feeling that accompanies the Dionysian experience but rather as the very process through which the individuated self is dissolved. According to Nietzsche, rapture has a twofold structure, though these are not sequential moments but two sides of the same occurrence. On one side, rapture involves a kind of 'self-forgetting', the submersion of the memory-laden individual. On the other, it is ecstatic and an enchantment, an elevation into the experience of primordial life. These two aspects cannot be separated, for it is precisely the structures of individuated existence that screen primordial life from view. To forget the self is already to be open to what was always present beneath it.

¹⁶⁵ In very different, still ethical terms, Paul Ricœur also notes the duality in the tragic experience of time: 'the passage of time in the Greek tragedies suggests the thought of a redemption by time, which wears out the claws and teeth of the wrath of gods and men. It is within this common cosmic space of time that Zeus the tyrant *becomes* Zeus the father of Justice' (Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 227–28).

To understand the self-forgetting aspect of rapture, I find it helpful to consider the particular character of suffering that arises from transience. This suffering is not simply the pain of loss as it happens. It is entangled with memory, with the accumulated weight of a cursed, personal history. The past presses upon the present, and it is this pressure that makes suffering from transience so acute and so resistant to resolution. No argument, no compensating pleasure, and no act of will can dissolve what memory preserves. As Oedipus cries out in agony: ‘Madness and stabbing pain and memory of my evils!’¹⁶⁶ Oedipus cannot forget who he has become, and the true, horrible meaning of his life, the time’s passage has revealed. Nietzsche is explicit about how rapture addresses this element of Oedipus’ suffering: ‘the ecstasy [*Verzückung*] of the Dionysiac state, in which the usual barriers and limits of existence are destroyed, contains, for as long as it lasts, a *lethargic* element in which all personal experiences from the past are submerged’ (BT 7, 40). I do not think the ‘*lethargic* element’ is a distraction that diverts attention from it. Rather, it is a temporary dissolution of the very capacity for personal recollection that makes suffering from transience so depressing. For the duration of the rapture, the individual whose past presses upon the present is submerged. There is no one left to remember. The self’s fixation on its own history, the inward turn of suffering that time has made irresolvable, is not answered but interrupted.

But, as I understand it, for Nietzsche this interruption is simply a negation. It is, at the same time, an elevation. Nietzsche develops the positive structure of rapture through the concept of ecstasis. In a note from around the same time of writing the *Birth*, he writes that ‘[i]n those orgiastic festivities of Dionysus, there was such a degree of being-outside-oneself, of ἔκστασις, because of which people felt and felt like transformed and enchanted ones’ (KGW I.5, 1[1]). The Greek term ἔκστασις carries both the sense of standing outside oneself and of ecstasy, and Nietzsche connects this to enchantment: ‘[e]nchantment is the precondition of all

¹⁶⁶ Sophocles, ‘Oedipus the King’, 1317–1318.

dramatic art. In this enchanted state, the Dionysiac enthusiast sees himself as a satyr, and as a satyr he in turn sees the god' (BT 8, 44). I take it that the self does not simply cease to be itself. Rather, it is displaced outside itself and into a higher form of existence, passing through the figure of the satyr as an intermediary¹⁶⁷. The satyr is the threshold figure, neither fully human nor fully divine, the form in which the individuated self first encounters its own dissolution as an elevation rather than a destruction. In standing outside itself, the spectator moves from the perspective of the suffering, memory-laden individual into proximity with divine primordial nature, and it is in this proximity that the experience of primordial life and its indestructible joy becomes possible. Self-forgetting is not mere dissolution but the condition of that experience. The individual cannot participate in the indestructible joy of primordial life while remaining enclosed within the individuated self, and rapture is what removes that enclosure.

Yet, a difficulty therefore remains here. Nietzsche is clear that rapture is only a temporary state (BT 17, 80–81¹⁶⁸). Once the individual is reconstituted, once the spectator leaves the theatre and returns to the world of individuated ethical life, the suffering that arises from transience is structurally unchanged. The pain of loss, the persistence of memory, the weight of a past that time has sealed, none of these is resolved by the Dionysian suspension. If tragic transfiguration amounts only to a temporary interruption of suffering, it is hard to see how it differs in kind from a refined form of distraction, more elevated perhaps than wine or sleep, but not fundamentally different. The question I need to ask at this point is whether the intimation of indestructible joy leaves a trace capable of permanently altering the individual's relation to its own transience, not merely a memory of having felt joy, but a changed way of inhabiting time itself.

¹⁶⁷ Walter Otto argues that Dionysian madness (*wahnsinn*) should not be understood as a clinical or psychological breakdown, but as a theophanic state that constitutes a higher form of sanity. In this state, the boundaries of the everyday world are shattered to reveal a deeper, reality, the wild, pulsating life-force of the god and existence as such (Walter F. Otto, *Dionysos*, Klostermann rote Reihe (Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 2011), 124–30).

¹⁶⁸ '[I]ts metaphysical solace tears us *momentarily* out of the turmoil of changing figures. For *brief moments* we are truly the primordial being itself' (BT 18, 81; emphasis added)

Giving Form to the Dionysus: Apollo, Semblance, and Metaphysical Solace

In the previous section, I tried to show that the Dionysian suspension brings about a genuine ontological disclosure. In the experience of primordial, indestructible joy and innocence, it becomes possible to see that transient existence is not as dreadful as the Silenic verdict would have us believe. Yet, I do not think that this disclosure, however real, amounts to what Nietzsche calls 'metaphysical solace which, I wish to suggest, we derive from every true tragedy' (BT 7, 39). To understand why, we need to look more closely at what solace is and what it requires. Solace is not a matter of reparation. It does not undo the damage that time has wrought, resolve the ethical conflict that cannot be resolved, or restore what has been lost. It is, Jean Pierre Wils has observed, something more modest. Solace, Wils argues, is a kind of assistance in suffering, a way of bearing what cannot be undone¹⁶⁹. But for solace to serve as assistance in bearing what cannot be changed, the individual who suffers must remain present. One cannot assist someone who, even temporarily, has ceased to exist as an individual. This, it seems to me, is where the Dionysian suspension, considered on its own, falls short. Rapture dissolves precisely the subject who stands in need of assistance (BT 1, 17–18). The ontological disclosure occurs, but there is no individuated self present to receive it as assistance, to be changed by it, or to bring it back into the world of individuated existence. When the individual returns, what remains is at most a memory of having felt something, not a changed relation to suffering from transience. For the disclosure to become genuine solace, something must keep it open for the returning individual and give it a form that the reconstituted self can inhabit. This, I want to suggest, is the particular achievement of the Apollonian, and it is to this that I now turn.

¹⁶⁹ Jean-Pierre Wils, *Warum Wir Trost Brauchen: Auf Den Spuren Eines Menschlichen Bedürfnisses* (Hirzel, 2023), 62.

Two related points further highlight this issue with understanding transfiguration exclusively through the Dionysian rapture. First, the experience is explicitly temporary (BT 17, 80–81). The ecstasy passes, the individual reconstitutes itself, and the world of individuated suffering from transience returns structurally unchanged. Second, and most acutely, the return is, therefore, not neutral. As Nietzsche writes, ‘as soon as daily reality re-enters consciousness, it is experienced as such with a sense of revulsion; the fruit of those states is an ascetic, will-negating mood’ (BT 7, 40). The revulsion arises because ‘once truth has been seen, the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now he understands the symbolism of Ophelia’s fate, now he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion’ (BT 7, 40). Not only does Oedipus’ tragedy reveal a world that solicits revulsion and a desire not to exist, but, even worse, in comparison to the bliss of the Dionysian state, individuated existence appears not merely unchanged but newly impoverished. The contrast with what was briefly experienced makes the ordinary world harder to bear, not easier. The Dionysian, left to itself, risks intensifying Silenus’ pessimism rather than answering it.

If solace is to be possible, it cannot come from deceiving oneself about the Dionysian vision, but rather from finding a way for that vision to enter the individuated world without dissolving it. The challenge, as I see it, is to make the disclosure of primordial, indestructible joy available to the individual as such, so that the one who returns to ordinary life does not simply resume suffering from transience, but carries with them something transformed by what the Dionysian has disclosed. For tragedy to offer more than a temporary interruption, the Dionysian intimation of indestructible joy and innocence must be given a form that the individuated subject can inhabit and live from. This is the point at which Apollo becomes relevant.

It is not obvious that Apollo can carry the Dionysian vision into individuated existence. As I have already noted, from the Apollonian perspective, the Dionysian appears as a kind of barbaric regression (BT 4, 27). If Apollo were simply to reassert the *principium individuationis* against the Dionysian (BT 2, 20), he would not provide what solace requires. He would only return the individuated world to its previous condition of suffering from transience, a condition the Dionysian had, for a time, suspended. What seems to be required is a different Apollo, one who has undergone what Nietzsche calls the ‘peace-treaty’ (BT 2, 20) with Dionysus and has emerged able to give the Dionysian vision artistic form, rather than merely opposing it. Nietzsche suggests that the reconciliation between Apollo and Dionysus is not simply a truce between unchanged adversaries, but a creative act: ‘for the first time the jubilation of nature achieves expression as art, here for the first time the tearing-apart of the *principium individuationis* becomes an artistic phenomenon. That repulsive witches’ brew of sensuality and cruelty was powerless here’ (BT 2, 20–21). The significance of the phrase ‘for the first time’ in Nietzsche’s account is that, prior to this reconciliation, the jubilation of nature may have existed but lacked expression, the tearing-apart of individuation occurred but was not yet an artistic phenomenon. In this sense, Apollo does not generate the Dionysian content, but rather makes it expressible, providing a form through which individuated consciousness can encounter it without being overwhelmed. The earlier Apollo could only recoil from what he saw as the barbaric Dionysiac, but through the peace, what was once a threat is transformed into art. Apollo, then, has not defeated the Dionysian, but, as we will see, has learned to give it a form that he, the god of individuation, can understand and live with.

The question I now need to answer is how Apollo gives voice to the Dionysian, what particular form this takes, and what it achieves for the spectators who share in the suffering of the individual heroes on stage. I begin with what the Apollonian image actually shows. Nietzsche writes that ‘the one, truly real Dionysos manifests himself in a multiplicity of figures,

in the mask of a fighting hero and, as it were, entangled in the net of the individual will. In the way that he now speaks and acts, the god who appears resembles an erring, striving, suffering individual' (BT 10, 52). The Apollonian image is, first and most immediately, the image of a god suffering as an individual destroyed by the very fate that individuation entails. This is Dionysus as Zagreus, the god who suffers dismemberment by titanic forces, and whose suffering is the mythic image the tragic experience of transience. Yet there is a difficulty here. If the Apollonian image shows a god suffering like an individual human hero, entangled in the net of fate and destroyed by it, then the image would seem to intensify rather than transfigure suffering from transience. If even a god suffers in this way, if the destruction of individuation is written into the structure of divine existence itself, then the individual's suffering is not reframed but confirmed. From within the Apollonian perspective alone, this is precisely how the image would appear. Suffering from transience is not a contingent misfortune but something ineluctable, inscribed at the highest level of existence as a horrifying fate. An Apollo who has not undergone the 'peace-treaty' cannot see the Dionysian dissolution as anything other than catastrophe.

The resolution of this problem, as I see it, lies in the directionality of the vision. Nietzsche writes that tragedy must be understood as 'a Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again in an Apollonian world of images' (BT 8, 44). The movement is from the Dionysian outward into the Apollonian, from the Dionysian chorus toward the Apollonian image, not from the image back toward the chorus. Nietzsche also writes: 'Dionysos no longer speaks in the form of energies but rather as an epic hero, almost in the language of Homer' (BT 8, 46). This suggests that the Apollonian image of the suffering hero is not Apollo's interpretation of an alien phenomenon seen from the outside. Rather, it is the Dionysian's own self-expression in individuated terms, the primordial vision pressing itself into individual form. The image is saturated with Dionysian content from the beginning, and this alters how the

image is to be read. Apollo, having undergone the reconciliation, no longer sees the tearing-apart of individuation from his own perspective alone. He attempts, across an insuperable gulf (since a pre-individuated state cannot be fully expressed in individuated terms)¹⁷⁰ to articulate what the Dionysian sees in the dissolution: ‘the fact that he appears at all with such epic definiteness and clarity is the effect of Apollo, the interpreter of dreams, who interprets to the chorus its Dionysiac condition by means of this symbolic appearance’ (BT 10, 52). Apollo does not explain the Dionysian to an Apollonian audience. He reflects the Dionysian back to itself in a form the individuated spectator can receive. He is ‘the interpreter of dreams’ because dreams give form to what exceeds the form of daylight reality, making visible, in individuated images, what cannot be directly seen.

The means by which Apollo accomplishes this is, again, what Nietzsche calls semblance. I want to be careful here, since the term is easily conflated with illusion, but as Schiller, whom Nietzsche follows, distinguishes it, semblance is not deception. Illusion presents itself as reality and deceives its recipient. Semblance, by contrast, is received as appearance, not as daylight reality, and yet it can disclose something genuine precisely through that transparency. This distinction will be important for what follows. When Nietzsche turns to the chorus of tragedy, he writes:

the Greeks built the hovering platform of a fictitious *state of nature* on to which they placed fictitious *creatures of nature*. Tragedy grew up on this foundation, and for this very reason, of course, was relieved from the very outset of any need to copy reality with painful exactness. Yet it is not a world which mere caprice and

¹⁷⁰ See also: ‘it is impossible for language to exhaust the meaning of music’s world-symbolism, because music refers symbolically to the original contradiction and original pain at the heart of the primordial unity, and thus symbolizes a sphere which lies above and beyond all appearance. In relation to that primal being every phenomenon is merely a likeness, which is why language, as the organ and symbol of phenomena, can never, under any circumstances, externalize the innermost depths of music; whenever language attempts to imitate music it only touches the outer surface of music, whereas the deepest meaning of music, for all the eloquence of lyric poetry, can never be brought even one step closer to us’ (BT 6, 36).

fantasy have conjured up between heaven and earth; rather it is a world which was just as real and credible to the believing Greek as Olympus and its inhabitants. As a member of the Dionysiac chorus, the satyr lives in a religiously acknowledged reality sanctioned by myth and cult (BT 8, 39).

Semblance in tragedy, then, is not mimetic in the ordinary sense. It does not simply copy reality as we know it, but rather opens a way into a different order of reality, that of that '*state of nature*', which is one that is not less real than individuated existence but real in a different register, acknowledged by religious practice and sanctioned by myth. I want to stress that I think it is this non-mimetic character that allows tragedy to present the Dionysian vision of the satyr chorus, where the dissolution of individuation is not merely negation but the expression of a deeper joy and innocence belonging to primordial life. The fact that semblance is known as semblance, that its transparency as appearance is not hidden, gives it two distinct and complementary powers. Each is necessary for the structure of solace I am trying to describe, and each represents a different aspect of the same protective and disclosive capacity.

The first of these powers concerns the spectator's relationship to their own suffering. Because the spectator is aware that they are exclusively attending to the reality of the polis where the heroes suffer deeply from the loss of their ethical self, semblance creates a kind of protected threshold between human existence and the Dionysian ground. Within this threshold, it becomes possible for the spectator to redirect attention away from the perspective of individuated suffering and toward the metaphysical perspective that semblance makes available. I do not mean that one forgets suffering or escapes into fantasy. Rather, one temporarily inhabits a different perspective on suffering, from which it appears differently. The relief that results is genuine, and it is available precisely because semblance is received as semblance. The protected distance is what allows this shift of perspective to occur without the stakes of human life overwhelming it.

The second power concerns the spectator's relationship to the Dionysian content itself. In what Nietzsche describes as the pure Dionysian state, the individual encounters the Dionysian vision without mediation and is dissolved by it. Through tragedy's semblance, however, the same truth is encountered through an Apollonian medium (through the form, clarity, and beauty of the epic) and this mediation preserves the individual as the subject of the experience. The spectator receives the Dionysian content as appearance, not as the thing itself, and it is this gap between appearance and what is disclosed that provides a kind of structural protection. Nietzsche writes that tragedy 'points to the eternal life of that core of being despite the constant destruction of the phenomenal world' (BT 8, 42). The Apollonian image points toward the Dionysian ground without collapsing into it, and it is precisely because it only points, only appears, that the individual who receives it remains an individual. Yet the pointing is real. The Dionysian content saturates the image, genuinely present within it, even as it remains mediated.

These two powers are, as I see it, two aspects of the same structure. Semblance protects the spectator from the full force of the Dionysian by holding the disclosure in individuated form, and it is this same protection that makes possible the shift of attention toward the Dionysian perspective. The satyr, half human and half goat, is the figure that embodies this dual character, with one leg in each world. Semblance itself stands between the two drives in a similar way. It is not fully Apollonian, since the Dionysian pull draws it away from ordinary individuated reality, nor is it fully Dionysian, since the Apollonian pull holds it in form as something the individual can receive without being dissolved. Semblance is constitutively between them, drawing its power from both at once. This, I think, is why tragic semblance can do what neither drive alone can accomplish. Apollo alone produces beautiful images but no Dionysian disclosure. Dionysus alone dissolves the individual but leaves no subject to receive the disclosure as solace. Together, through the medium of semblance, they make possible an

experience in which the Dionysian truth is genuinely disclosed to an individual who can receive it, hold it, and perhaps carry it back into the sphere of ordinary life.

I now want to consider the form this disclosure takes in the tragic theatre, which I would refer to as theophany. The spectator, who already carries some intimation of primordial unity from the choral experience, sees the masked actor on stage and, Nietzsche thinks, undergoes a transformation of perception:

the spectator, in a state of Dionysiac excitement, saw approaching on the stage the god with whose suffering he has already become one. Involuntarily he transferred on to that masked figure the whole image of the god which he saw trembling magically before his soul, and he dissolved, so to speak, the reality of the figure into a ghostly unreality. This is the Apolline dream-state in which the day-world becomes shrouded, and a new, clearer, more comprehensible, more affecting world, but one which at the same time is more shadow-like, is born anew (BT 8, 45).

Here, the masked actor does not simply represent the god. Rather, the god becomes visible through him. What Nietzsche calls a 'ghostly unreality' is not a matter of falseness, but of a different order of reality, in which the Dionysian ground appears through the Apollonian surface. This, as I understand it, is what theophany means in this context. It is not a supernatural apparition, but the disclosure of primordial life through a finite, individuated medium. It is semblance, I think, that makes this possible. Because the spectator receives the actor as appearance rather than as daylight reality, the Apollonian surface remains intact enough to be seen through, rather than simply suffered. The god becomes visible precisely because the finite figure is held as semblance, transparent to what it discloses.

What the spectator undergoes in this theophanic experience, as I see it, is a single, simultaneous experience that can be described from two sides but is felt as one. Nietzsche

captures this experience: ‘that phenomenon whereby pain awakens pleasure while rejoicing wrings cries of agony from the breast. From highest joy there comes a cry of horror or a yearning lament at some irredeemable loss’ (BT 2, 21)¹⁷¹. The spectator suffers with the hero. The destruction before them, the loss of ethical integrity, the dissolution of every bond, is felt in its full weight. The lament about transience is real and the suffering is irredeemable. Yet within that same suffering, Nietzsche finds, there is a yearning to move beyond the individual figure. A yearning not to escape the suffering, but to follow the destruction through to what it discloses. This, as I see it, is why the tragic Greek ‘sees before him the tragic hero with all the clarity and beauty of the epic, and yet he takes delight in his destruction’ (BT 22, 104). This yearning is the Dionysian perspective pressing through the Apollonian surface, the intimation that the destruction before the spectator’s eyes is not only catastrophe but the expression of a primordial vitality that exceeds and survives the individual form. Thus, as Nietzsche puts it, ‘suffering, the origin of tragedy, gains its transfiguration with [Sophocles]: it is conceived as something sacred’ (KSA 2.3, 40)¹⁷². The clarity and beauty are Apollonian, the form that holds the spectator within semblance and prevents dissolution. The delight is Dionysian, the joy of primordial life recognised in the very movement of destruction. It is semblance that holds these together, making it possible to feel both without one cancelling the other.

If I apply this to Oedipus, theophany seems to transform the meaning of everything the drama has shown. The animalistic vitality that time brings to light, the part of his self capable of incest, of parricide, of transgressing every ethical boundary, is no longer simply read as depravity, but as the outpouring of a primordial force so powerful that it exceeds all ethical

¹⁷¹ Walter Otto explores the god as a primordial phenomenon defined by the coincidence of opposites in which the contradictory poles of joy and terror, and life and death, are not merely linked but are revealed as a single, unified reality (Walter F. Otto, *Dionysos*, Klostermann rote Reihe (Vittorio Klostermann GmbH, 2011), 87–110).

¹⁷² Friedrich Hölderlin, likely inspired Nietzsche. In his commentary on Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, Hölderlin stresses that the sacred manifests through the destruction of the hero (Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Anmerkungen Zu Oedipus’, in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Theoretische Schriften*, ed. Johann Kreuzer (Felix Meiner Verlag, 1998); Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Die Griechische Tragödie*, Tübinger Vorlesungen (Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011), 317; Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Sophokles Und Das Leid* (Eduard Stichnete, 1944), 22–29.

containment. What the ethical perspective time reveals as the most shameful and revolting is, from the Dionysian perspective disclosed through Apollonian semblance, the theophany of primordial vitality itself. The passage of time becomes the medium of tragedy's theophany. Because this vitality is innocent in the sense I have tried to establish earlier, playing before and beneath the ethical framework rather than within it, the guilt that underwrote the Silenic verdict is not resolved but dissolved. The destruction of Oedipus is not the punishment of a corrupt will, but the expression of the playing force of primordial life, building up and demolishing an individual form with equal joy.

It is this experience, I want to suggest, that constitutes 'metaphysical solace'. Nietzsche's reading of *Oedipus at Colonus* brings out its precise character. Stripped of everything, stricken with an 'excess of suffering, and exposed purely as a *suffering being* to all that affects him', the active ethical self entirely gone, Oedipus 'receives an unearthly serenity which comes down from the sphere of the gods' (BT 9, 47). The individual who has let go of the ethical self achieves through that very passivity what no ethical striving could accomplish. Solace is not reparation. It does not repair what time has done, restore what has been lost, or resolve what is irresolvable. It is, as Nietzsche puts it, the sense 'that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable' (BT 7, 39). What the theophany discloses, as I read it, is that the suffering individual is not alone in their suffering, that it belongs not to the isolated self but to the primordial life that generates and dissolves all things. The burden is not escaped but given over to something greater. The individual's hold on their own destruction is loosened, and in that loosening, the weight of irreparable loss is not removed but transformed. The suffering remains, the lament is real. But the individual who suffers is no longer entirely enclosed within their own suffering. They have felt, even if only briefly, that their destruction is the expression of a life that is indestructible,

innocent, and joyous. That feeling, I think, is what, it means, according to Nietzsche, to be solaced by tragedy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have followed the way Nietzsche's account of tragedy transforms the tragic Greeks suffering from transience. This suffering, I have argued, finds its most extreme form in the figure of Oedipus, whose ethical self is destroyed by a fate slowly unfolding through time's passage and who is left isolated from the bonds that once made individuation bearable. I do not want to claim that tragedy simply refutes or repairs the Silenic verdict that such a life is not worth having. Rather, it seems to me that tragedy changes our experience of time itself, and it does so through two movements. The first, which Nietzsche calls also Dionysian, involves a kind of rapture in which the individuated self is temporarily dissolved. In this state, the weight of personal history is submerged, and the spectator is given a glimpse of a primordial vitality, of a life that creates and destroys individual forms with the innocence of a child at play, before the ethical notions of guilt, shame, and revulsion give rise to the Silenic verdict. The second movement is Apollonian. Here, the Dionysian experience is given form, so that the spectator, returning to themselves, can receive and inhabit it. This allows the perspective of primordial life to remain open, without dissolving the subject who still needs consolation. These two movements, taken together, culminate in what I have called theophany, that is, the moment when the god becomes visible in the finite figure of the suffering hero. At this point, the spectator, suffering with the hero and yet longing to move beyond the individual form, experiences the destruction of the ethical self not only as irreparable loss but also as the expression of a life that is indestructible, innocent, and joyous. This, as I understand it, is what Nietzsche means by 'metaphysical solace'. It is not the removal of suffering, nor the restoration

of what time has taken away, but a transformation in how the suffering individual relates to their own transience. In this way, the weight of irreparable loss is given over to something larger than the self, and grief does not become a final judgment on the value of having lived.

I think that in this way, tragedy resists what I have called temporal nihilism. By this I mean the particular evaluative move that begins from the recognition that suffering from transience, leading to irreparable loss, is not an accidental misfortune but is intrinsic to individuated existence, a fate that belongs to any being capable of love and care in a world shaped by time. From here, one is tempted to conclude that such an existence is, for that very reason, undesirable. Tragedy, as I have tried to show, does not contest the premise that transience is intrinsic and inescapable. It accepts that the ethical self will be dissolved, that the polluted core will be exposed, that suffering is real, and that the loss of one's ethical self cannot be redeemed. What tragedy resists is the evaluative step from transience is inescapable to existence is therefore undesirable. It does so not by argument but through an experience in which we overcome our ordinary entrapment in our own mortal perspective, seeing, instead, our own suffering '*sub specie aeterni*' (BT 23, 100). In this way, tragedy as an art form reveals through the Apollonian semblance of the Dionysian that the structural fact of inevitable loss need not bear the meaning our ethical perspective assigns to it. The nihilistic denial of transient existence is no longer a judgment on the kind of being whose existence is itself a wrong, nor is irreparable loss exclusively a painful privation. Human life may not, for all that, become absolutely desirable. Yet it is no longer undesirable for the reasons temporal nihilism provides.

It is reasonable to ask, at this point, whether the particular play at the centre of this discussion, *Oedipus the King*, truly invites the response I have described. The play concludes with Oedipus blinded and exiled, and the chorus offers not a vision of higher delight but rather

a reiteration of the Silenic wisdom, urging the audience to count no one happy until death¹⁷³. What we are left with is not an image of primordial vitality, but a figure broken and led away into exile. Furthermore, the chorus here is not that of satyrs, but of Theban elders, who remain firmly within the ethical perspective, often reflecting on divine law, hubris, and the precariousness of human happiness. It is therefore not immediately clear that this chorus serves as the Dionysian medium through which the shift in perspective I have been tracing is meant to occur.

I offer some thoughts in response, though I do not take them to be conclusive. Nietzsche insists that music is the principal means by which the Dionysian enters tragedy. It is through music that the Dionysian vision is communicated to the Apollonian world of images, and the choral odes are thus imbued with an affective resonance that exceeds their ethical content (BT 16, 80)¹⁷⁴. The text of *Oedipus the King*, as it survives, presents us with the Apollonian surface of a work whose Dionysian aspect was once carried by music that is now lost. The odes of the Theban elders, when read as text, speak in the language of law, hubris, and divine justice, but in performance they were sung, danced, and accompanied by music that, I must imagine, enveloped these ethical utterances in a Dionysian suggestion, shifting their affective register. This musical dimension of tragedy is no longer available to us. Moreover, the original performance of *Oedipus the King* was not simply a theatrical event but part of a religious festival, the Dionysia, in which the ritual context may well have prepared the audience for precisely the kind of shift in perspective I have been discussing¹⁷⁵. To encounter the play as

¹⁷³ Sophocles, 'Oedipus the King', in *Sophocles I*, ed. Glenn W. Most and Mark Griffith, trans. David Grene (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1529–30.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. 'the art of Dionysos customarily exerts two kinds of influence on the Apolline capacity for art: music stimulates us to *contemplate symbolically* Dionysiac universality, and it causes the symbolic image to emerge with the *highest degree of significance*. From these facts, which are inherently intelligible and not inaccessible to deeper examination, I conclude that music is able to give birth to *myth*, i.e. to the most significant example, and in particular to *tragic* myth, myth which speaks of Dionysiac knowledge in symbols [...] music struggles to inform us about its nature in Apolline images' (BT 16, 79-80)

¹⁷⁵ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood argues that tragedy functions as a highly controlled religious laboratory. It takes the most disturbing, chaotic, and ambiguous elements of human existence (the 'Dionysian' disruptions) and explores them on stage. However, it does this precisely to test, challenge, and ultimately re-stabilize the audience's

text, outside this context, is inevitably to encounter only a fragment of what the work once was. Whether this fragment is sufficient to produce the transfigurative response I have described, or whether something essential is missing, is not a question I can answer with any certainty. What does seem clear is that, on Nietzsche's account, tragedy in its full form (music, chorus, ritual, festival) was structured to achieve a particular effect. Whether *Oedipus the King*, in any given performance or reading, fully realises that structure is another matter, and one that I cannot address here.

Nietzsche himself points beyond *Oedipus the King* to *Oedipus at Colonus* as the play in which the transfigurative power of tragedy is most fully and purely realised. He writes that the audience encountered 'same serenity in *Oedipus at Colonus*, but here it is elevated into infinite transfiguration' (BT 9, 47). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the 'old man, stricken with an excess of suffering, and exposed, purely as a suffering being' (BT 9, 47), becomes the medium through which divine serenity manifests, and Nietzsche writes of 'the unearthly serenity which comes down from the sphere of the gods as a sign to us that in his purely passive behaviour the hero achieves the highest form of activity, which has consequences reaching far beyond his own life' (BT 9, 47). The exile who began polluted and excluded is reintegrated into both divine and human community. The Furies who once haunted bloodguilt now shelter him¹⁷⁶, and his death does not mark exclusion but the highest form of belonging, his protective power radiating over Athens as a source of blessing even after his death. Nietzsche can therefore write that '[i]n Soph. the mortal falls into misfortune by the ordinance of the gods [...] misfortune is not punishment, but something by which man is consecrated to a holy person' (KSA 2.3:10), and in this sense 'the sounds of reconciliation from another world can perhaps be heard at their

faith in the divine order. The plays do not subvert Athenian religion. They process cosmic anxieties so that by the end of the play, order, ritual propriety, and the justice of the gods are reaffirmed. (Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Tragedy and Athenian Religion* (Lexington Books, 2003)).

¹⁷⁶ Sophocles, 'Oedipus at Colonus', in *Sophocles I*, ed. Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1626-1627ff.

purest [*reinsten*] in *Oedipus at Colonus*' (BT 17, 84). Yet this very purity raises its own difficulties. Nietzsche also notes that tragedy's Dionysiac ground was already beginning to give way in Sophocles (BT 14, 70), and in his notes he can speak of the '[d]eath of tragedy with *Oedipus at Colonus*, in the grove of the Furies' (KGW 1.5, 1[6]). The reconciliation achieved there draws transfiguration back into the civic and ethical order in a way that risks converting metaphysical vision into something closer to earthly resolution, upending the suspension of the ethical perspective that gives tragedy's transfiguration such force. Thus, whether *Oedipus at Colonus* represents the fullest expression of tragic transfiguration or the point at which it begins to exhaust itself, tragedy's swansong rather than its summit¹⁷⁷, is a tension Nietzsche leaves unresolved, and one I do not propose to settle here.

At the very moment when tragedy achieved its transfiguration, however, a counter-movement had already begun. Socrates, who will be the focus of the next chapter, confronted the same phenomenon of suffering from transience, the same erosion of the ethical self by the passage of time, but arrived at a diagnosis fundamentally at odds with that of the tragic Greeks as Nietzsche understands them.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Die Griechische Tragödie*, 318.

4.

Socrates: Transience, Ignorance, and the Examined Life

In the opening scene of Plato's *Crito*, Crito arrives at the Athenian prison before dawn, expecting to find Socrates, condemned to die that day, in the grip of fear or agitation. Instead, he finds him sleeping so soundly that he hesitates to wake him. When Socrates does wake, Crito remarks: 'I have often before thought you happy in your character, but much more so in the present misfortune, at the ease and gentleness with which you bear it'¹⁷⁸. Crito seems to assume that from the perspective of ordinary human expectation, imminent death should provoke terror or at least restlessness. Yet what Crito encounters is not the brittle composure of someone suppressing fear, but a genuine ease, as if the situation simply does not call for terror. I do not take this scene as a mere biographical curiosity. Rather, it offers an image of a life that has found a way to be at ease with transience. Socrates, by sleeping soundly on the eve of his execution, seems to show that time has not robbed him of a life worth living, even if it is about to end. This scene brings me directly to the question that animates this chapter. What new kind of experience of time and suffering could make Socrates' composure possible?

¹⁷⁸ Plato, 'Crito', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 43b.

Nietzsche famously claims that with Socrates, something genuinely new enters the historical scene (BT 15, 74). The usual account of this break with the previous ages is cast in ontological and epistemological terms¹⁷⁹. Socrates is taken to embody a principle of theoretical optimism, the conviction that existence can be understood and corrected through rational inquiry (BT 13, 66; 15, 73). In this way, he is said to negate the Dionysian wisdom that sees existence as fundamentally painful and justifiable only as an aesthetic phenomenon (BT 5, 33). Nietzsche himself puts it in terms of a ‘new opposition: the Dionysiac versus the Socratic, and the work of art that once was Greek tragedy was destroyed by it’ (BT 12, 64). On this reading, the Socratic turn replaces the tragic worldview with conscious reflection and dialectic, displacing the Greeks’ original, intuitive, and mythological relation to existence. I do not wish to dispute the broad outlines of this account. But I want to approach the opposition from a different angle, one that, as far as I am aware, has not been developed in the existing literature. I want to approach the opposition as a conflict about the experience of time and what it means for the possibility of living well¹⁸⁰.

What I find surprising, on closer inspection, is that Socrates and tragedy do seem to me preoccupied with the same fundamental concern. Both, as I read them, are haunted by the possible loss of the ethical self, the dissolution of the integrity that makes a good life possible. This shared preoccupation is not immediately obvious, since, according to Nietzsche, Socrates and tragedy seem to inhabit entirely different worlds. The former, the world of rational argument and dialectical scrutiny, and the latter, the world of myth and art. Yet the animating concern is, I think, the same. In tragedy, as I argued in chapter two, the loss of the ethical self

¹⁷⁹ Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 183–84; Paul Raimond Daniels, *Nietzsche and The Birth of Tragedy*, 106–38; Eugen Fink, *Nietzsches Philosophie* (Kohlhammer, 1986), 28.

¹⁸⁰ The Socrates who concerns me here is not the historical Socrates, nor the aporetic figure of the early dialogues, but Nietzsche’s Socrates, that is, the cultural-historical force whose picture of rational existence, Nietzsche claims, shapes the tradition that follows. Whether this portrait is faithful to Socrates as he really was is a question I deliberately set aside

is the central source of suffering. Time's passage gradually reveals that the hero was never the noble figure he appeared to be. Beneath the surface of nobility lies a hidden pollution. Oedipus, the wise king and devoted father, is revealed as a parricide, his children the offspring of his incest. The revelation does not merely damage his reputation but destroys his ethical self entirely, cutting him off from divine and human community, from the identity he had built, from everything that made his life worth living. This destruction is not the result of a personal failure, but the structural consequence of living in time, when the meaning of one's actions is only available retrospectively, and recognition always arrives too late to change anything. Tragedy stages this loss as the inevitable unfolding of fate across time, and its response is transfiguration, offering 'metaphysical solace' (e.g., BT 7, 39) by revealing suffering from transience to have a different, even joyous, and cosmic meaning.

Socrates is equally preoccupied with the loss of the ethical self, but the preoccupation takes a radically different form. In the *Apology*, defending himself before the Athenian jury that will condemn him to death, he insists that the care of one's soul takes precedence above all else. He tells the jury that he will not stop philosophising even under threat of death, because to abandon the examined life would be to disobey a divine command and to harm his own soul¹⁸¹. Later, he makes the priority explicit:

I shall never stop practising philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet [...] Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ Plato, 'Apology', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 29d-e.

¹⁸² Plato, 'Apology', 30a-b.

For Socrates, the care of the soul is not simply one value among others, but the condition on which all other values depend. Nothing, he insists, matters more than whether a person lives well, and the central threat to living well is the corruption or loss of the ethical self through ignorance¹⁸³. The disagreement between Socrates and tragedy, as I see it, is not simply a matter of reason versus art, or optimism versus pessimism. Rather, it is a disagreement between two responses to the same problem, each rooted in a different diagnosis of its cause. In this chapter, I argue that it is the temporal dimension of this disagreement that is key to understanding how Nietzsche thinks about both the depth of the Socratic critique of tragedy and the historical force of the position it introduces.

I develop this argument in three parts. First, I examine Socrates' critique of tragedy, considering both his objection to what tragedy reveals and his deeper concern about its effects on those who attend its performance. Second, I turn to the positive Socratic alternative, exploring how the examined life constitutes a fundamentally different experience of time, one in which the ethical self does not suffer the fate of its transience but is continuously reconstituted through the activity of reason. Third, I draw out the historical consequences of this alternative, asking why Socratic optimism spreads so powerfully and endures so tenaciously in the history that follows. I argue that the answer lies not only in the appeal of the Socratic promise, but in the temporal structure of the practice through which it is transmitted.

Tragedy as Ethical Danger: Fate, Ignorance, and the Corruption of the Soul

The disagreement between Socrates and tragedy, as I have already suggested, does not concern the significance of the loss of the ethical self, but rather the question of its origin and, crucially, its temporal structure. Both tragedy and Socrates are animated by a shared anxiety

¹⁸³ For an interesting discussion of the view on ethical character as the ground of well-being, see Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Routledge, 2011), 34–59.

about what time does to the ethical self. But they diagnose the cause of that loss in fundamentally different ways, and this difference in diagnosis is what drives Socrates' rejection of tragedy at every level. For tragedy, the loss of the ethical self is fated, something structurally guaranteed by the passage of time, which gradually reveals a ruin already accomplished beneath the surface of the noble life. For Socrates, by contrast, the loss of the ethical self is not the work of time as fate but of time as ignorance, the slow, self-inflicted erosion of rational self-governance through a life lived without examination. The suffering from transience that tragedy presents as inevitable is, on this account, a misdiagnosis. It mistakes for fate what is in fact a choice, and for that reason it mistakes consolation for the only response available when correction remains possible. This, I want to argue, is the thread that runs through all of Socrates' objections to tragedy, and it is what gives those objections their distinctive force.

Nietzsche captures the nature of this disagreement in the image of Socrates' 'great Cyclopan eye turned on tragedy, an eye in which the lovely madness of artistic enthusiasm never glowed' (BT 14, 67). The image is rich in its implications. The Cyclops has only one eye and does not merely choose not to look in a particular direction¹⁸⁴ but is incapable of the depth of vision that requires two. Tragedy, as Nietzsche argues, is constituted by the dual vision of Apollo and Dionysus. Socrates is constitutively closed off from the Dionysian pole of that vision. In productive natures, Nietzsche argues, instinct is the creative force, while rational consciousness makes only 'critical and warning gestures' (BT 13, 66). In Socrates, this relation is inverted. Instinct manifests only as prohibition, the famous daimonion that never commands

¹⁸⁴And so, in Homer's *Odyssey*, fails to see, since Odysseus and his companions are able to escape the cyclop Polyphemus' cave (Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Harper Perennial, 2007), IX.500-525). According to Hesiod, the Cyclops are also the brothers of the Titans (Hesiod, 'Theogony', in *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most (Harvard University Press, 2006), 140). An interesting question is therefore why Nietzsche would associate Socrates with the Titans. A tentative answer is given by Euripides' satyr play *The Cyclops* where Silenus, leader of the chorus, is held captive by the cyclop Polyphemus. Euripides, 'The Cyclops', in *Euripides V*, ed. Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most, trans. William Arrowsmith (The University of Chicago Press, 2013). This could suggest that Socrates is holding captive the chorus and Silenus, whose wisdom, I have argued in chapter one and two, is key to Nietzsche's understanding of pre-Socratic art, and culture more broadly.

but only restrains, while rational consciousness usurps the role of creation. Nietzsche calls this inversion a ‘monstrosity *per defectum*’ (BT 13, 66). Socrates’ nature is so lopsided that the very mode of production on which tragedy depends is structurally inaccessible to him. He cannot access the experiential condition of ecstatic Dionysian possession and collective choral rapture through which tragedy’s picture of the suffering individual becomes bearable. As Nietzsche claims, Socrates was ‘debarred from ever looking with pleasure into the abysses of the Dionysiac’ (BT 14, 68). But this blindness is not merely a matter of temperament. It is the perceptual consequence of a philosophical orientation that has already decided, in advance, that the loss of the ethical self is not something to be borne through transformation but something to be prevented through knowledge (BT 13, 66; 15, 73). A mind structured around correction cannot enter a world structured around fate.

This becomes clearer if we attend to the way tragedy unsettles the structure of cause and effect. From the standpoint of rational inquiry, there is an expectation that causes yield effects, that agents are responsible for actions that can be known, and that, therefore, the world is, at least in principle, intelligible. When Nietzsche remarks that Socrates’ Cyclopedian eye perceived only ‘causes which apparently lacked effects and effects which apparently lacked causes’ (BT 14, 68)¹⁸⁵, he is drawing attention to the way tragedy disrupts the causal logic on which rational ethical life depends, and does so in both directions at once. Consider first the effects that lack causes. Oedipus is condemned before he acts. The oracle’s pronouncement precedes any decision of his own, and the plague descends on Thebes before its cause is accessible to knowledge. From the perspective of reason, these consequences seem to arise

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (University of California Press, 1983), 128: “‘*Dike* means not only “justice,” but “the order of the universe,” and from the human point of view that order often seems to impose a natural rather than a moral law [...] What made it hard, he [Sophocles] thought, for men to understand the justice of the gods was the immense extent of time which may separate cause from punishment, and the complex interweaving within human history of different causal chains of injustice followed by chastisement’”. Lloyd-Jones’s reading offers an important complication, if not a direct counterpoint, to Nietzsche’s rigid division between tragic mystery and Socratic rationalism. It suggests that Sophocles was already internalizing and dramatizing the problem of causal confusion, locating the tragic effect precisely in the agonizing mismatch between human epistemic limitations and an unyielding, generational cosmic order.

from nowhere, or from a source so distant and impersonal as to be unintelligible. Oedipus suffers for what he has not set in motion and could not have foreseen. For Socrates, this is not a deeper insight into ethical life but rather its undoing. If effects are imposed on agents who cannot be held to account for them, the very notion of moral responsibility is emptied of content. Consider now the causes without effects. Oedipus, in many respects the most Socratic of tragic figures, pursues the truth with unwavering diligence, refusing to abandon his inquiry even when warned. Yet it is precisely this rational pursuit that leads to his destruction. The cause, the search for knowledge, produces an effect, utter ruin, that no rational calculation could have anticipated or justified. His virtue becomes the source of his undoing. The causal sequence does not merely fail but reverses. What ought to preserve him instead destroys him.

What is at stake in this reversal is the gradual revelation, as time unfolds, that the hero was always already marked by pollution, that beneath the appearance of nobility there lay a transgressor, not by virtue of wickedness, but through a fundamental ignorance of self and action. In the case of Oedipus, pollution is anterior to moral agency. He is guilty before he can be said to be responsible. The loss of his ethical self is the result of a cause he could neither have foreseen nor avoided. If ethical life is structured in this way, then the Socratic project, the examined life, offers no real safeguard. The care of the soul, on this view, risks becoming ineffectual. For Socrates, the moment of recognition is especially difficult, since knowledge, as he conceives it, is always in principle capable of correction (BT 13, 66; 15, 73). His ethics is grounded in the conviction that ignorance can be overcome, and that such overcoming transforms the self, rendering it virtuous and happy. Yet in Oedipus, knowledge arrives only when it is too late to alter anything. Recognition of the truth does not provide a way forward but merely confirms a ruin that has already taken place and cannot be undone. For Socrates, this may be the most intolerable moment in tragedy because it is the point at which knowledge fails to redeem. It is not only that the causal order is perplexing, but that the very resource

Socrates most relies upon, the corrective power of knowledge, proves powerless in the face of the suffering that time discloses. And this, from the Socratic perspective, is not a tragic truth but a tragic lie. It presents as fate what is, in Socrates' view, the consequence of a life not yet examined, a life whose ignorance time gradually brings to light, not because fate so decrees, but because ignorance, left unaddressed, accumulates and hardens through time into the conditions of its own ruin.

Nietzsche's account of the Socratic objection, as I read it, culminates in a remark that gathers together the threads of the preceding analysis. Socrates, Nietzsche argues, finds tragedy 'so varied and multifarious that it was bound to be repugnant to a reflective disposition, but also dangerous tinder for sensitive and easily aroused souls' (BT 14, 68). The first of these charges, that tragedy is repugnant to a reflective disposition, concerns the content of tragedy itself. Tragedy, on this view, offers a picture of ethical life in which causal order is disrupted, where guilt precedes agency, knowledge destroys rather than redeems, and the loss of the ethical self is not something to be corrected but something to be borne as fate. This is what the rational mind cannot accept, not merely on aesthetic grounds, but because it forecloses the possibility of correction at the very moment it is most needed. The second charge, that tragedy is dangerous tinder for sensitive souls, is equally significant, and it concerns not only what tragedy represents but what it does to its audience over time. Tragedy, in this sense, does not simply mislead about the causes of ethical ruin but participates in bringing that ruin about.

In Plato's *Republic*, Plato identifies with precision what he takes to be so dangerous about tragedy's portrayal of suffering from transience. The soul contains a rational part that governs by law and reason, and an irrational part that seeks the release of grief, pity, and lamentation. When a good person suffers loss, reason counsels composure, advising that we cannot know whether the event is truly bad in the long run, and that grief does not provide a

remedy¹⁸⁶. Yet there remains a childish, irrational part of the soul that longs to give itself over to sorrow. In ordinary circumstances, reason may be able to restrain this part. Tragedy, however, systematically nourishes the irrational. When we witness Oedipus or Achilles in agony, we allow ourselves to feel grief, reassuring ourselves that there is no shame in pitying a character on stage. For Socrates, the risk is a kind of moral contagion. By repeatedly exercising what might be called the grief muscle in the theatre, we weaken our capacity to restrain it in our own lives. The habit of emotional surrender cultivated in the audience erodes, over time, the rational self-governance on which ethical life depends: ‘the imitative poet puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are far removed from the truth and by gratifying the irrational part’¹⁸⁷. In this way, Socrates continues, poetry ‘nurtures and waters them [the irrational desires, pains, etc.] and establishes them as rulers in us when they ought to wither and be ruled’¹⁸⁸. This is the temporal dimension of the Socratic objection to tragedy that I want to emphasise. The corruption of the soul is not an event but a process, one that unfolds through time as the irrational part of the soul is repeatedly inflamed and the rational part progressively weakened. In Plato’s *Gorgias*, Socrates takes up this a concern, asking ‘don’t you call this condition injustice, ignorance?’¹⁸⁹ and adding that ‘injustice, then, lack of discipline and all other forms of corruption of soul are the worst thing there is’¹⁹⁰. Tragedy as an art form does not bring about ethical ruin in a single evening. It does so gradually, cumulatively, through the same medium, time’s passage, that it presents as the agent of inevitable fate. From the Socratic perspective, this is the deepest irony of the tragic

¹⁸⁶ Plato, ‘Republic’, in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 603a, 606a.

¹⁸⁷ Plato, ‘Republic’, 605b-c.

¹⁸⁸ Plato, ‘Republic’, 606d.

¹⁸⁹ Plato, ‘Gorgias’, in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 478b.

¹⁹⁰ Plato, ‘Gorgias’, 477e.

theatre. In consoling its audience for a loss it presents as fated, tragedy participates, through its effects, in the very process of erosion it depicts on stage.

The concern with the state of the soul is not limited to the audience. If tragedy is, as Socrates fears, a source of danger for its spectators, it is because the process of tragic creation itself exemplifies the very condition that is at issue, the irrational soul in ascendancy, reason diminished, and the self given over to something beyond its own understanding. Nietzsche writes:

‘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; wherever it directs its probing gaze, it sees a lack of insight and the power of delusion [*des Wahns*], and it concludes from this lack that what exists is inwardly wrong and objectionable (BT 13, 65-66).

The German *Wahn* carries a double meaning that is crucial here. It denotes not only delusion or error but also inspired madness and divine frenzy, the rapture of Dionysian possession in which the chorus discharges its visions as Apolline images (BT 8, 44). What Socrates identifies as delusion is, for Nietzsche, the generative power of Dionysus itself. The two perspectives name the same phenomenon from opposite sides. Where Nietzsche sees the womb of tragedy, Socrates sees the absence of knowledge. Nietzsche writes that tragedy “‘did not seem to Socrates even to ‘tell the truth’” (BT 14, 68) about ethical life, because it was created by instinct rather than knowledge. In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates recounts how he ‘went to the poets, the writers of tragedies’¹⁹¹ and ‘realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets’¹⁹², and that they were unable to explain their own work. As Nietzsche puts it, Socrates ‘encountered the same illusion

¹⁹¹ Plato, ‘Apology’, 22a-b.

¹⁹² Plato, ‘Apology’, 22c.

of knowledge everywhere' and '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' (BT 13, 65-66). Nietzsche further notes that poetry is produced through a kind of inspired gift: 'the gift of soothsaying and interpreting dreams; the poet, he [Plato] says, is unable to compose poetry until he has lost consciousness and reason no longer dwells within him' (BT 12, 64)¹⁹³. As Gadamer observes, 'although poetry might be divine possession, it is in any case not knowing. It is not skill (*technē*) which could account for and justify itself and its truth'¹⁹⁴. In the *Apology*, Socrates thus remarks that 'almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could'¹⁹⁵.

Tragedy's account of the loss of the ethical self, as something brought about by fate, by the gradual disclosure of a hidden pollution, by temporal forces beyond the hero's knowledge or control, is itself, then, the product of a mind that does not know. Tragedy is not only about ignorance but is, in a sense, an enactment of ignorance, a vision of ethical life generated by those who cannot account for what they have made. What tragedy presents as an insight into the human condition, the inevitability of the loss of the ethical self through time, is, from the Socratic perspective, a symptom of the very ignorance it mistakes for wisdom. And it is this misidentification that makes tragedy not merely wrong but dangerous. In consoling its audience

¹⁹³ In Plato's *Ion* Socrates argues that the rhapsode Ion, who is an expert on Homer, does not possess true knowledge or a craft of poetry. Instead, his ability comes from a divine possession or frenzy: 'For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him' (Plato, 'Ion', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. Paul Woodruff (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 534b). Their art is a gift from the gods, but because it is not based on reason or skill, it has no educational value and is twice removed from the truth. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato presents a different, more positive take on divine madness. Here, Socrates argues that not all madness is bad; in fact, the greatest blessings come to humanity through a special kind of madness that is a gift from the gods. He identifies four types of divine madness: Prophetic madness from Apollo; ritual madness from Dionysus; poetic madness from the Muses; erotic madness from Aphrodite and Eros. In this context, poetic madness is seen as a positive force that elevates the poet's soul and allows them to create works of exceptional beauty. It is the necessary state for a poet to create anything truly great, and a sane poet's work is considered inferior to that of a madman (Plato, 'Phaedrus', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. Paul Woodruff and Alexander Nehamas (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

¹⁹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectics*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (Yale University Press, 1980), 42.

¹⁹⁵ Plato, 'Apology', 22b-c. Nietzsche's own account in 'Socrates and Tragedy' confirms this. He writes that for Socrates, '[w]isdom consists in knowledge' and that 'one knows nothing that one cannot express and communicate to others so as to convince them' (KGW 3.2, 33).

for a loss it presents as inevitable, tragedy forecloses the possibility of correction at precisely the moment when correction is most urgently needed. Where tragedy offers consolation for a loss it presents as the work of fate and time, Socrates proposes something different. He offers not consolation but the possibility of correction. The loss of the ethical self is not the work of time as fate, but of time as ignorance, a life lived without examination, in which ignorance accumulates, irrational habits harden, and reason is progressively weakened through neglect. And if that is so, then the suffering from transience that tragedy takes as its subject is not an inescapable structural feature of finite existence but a preventable consequence of how one chooses to inhabit time. This, I want to argue, is the ground on which Socrates' positive alternative stands, and it is to that alternative that I now turn.

The Examined Life: Knowledge, Correction, and a New Experience of Time

The positive alternative is what I would call Socrates' optimistic temporality of correction. Where tragedy presents the loss of the ethical self as the work of time as fate, something structurally guaranteed by finite existence and brought to light through the passage of time, Socrates insists that the loss of the ethical self is the work of time as ignorance, the slow, self-inflicted erosion of rational self-governance through a life lived without examination. And if that is so, then time is not an agent of inevitable ruin but a medium through which the self either maintains or loses its ethical integrity depending on how it is inhabited. Nietzsche captures the moral urgency of this reorientation: 'Socrates believed that he was obliged to correct existence, starting from this single point; he, the individual, the forerunner of a completely different culture, art, and morality, steps with a look of disrespect and superiority into a world' (BT 13, 66). Socrates does not simply prefer a rational life, but feels morally compelled to correct a vision of existence that renders ethical ruin inevitable and uncorrectable, and so undermines the very motivation to pursue an ethical life. If we come to believe that the

loss of the ethical self is fated, we will not struggle to prevent it. And if we attend tragic theatre, we may already, without realising it, be losing that struggle. Socrates' response to tragedy, then, is that ignorance can be overcome over time through the pursuit of the examined life, through one's ethical development.

Nietzsche finds the philosophical ground of this optimistic temporality in three statements that he attributes to Socratism: 'Virtue is knowledge; sin is only committed out of ignorance; the virtuous man is a happy man' (BT 14, 70). In my view, it is important to attend to the logic that binds these statements together, since this is, as I see it, the key to understanding both the temporal optimism of the Socratic perspective and Nietzsche's claim that 'in these three basic forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy' (BT 14, 70).

I take these three statements to form a closed chain of mutual implication. The kind of knowledge at issue for Socrates is not factual but ethical. It is knowledge of what is good and bad, and the reach of this knowledge, in his account, is striking. Socrates claims in the *Protagoras*: 'knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates'¹⁹⁶. On this view, knowledge of the good does not simply inform the will but is said to govern it entirely. No passion, no misfortune, no external circumstance, can compel the knower to act against what he knows to be good. The person who knows is, in this sense, sovereign over his own actions in a way that the ignorant person is not.

This sovereignty rests on a further claim about human desire. Socrates further argues in the same dialogue that 'no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad

¹⁹⁶ Plato, 'Protagoras', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 352c.

instead of to the good'¹⁹⁷. By nature, everyone desires their own well-being¹⁹⁸. To choose the bad would mean intentionally pursuing one's own harm, which is contrary to the deepest orientation of human desire. When someone chooses badly, they have not failed in will but in knowledge, mistaking the bad for the good in that moment. As Socrates claims: 'those who make mistakes with regard to the choice of pleasure and pain, in other words, with regard to good and bad, do so because of a lack of knowledge [...] And the mistaken act done without knowledge you must know is one done from ignorance'¹⁹⁹. Socrates thus denies weakness of will altogether²⁰⁰. The familiar experience of knowing something is harmful and doing it anyway is not a failure of willpower but a failure of reasoning, a momentary confusion about where one's true good lies. A bad person is not a weak person but an ignorant one.

It is this conclusion, as I see it, that gives Socratism its distinctive optimism. If wrongdoing is, without exception, a cognitive failure rather than a corruption of nature or a failure of will, then it follows that it is, in principle, always open to correction through knowledge. Sin, if it is understood as the loss of the ethical self, need not be inevitable. The

¹⁹⁷ Plato, 'Protagoras', 358d.

¹⁹⁸ Cf. Plato, 'Euthydemus', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 278e–82.

¹⁹⁹ Plato, 'Protagoras', 357d–e.

²⁰⁰ The denial of weakness of will is not merely a contested claim in moral psychology. It is the hinge on which the entire Socratic immunisation of the self against suffering from transience turns. If weakness of will were real, if the self could know the good and still be overwhelmed by passion, grief, or the destructive force of time, then rational self-knowledge would be insufficient to protect the ethical self from dissolution. The self would remain vulnerable to transience even in possession of knowledge, because knowledge would not guarantee sovereignty over action. For Socrates, however, grief, like all disruptive passions, is a form of cognitive error, a mistaken judgment about the value of what has been lost. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is explicit that the philosopher does not grieve the losses that time brings, not because he is indifferent to them, but because he has correctly understood that the things time takes away are not the true objects of human good (Plato, 'Phaedo', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 64a–67e). Grief, on this account, is not a rational response to genuine loss but an irrational passion arising from ignorance, from the mistaken conviction that transient things matter in the way we unreflectively take them to. The denial of weakness of will is therefore what makes the immunisation complete. It closes the gap between knowing and doing, ensuring that the self which knows the good cannot be undone by grief or by anything else that time and fortune bring. The self that has achieved Socratic knowledge cannot lose its ethical integrity through suffering, because the passions that suffering generates, grief, despair, shame, have no authority over a will that is governed by knowledge. The Stoics, who develop this Socratic promise most systematically, make the connection to transience fully explicit. For Epictetus, for instance, the distinction between what is in our power and what is not is precisely a claim about the sovereignty of rational judgment over everything that time can do to the self. What time destroys is never what truly matters, and the self that knows this cannot be diminished by loss (Epictetus, 'Enchiridion', in *Discourses and Selected Writings*, trans. Robert F. Dobbin, Penguin Classics (Penguin, 2008), 1–2).

appropriate response is not to punish the will but to educate reason. If the self can be preserved through rational self-knowledge, then the dissolution of the ethical self that tragedy treats as unavoidable is, for Socrates, not unavoidable at all. What tragedy presents as a fate without remedy becomes, in this view, a problem with a solution. This is, I think, what Nietzsche has in mind when he speaks of the ‘death of tragedy’. Tragedy requires that the hero’s destruction be genuinely inescapable. Socratism, by contrast, refuses that inescapability at its foundation.

The source of this independence, as I see it, is a fundamental shift in where value is located²⁰¹. If happiness and virtue depend on things outside oneself, say, on wealth, health, reputation, youth, then one becomes a hostage to fortune and the passage of time. Any of these can be taken away at any moment, stripping such a life of its value. But if happiness depends on the condition of one’s own soul, on the knowledge and virtue that constitute ethical integrity, then the situation is quite different²⁰². Time can take away money, strength, or status. But knowledge of good and bad depends on the correct exercise of the mind, and because virtue is, on this account, knowledge, virtue is equally stable. It cannot be taken away by anyone but oneself, and only through a failure of reason. As I cited above, Socrates insists in the *Gorgias* that the only real harm a person can suffer is the corruption of the soul through injustice and ignorance²⁰³. If a tyrant kills you, he has harmed your body, which is an external thing. If a tyrant forces you to commit an injustice and you comply, you have harmed your soul, your true self. Since only you can control whether you choose the good or the bad, your ultimate well-

²⁰¹ Cf. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁰² Gregory Vlastos offers a nuanced reading of Socratic eudaimonism by distinguishing it from the Identity Thesis that virtue *is* happiness of later Stoicism. He argues that while virtue is the sovereign and incommensurable good (carrying infinite weight in any rational calculation of happiness) Socrates does not view trivial external goods (such as wealth, health, or social status) as value-neutral. Rather, Vlastos posits a Dependency Thesis, wherein these external goods possess a real, albeit derivative, value that is entirely contingent upon the agent’s virtuous knowledge to use them correctly. In this view, the failure of reasoning is specifically a failure of *techné*, that is, the inability to recognize that without the governing craft of virtue, the trivial components of a happy life are rendered ethically inert or even harmful (Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 200–232).

²⁰³ Plato, ‘Gorgias’, 477e.

being is entirely within your own jurisdiction. The gods or fate may decide when you die, but only you decide how you live²⁰⁴. This, I think, is the space Socrates carves out. But this independence is not a matter of standing outside time. It is, as I will now argue, a particular way of inhabiting time, one in which the self continuously reconstitutes its ethical integrity through rational practice rather than being passively shaped by what time brings.

Nietzsche gives the fullest expression of this sovereignty in his image of Socrates facing death: ‘the image of the *dying Socrates*, of a man liberated from fear of death by reasons and knowledge’ (BT 15, 73). This image matters because it brings together the two dangers Socrates identifies in tragedy. First, the misdiagnosis of what causes the loss of the ethical self, and second, the power of grief and fear to overwhelm reason and so bring about that loss. It is precisely in the face of death, facing one’s own transience, that the irrational part of the soul is most likely to be inflamed, that terror and grief are most likely to threaten rational self-governance and force a betrayal of principle. Socrates does not yield to this. He had the opportunity to escape Athens, arranged by Crito, but chose not to take it²⁰⁵. To escape would have been to act unjustly, to harm his soul in order to preserve his body. The fear of death, if allowed to overtake reason, would have produced exactly the kind of cognitive error Socrates spent his life diagnosing, choosing the bad by mistaking the avoidance of bodily death for the greater good. In the *Apology*, in his final speech after being sentenced to death, Socrates makes a point that reaches the core of his ethical project in relation to suffering from transience. He claims that it ‘is not difficult to avoid death, gentlemen; it is much more difficult to avoid wickedness, for it runs faster than death’²⁰⁶. He portrays those who would do or say anything to escape death as valuing survival by any means more than the just state of their soul. And so

²⁰⁴ Cf. my discussion of Fränkel in chapter one, page 30.

²⁰⁵ Plato, ‘Crito’, 44b–54d.

²⁰⁶ Plato, ‘Apology’, 39b.

even in the face of imminent death, Socrates does what he always does. He pursues the philosophical way of life and reasons.

The scene in the *Phaedo*, as I read it, makes visible what this sovereignty looks like from the outside. Phaedo, the narrator, describes a peculiar feeling. He did not experience the pity one expects at the death of a friend²⁰⁷. Socrates was so cheerful and noble that he seemed, in some sense, destined for happiness. While his friends weep and lose control, so much so that Socrates must rebuke them, he continues calmly discussing the immortality of the soul. The contrast is not incidental and might, in fact, be the point. The friends respond as the audience of tragedy does, surrendering to grief and allowing the irrational part of the soul to overwhelm the rational²⁰⁸. Socrates, by contrast, demonstrates the alternative, and does so in the most extreme circumstances imaginable. Because he has tended to his soul through virtue and knowledge, the external event of his execution cannot disturb his inner peace and happiness. Death is the most obvious form of suffering from transience, the final and irrevocable act of time's passage. Yet even here, the examined life holds. Socrates begins to philosophise in response to his friends' anxiety, arguing that fear of death is inconsistent with philosophy. What the scene shows, I think, is that transience as such, and the fear of transience, cannot harm the soul's ethical integrity. Time can take a life, but it cannot take what that life has made of itself through reason.

Socrates builds this conviction into the fabric of daily life. He insists, as he says in the *Apology*, that 'it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men'²⁰⁹. The demand for daily self-examination makes this an explicitly temporal practice, one that must be renewed without end. Ethical integrity, on this

²⁰⁷ Plato, 'Phaedo', 58e–59a.

²⁰⁸ Plato, 'Phaedo', 117c–e.

²⁰⁹ Plato, 'Apology', 38a.

view, is not a static possession but an ongoing activity²¹⁰. It is not something one simply has and then risks losing. Instead, integrity is achieved through what one does and continues to do. The temporality at work in the examined life is not accumulative, as if one were moving toward ever greater possession of virtue or happiness, but iterative. If one ceases this practice, the risk of acting from ignorance returns, and with it the possibility of losing one's integrity. Each day is a new challenge and an opportunity for correction, a fresh test of whether reason, knowledge, and virtue can prevail over ignorance. Where the time of tragedy moves inevitably in a single direction, toward the revelation of a ruin already accomplished, the time of Socratic practice is radically open. Each moment offers the chance to reassert the ethical self, rather than simply to watch it dissolve.

This iterative practice clarifies what it means to say that reason is immune to the passage of time. I do not mean that reason stands outside time, or that the Socratic self is somehow atemporal. That would simply exchange the tragic image of a self determined by fate for a Platonic image of a self anchored in eternal, transcendent essences. I think that my reading of Nietzsche shows that Socrates' position does not require such a move. Reasoning is a temporal activity. Dialectic unfolds in time; self-examination is a daily practice; the examined life is lived through time, from one day to the next. Reason, in this sense, is a particular quality of temporal experience, not an escape from it. It is the activity through which the self maintains its integrity as time passes, rather than being passively shaped by what time brings. Reason is not independent of time, but independent within time. The immunity of the ethical self to transience is therefore not the immunity of an eternal soul untouched by the world, but the

²¹⁰ Ursula Wolf identifies a fundamental paradox in the Socratic examined life. While the philosophical quest is driven by the desire for a stable, virtuous existence that is immune to the changes of fortune, it is simultaneously defined by the recognition of human finitude. However, for Wolf, the failure of reasoning to reach a final, absolute knowledge of the Good does not render the pursuit futile. Rather, it transforms the good life into an ongoing activity of self-reflection. In this view, the happy life is not a static possession of truth, but the very process of navigating the gap between our moral aspirations and our inherent intellectual limits (Ursula Wolf, *Die Suche Nach Dem Guten Leben* (Vittorio Klostermann, 2013)).

immunity of an ethical self that continuously reconstitutes itself through rational examination. To object to existence on the grounds that one's ethical self will be irreparably lost is, in Socrates' view, to misunderstand the structure of the examined life. The transience of the self is not a loss that undoes its value. The examined life does not depend on accumulation or permanence. It depends only on the willingness to begin again each day.

Eros, Transmission, and the Historical Spread of Socratic Optimism

It is tempting to describe the ethical temporality that emerges with Socrates as something wholly new, yet I find it important to note that this newness is not simply a matter of individual experience. The practice of self-examination, as I have discussed it, is not a solitary affair. Socratic dialectic, after all, presupposes interlocutors. The examined life, as Socrates himself puts it, is lived in conversation and mutual testing. In this sense, the process by which one seeks to overcome suffering from transience and reshape the ethical self is, from the beginning, a communal practice. It is only through others that this work is possible, and in this reliance on others, a certain relationship is established (between teacher and student, between generations) that allows the Socratic project to extend itself into the future. The hope of overcoming the suffering that comes with transience is thus not confined to the individual. Rather, it is, from its inception, a communal and historical hope. In this sense, time itself acquires a pedagogical character and becomes the medium through which ignorance may be lessened, not only for individuals but across generations, each inheriting and continuing what has come before. Where tragedy had insisted on the permanence of suffering from transience, offering only consolation, Socrates proposes that such suffering can be lessened, perhaps even overcome, through instruction. This, I take it, is a further reason for Nietzsche's insistence that we see Socrates as 'the vortex and turning-point of so-called world history' (BT 15, 74). Here, I want to argue that it is not simply the content of Socrates' answer to suffering from transience that

matters, but the form of that answer, a form designed for transmission and communal uptake. The examined life, in being teachable, is also inherently capable of propagation.

Nietzsche's characterisation of Socrates as 'the true eroticist' (BT 13, 67) draws attention to the affective dimension that animates this process of transmission. In recalling Plato's *Symposium*, Nietzsche notes the image of Socrates as the last to leave the gathering with friends, beginning a new day while his companions remain behind, still dreaming of him (BT 13, 67). Eros, love, as the *Symposium* makes clear, is the desire for what is not yet possessed²¹¹. It is, in this sense, oriented toward the future, toward what remains unattained. Because the object of philosophical love—wisdom—is never fully possessed, the pursuit is necessarily unending. Here, love reveals itself as a temporal phenomenon. The lover of wisdom, in seeking what he does not yet have, draws others into the same pursuit, and in so doing, ensures that the search continues beyond the boundaries of any single life. What is transmitted, then, is not simply a body of knowledge, but the desire to seek knowledge, a desire that is, in some respects, more enduring and more productive than any particular content. This, I think, marks a crucial distinction between Socratic transmission and mere instruction. A teacher who imparts information produces students who possess that information. A teacher who awakens eros produces students who continue to desire, to inquire, and to awaken that same desire in others. The transmission is thus one of orientation rather than content, of the impulse to seek rather than the possession of answers. Nietzsche makes this especially vivid in his depiction of Plato, who, as he writes, throws himself down before the image of the dying Socrates with all the devotion of his soul (BT 13, 67). This act is not simply one of admiration or intellectual inheritance, but of being seized by a certain orientation of desire, a seizure that, in turn, animates the entire philosophical project of his dialogues. On this reading, Plato's

²¹¹ Plato, 'Symposium', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 200b, 200e; for a discussion of love in Plato see Simon May, *Love: A History* (Yale University Press, 2011), 38–55.

corpus becomes the expression of Socratic eros working through a generation, transforming the grief of loss of the teacher into a renewed desire to pursue and transmit what the teacher embodied. In this way, death itself becomes the scene in which philosophy is perpetuated, as the calmness of the teacher exerts an erotic force that binds the young to philosophy and carries its temporality forward.

Nietzsche grounds this pedagogical and erotic power in a specific observation about what Socrates achieves in the lives of those he encounters. He writes:

To anyone in this state of mind, Plato's Socrates seems to be the teacher of a quite new form of 'Greek serenity' and bliss in existence, one which seeks to discharge itself in actions and mostly achieves this discharge by having a Maieutic and educative effect on noble youths (BT 15, 75).

The serenity that Nietzsche describes discharges itself in actions, and specifically in the 'Maieutic and educative effect'. The claim that the Socratic programme has an educative effect rests on the premise that virtue is teachable, and Nietzsche evidently thinks it was teachable, or at least, that people thought it was teachable and so pursued philosophy as a way of life²¹². Everything turns on this point. If a virtuous life cannot be taught, then the examined life remains an individual achievement, unable to generate successors. But if a virtuous life can be

²¹² The question of whether virtue is teachable is one Socrates treats with characteristic complexity. In the *Meno*, he argues against its teachability on empirical grounds because even the most virtuous Athenians, Themistocles and Pericles among them, could not pass virtue on to their sons (Plato, 'Meno', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 93a–94e). Yet the dialogue's deeper answer emerges through the slave boy experiment and the theory of recollection (*anamnesis*). On this view, virtue, as a form of knowledge, cannot be transmitted by filling an empty vessel but must be drawn out from within. This is precisely what the maieutic achieves (Plato, 'Meno', 82b–85d). Socrates describes himself in the *Theaetetus* not as a teacher but as a midwife who brings forth what is already within the student (Plato, 'Theaetetus', in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper et al., trans. G.M.A. Grube (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 149a–151d). First, the dissolution of false certainty (the gadfly work of the *Apology*, which strips away the illusion of knowledge, see Plato, 'Apology', 30e) and second, the birth of genuine inquiry, in which the student, now aware of his ignorance, is recruited into the forward-oriented, self-examining life that Nietzsche's Socrates embodies. The student does not receive a lesson but becomes a new instance of the Socratic orientation and, in time, will question others in turn.

taught, then the practice of self-examination can be transmitted, and with it the promise of overcoming the suffering that comes with transience.

Yet the maieutic does not work on everyone, and I think this qualification is essential to understanding both the scope and the limits of Socratic transmission. Nietzsche specifies that the educative effect falls on ‘noble youths’, and while this is not merely a social qualification, it is that as well. Plato and the circle around Socrates were indeed of noble birth, and social position granted both a certain distance from the immediate pressures of practical life and the leisure for philosophical inquiry²¹³. But I want to suggest that nobility here also means something more fundamentally dispositional. The first phase of the maieutic, the dissolution of false certainty, is deeply uncomfortable. To be shown that one does not know what one thought one knew is, for most people, not an invitation to further inquiry but an occasion for resentment. Socrates was brought to court precisely because the ‘gadfly’ sting provoked hostility as often as it provoked wonder²¹⁴. The conversion from passive ignorance to active inquiry requires a soul that responds to the exposure of ignorance with desire rather than defensiveness, with the impulse to pursue what is now seen to be lacking rather than the impulse to silence the one who revealed the lack. Without this openness, the maieutic produces not a philosopher but an enemy. This is, I think, why Socratic transmission is inherently selective. It does not spread indiscriminately but through those who are open to receive the eros and the capacity for rational self-scrutiny. The temporal horizon nonetheless becomes generational, for each student who undergoes the full conversion becomes a potential teacher, projecting the Socratic programme forward to the next generation. As Nietzsche himself

²¹³ This connection between socio-economic privilege and intellectual cultivation aligns with Aristotle’s foundational assertion that philosophy requires leisure. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle notes that the theoretical sciences could only emerge in cultures where the immediate necessities of survival had been secured and a class of citizens was granted leisure, as exemplified by the Egyptian priests (Aristotle, ‘*Metaphysica (Metaphysics)*’, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W. D. Ross (Modern Library, 2001), I.I.981b). For a broader discussion of the political necessity of leisure for philosophical life, see also Aristotle, ‘*Politica (Politics)*’, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, trans. W. D. Ross (Modern Library, 2001), VII.IX.1328b–1329a.

²¹⁴ Plato, ‘*Apology*’, 30e–31b.

encapsulates in the image of how ‘one school of philosophy follows another, like wave upon wave’ (BT 15, 73).

Yet the consequences, if we follow Nietzsche's line of thought, extend beyond the mere succession of philosophical schools. Nietzsche himself identifies what he takes to be a more decisive development, namely, the emergence of a new kind of human being: ‘that even Socrates deserves the dignity of this kind of leading position, one only needs to recognize in him the archetype of a form of existence unknown before him, the archetype of *theoretical man*’ (BT 15, 72). The Socratic programme, on this reading, does not simply produce philosophers but redefines what it is to be human. The pursuit of knowledge, which for theoretical man is the highest vocation, is no longer a matter of noble birth, heroic action, or divine favour, but of rational inquiry, a capacity that is, crucially, teachable and transmissible. Nietzsche's claim that ‘the mechanism of concepts, judgments and conclusions was prized, above all other abilities, as the highest activity and most admirable gift of nature’ (BT 15, 74) marks a shift from philosophical practice to anthropological definition. The faculty of rational argumentation, the ability to form concepts, make judgments, and draw conclusions, becomes the defining human achievement. But I want to stress that this is also, and essentially, a temporal redefinition. Theoretical man is not simply a human being with a new set of capacities. He is a human being who inhabits time in a new way. Where the tragic hero is constituted by a fate that unfolds through time toward inevitable ruin, theoretical man is constituted by a practice that unfolds through time toward progressive correction. His humanity is not given but achieved, through the iterative, daily exercise of rational inquiry. To be human, on this account, is to live through time as a project of rational self-cultivation, overcoming ignorance through examination and so avoiding the suffering that a life of ignorance brings. The temporal significance of theoretical man is therefore inseparable from his anthropological significance. He does not merely represent a new philosophical ideal but a new way of being

in time, one in which the loss of the ethical self is not a fate to be transfigured but an ignorance to be corrected.

With the emergence of '*theoretical man*', the stakes of the Socratic worldview appear far greater, for what is at issue is not only the fate of the individual soul but the direction of human history itself. Nietzsche writes: 'In the face of this practical pessimism, Socrates becomes the archetype of the theoretical optimist, whose belief that the nature of things can be discovered leads him to attribute to knowledge and understanding the power of a panacea, and who understands error to be inherently evil' (BT 15, 74). If error is not merely a lapse in judgment but a kind of moral corruption, then ignorance is not innocent. Ignorance breeds error, and error misleads action so that the harmful is mistaken for the good. And because human beings now live through time as projects of rational self-cultivation, ignorance is not simply a private failing but a historical force. A humanity that has not yet assumed its theoretical vocation, that continues to live through time in ignorance rather than through examination, produces a history marked by conflict and self-destruction, a 'practical pessimism' that Nietzsche, echoing the wisdom of Silenus, describes as manifesting in 'general wars of extinction and unceasing migrations, with suicide having become habitual' (BT 15, 74). This is, I want to suggest, the historical expression of a civilisation that has not found a way of inhabiting time that can bear the suffering it brings, and that turns, collectively, toward life-denial. The task of Socratic optimism, on this account, is not simply to secure the good life for the individual but to interrupt a historical sequence that runs from ignorance to error, from error to evil, and from evil to life-denial. It is for this reason that knowledge appears as a 'panacea', and that Socratic temporality is cast not only as a form of individual ethical development but as a project of historical transformation, one that seeks to avert 'practical pessimism' rather than acquiesce to it. Theoretical man is, in this sense, Nietzsche's name for

a humanity that has decided to meet the suffering from transience not with transfiguration but with correction, not with the wisdom of Dionysus but with the examined life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Nietzsche's Socrates represents not simply a new philosophical outlook but a new way of inhabiting time, one that stands in direct and deliberate opposition to the tragic experience of transience developed in the preceding chapters. Where tragedy experiences time as fate, a force that gradually discloses a ruin already accomplished beneath the surface of the noble life, Socrates reframes the experience of suffering from transience entirely. The loss of the ethical self is not the work of time as fate but of time as ignorance, the slow, self-inflicted erosion of rational self-governance through a life lived without examination. This reframing rests on the three pillars of Socratic optimism, that virtue is knowledge, that sin is only committed out of ignorance, and that the virtuous man is a happy man, which together form a closed chain whose conclusion is that the suffering tragedy presents as structurally guaranteed by finite existence is, in principle, always preventable through rational self-cultivation. The examined life is therefore not merely an ethical practice but a temporal one, iterative rather than accumulative, radically open rather than fated, meeting time at each moment with reason rather than watching it dissolve the self from within. This optimism, transmitted through Socratic eros from teacher to student and across generations, acquires historical force with the emergence of '*theoretical man*', a humanity that defines itself through the capacity for rational inquiry and takes the correction of ignorance as its highest vocation. For such a humanity, suffering from transience is not an inescapable feature of finite existence but a preventable consequence of how one chooses to inhabit time, and the examined life is the practice through which that suffering can be continually held at bay.

What I take to be at stake in this Socratic temporality is the avoidance of temporal nihilism, the view that irreparable loss is not a preventable consequence but a structural feature of any finite existence that loves and cares in a world governed by time. Tragedy, as I interpret Nietzsche, does not succumb to temporal nihilism, but it does so by leaving its premises in place. It presents a world in which ignorance is built into temporal life, so that to live in time is to live without knowledge of the true meaning of one's actions, and the loss of the ethical self is always a possibility as time unfolds. Tragedy accepts that suffering from transience is part of the structure of existence, and yet finds a way to make this condition desirable, transfiguring inevitable loss into something that has metaphysical significance. This, for me, is the distinctive achievement of tragedy. It shares the temporal nihilist's picture of existence but refuses his conclusion. Socrates, by contrast, does not seem to me to accept the picture itself. He does not deny that time passes or that things are lost, but he denies that the suffering the temporal nihilist identifies follows necessarily from transience. For Socrates, it follows only from ignorance, and ignorance is not fate. If suffering from transience can be corrected, then the premise of the temporal nihilist has collapsed. But to maintain this, Socrates must reject existence as it is ordinarily lived, not because it is painful, but because it accepts ignorance as its condition. The unexamined life, lived in passive ignorance, remains open to the temporal nihilist's conclusion precisely because it leaves the loss of the ethical self as a standing possibility. The examined life removes that possibility, not by abolishing transience, but by altering one's relation to ignorance, from passive endurance to active, daily scrutiny. In this way, Socrates avoids temporal nihilism not by making existence easier but by making it different, replacing the tragic relation to time, in which ignorance is fate and loss is inevitable, with a rational relation to time, in which ignorance is a correctable error and the ethical self is continuously reconstituted through reason.

However, it might now be objected that Socrates himself comes close to temporal nihilism. After all, he rejects ordinary existence as vulnerable to the loss of the ethical self, as a life in which ignorance is left uncorrected and suffering from transience is always possible. In this sense, he shares with the temporal nihilist a refusal to affirm existence as it is. Yet I do not think Socrates is a temporal nihilist, for he has another form of life to desire. The examined life is not a deferred promise but a present reality, realised in each moment of rational self-scrutiny. Transience, on this view, cannot touch the life that is truly worth living, the philosophical life, and so transience is not a reason to reject existence but a reason to live otherwise. It is this alternative that, in my view, separates Socrates from the life-denial of the temporal nihilist. And yet the logic of correction, the idea that ordinary existence is deficient and in need of rational amendment, contains within it a tension whose consequences will shape everything that follows. What happens when correction is no longer directed inward, toward the self, but outward, toward the conditions of existence itself, and when the alternative form of life is no longer available in the present moment of philosophical practice, is the question to which I turn in chapter six.

For now, I want to raise a further difficulty that arises within Nietzsche's account itself. His argument, as I interpret it, holds that the examined life protects the self from the loss of ethical integrity by the idea that reason, through seeking knowledge, can gradually overcome ignorance and secure the ethical self. Yet Socrates, in the *Apology*, famously claims that his wisdom lies in knowing that he knows nothing, and that he is wiser than others only because he does not mistake ignorance for knowledge²¹⁵. Nietzsche, too, highlights this point (BT 13, 65). On first inspection, this might seem to undermine the immunisation argument. If the examined life leads not to secure ethical knowledge but to aporia, to a genuine perplexity and the dissolution of false certainty, then it is not obvious that it delivers the sovereignty over

²¹⁵ Plato, 'Apology', 21d.

action that the *Protagoras* Socrates promises. But I want to suggest that aporia does not in fact undermine the temporal argument I have been developing. It confirms it. The interlocutor who enters a Socratic conversation believing he knows what virtue or piety is, and who leaves in genuine perplexity, has not failed the examined life. He has undergone its first and most essential movement. The ignorance that was passive and unrecognised has become active and acknowledged, and the self is now in a position to begin again from a more honest starting point. Aporia is not the recognition that knowledge is impossible but the recognition that one did not yet have it, which is precisely the condition of seeking it. And the seeking itself, the daily practice of self-examination, is what continuously reconstitutes the ethical self in the way I have been arguing. In this sense, the aporetic Socrates is not in tension with the temporal argument but is its more honest expression. The real difficulty, however, lies deeper. It is not whether aporia is compatible with the examined life but whether the iterative practice of examination, which may never arrive at final and secure knowledge, is sufficient to hold the self together over an entire lifetime.

This is the question Nietzsche's '*music-making Socrates*' (BT 15, 75) raises. Nietzsche notes that while in prison awaiting death, Socrates was troubled by a recurring dream instructing him to practice music and art (BT 14, 71). In response, Socrates began composing a hymn to Apollo and turning Aesop's fables into verse. Nietzsche treats this detail as philosophically significant. He suggests that the Socrates had some sense that his rationalism was incomplete, that there was a dimension of the soul's needs that the examined life could not reach. Socrates' Cyclopan eye, for all its power, leaves something unexamined, or rather, something that cannot be examined because it belongs to a register that rational scrutiny cannot reach. Where the aporia problem concerns whether reason can deliver on its own promises, the '*music-making Socrates*' raises, in Nietzsche's view, the question of whether the promises of reason are sufficient in the first place.

These philosophical difficulties find their historical counterpart in the failure of Socratic transmission itself. Nietzsche shows that Socrates' project can only reach those 'noble youths' whose erotic orientation toward the good enables them to receive the maieutic encounter as an opening rather than an affront. Most people, lacking this eros, experienced the Socratic encounter differently, not as an invitation to inquiry but as an exposure of their ignorance, and it was precisely these people who ultimately condemned him to death. The philosophical limits of the Socratic promise and the historical limits of its transmission are, I want to suggest, two expressions of the same underlying problem. Reason, however rigorously pursued, cannot by itself secure the relation to existence that the overcoming of temporal nihilism requires. When I turn to Euripides and the Hellenistic Greeks in the next chapter, I will argue that the threat of temporal nihilism re-emerges with particular force once Socratic rationality is separated from the erotic orientation toward the good that alone made it, for a few, a genuine way of inhabiting time.

5.

From Euripides to the Hellenistic Greeks: Reason's Fragility and the Suffering from Transience

Menander and Philemon were the leading poets of the New Attic Comedy, writing in the late fourth and early third century BC, a full generation after Euripides. By any ordinary measure, they were successful dramatists. Their plays drew large audiences, their wit was celebrated, and their work helped to define the theatrical culture of the Hellenistic world. Yet Nietzsche draws our attention to something curious in their relationship to their predecessor. He records, for instance, Philemon's wish to hang himself on the spot, simply to be able to visit Euripides in the underworld, 'provided he could be assured that the departed was still in his right mind' (BT 11, 55). I want to pause over this pairing of Philemon and Euripides. The usual pairing in the secondary literature is Socrates and Euripides; the philosopher and the dramatist who, as Nietzsche argues, together killed tragedy from within (BT 12, 64)²¹⁶. But Philemon is a comic poet, not a philosopher, and his relation to Euripides is not one of intellectual alliance but of longing. What are we to make of the fact that a successful dramatist, working in a form that is,

²¹⁶ John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy*, 121; James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy*, 88; Paul Raimond Daniels, *Nietzsche and The Birth of Tragedy*, 106–8; Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy From Plato to Žižek*, 183.

by convention, cheerful, would prefer death to a life without access to Euripides and his tragedies?

In this chapter, I argue that the Philemon joke is not simply an expression of aesthetic admiration, but rather the symptom of a greater existential difficulty, that of suffering from transience. To see why this might be so, it is necessary to trace the history of how suffering from transience changed in the period from Socrates to the Hellenistic world. This history forms an alternative to the standard reading of the relationship between Socrates and Euripides, and by unpacking it, I hope to show not only why that reading is compelling, but also where it fails to capture something essential.

On the standard reading, Euripides is not so much an independent figure as a mask through which the demonic voice of the Socratic speaks (BT 12, 60). Nietzsche points to ancient legends that suggest Socrates helped Euripides write his plays, lending them a rationalistic sheen (BT 13, 64). The defining link between the two is what Nietzsche calls 'aesthetic Socratism' (BT 12, 64). Euripides, Nietzsche argues, applied Socratic rationalism to tragedy, insisting that only what is intelligible is beautiful (BT 12, 62). On this account, Euripides brought the philosopher onto the stage, creating ordinary characters who debate and philosophise, instructing the audience in a new, rational way of life (BT 11, 56). He is, as it were, the Brutus of tragedy, the one who delivered the final blow from within, as Socrates' henchman. I think this reading is, in its broad outline, correct. But it does not register the often-overlooked divergence in Euripides' position, one that becomes visible when we look at the pairing of Euripides and Philemon, and it is this pairing that reveals the failure of Socratism, marking the return of the suffering from transience during the period of the Hellenistic Greeks and their New Attic Comedy.

Nietzsche maintains that Euripides democratised the practice of reasoning, bringing, as Aristophanes' caricature suggests, 'the mass onto the stage' (BT 11, 55, 58). He further claims

that the ‘the successful result of the wisdom he [Euripides] had injected into the people’ was that ‘the broad mass now philosophizes’ (BT 11, 56). Yet this form of philosophising is not the Socratic dialectic oriented toward knowledge and virtue. Rather, as Nietzsche puts it, it is ‘the most cunning sophistication’ by which the ordinary populace ‘conducts trials, and administers land and property with unheard-of cleverness’ (BT 11, 56). What is transmitted here is not the Socratic capacity to reason in the direction of virtue, but rather a sophistical ability to reason in pursuit of self-interest. The division that Socrates sought to overcome, the one between the mere capacity to reason and the commitment to reason well, is not resolved by Euripides’ democratisation of tragedy. Instead, his focus on ordinary people only deepens it, laying bare the fragility of reason.

This chapter asks what happens to suffering from transience when the Socratic resources for bearing it begin to fail. I begin with Euripides, whose alliance with Socrates kills tragedy from within. However, bringing the Socratic conviction that reason can correct existence onto the tragic stage does not yield a drama of successful correction but something far more unstable, a tragedy of reason in which time becomes the medium of consequence rather than fate’s revelation. This new and distinctively fragile experience of transience is still barely contained by Euripides’ own formal devices, but with the death of tragedy those devices are lost. The Hellenistic Greeks then face a question that has no easy answer. How does one bear the suffering that comes from having lost the very medium through which suffering from transience was made bearable? Their response, I will argue, is not to find a new means of bearing that suffering but to construct a new experience of time, one structured so that suffering from transience never rises into awareness at all.

Euripides: The Tragedy of Reason

Nietzsche's claim that 'in league with Socrates, Euripides dared to be the herald of a new kind of artistic creation. If this caused the older tragedy to perish, then aesthetic Socratism is the murderous principle' (BT 12, 64) is central to what I want to argue in this chapter. But I want to approach the murderousness from a specific angle, one that connects it directly to the question of time and suffering from transience. The Socratic conviction, as I argued in the previous chapter, is that reason aims at correction, that ignorance can be overcome and existence improved through rational inquiry. This conviction is, in principle, incompatible with tragedy. A drama in which reason successfully corrects existence is not a tragedy. It is a comedy, or at best a cautionary tale with a happy ending. For tragedy to be possible within a Socratic framework, reason must fail, and it must fail in a way that is intelligible, rationally accountable, and therefore, in principle, correctable. This is precisely the irony that Euripides stages. He does not show reason triumphantly correcting existence. He shows reason generating its own ruin, not despite its logic but through it. The result is not a drama of correction but what I want to call a tragedy of reason, and with it a new experience of transience, one in which time is no longer the medium of fate's revelation but the medium of consequence, the slow and inexorable unfolding of what reason itself has set in motion and cannot stop. It is this new experience of transience, and what follows from it, that this chapter traces.

To make sense of why 'aesthetic Socratism' is, as Nietzsche puts it, 'murderous' (BT 12, 64), we must first consider what it is that Euripides found unacceptable in the older tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The starting point, I think, is the experience of incommensurability. Nietzsche's description of Euripides 'as a spectator' (BT 12, 59) is already a loaded one. He has argued that in older tragedy there was 'fundamentally no opposition between public and chorus' (BT 8, 42). The audience did not merely observe but participated,

so fully absorbed into the choral experience that the distinction between stage and spectator was effaced. To call Euripides a spectator is, then, to mark his exclusion from the tragic experience, his inability to enter into it. He occupies the position of one who observes with analytical clarity rather than one who is carried along by the mythological current, and it is precisely this instrument, 'the clarity and agility of his critical thinking' (BT 11, 58), that prevents him from understanding what is at stake in the older tragedy. So, Nietzsche continues, Euripides 'sat in the theatre' and 'strained every sinew to recognize feature after feature, line after line, in the masterpieces of his predecessors, as if studying paintings darkened by the passage of time' (BT 11, 58).

What Euripides encounters when he brings his 'critical thinking' to bear is not simply darkness or confusion, but something incommensurability. Nietzsche claims that in 'every feature and every line' Euripides perceives 'a certain deceiving definiteness, and at the same time a puzzling depth, indeed infinity, in the background' (BT 11, 58). The older tragedy offers a surface that appears determinate but conceals a depth that rational analysis cannot exhaust: 'Even the clearest figure still trailed a comet's tail after it which seemed to point into the unknown, into that which cannot be illuminated' (BT 11, 58). This is not, I think, merely a poetic image. It is a structural marker of what older tragedy refuses to deliver, namely, a rationally transparent account of why things go as they do. Aesthetic Socratism, for its part, demands reasonableness as the measure of aesthetic achievement: 'In order to be beautiful, everything must be reasonable' (BT 12, 62). When this standard is applied to older tragedy, it necessarily finds the older form opaque, since older tragedy operates in a register that such rationality cannot access.

The specific objections that follow bear this out. Euripides finds 'the solution of the ethical problems' dubious, 'the treatment of the myths' questionable, and 'the distribution of happiness and unhappiness' uneven (BT 11, 59). These are not, I think, merely aesthetic

complaints but objections from the standpoint of justice, clarity, and proportionality. What Euripides cannot accept is that older tragedy refuses to distribute guilt, suffering, and resolution in accordance with any principle that reason could endorse. This is the situation exemplified by Oedipus, who is guilty and innocent at once, destroyed by a fate that is both his destiny and his own actions, and offered no judicial resolution, only 'metaphysical solace'. For Euripides, as spectator and critic armed with Socratic clarity, this is not a resolution but an evasion. The ethical problem (the loss of one's ethical self) is not resolved but aesthetically absorbed into a view of the cosmos that places it, incomprehensibly, beyond the reach of reason. The comet's tail, pointing into the unknown, is precisely what must be severed if tragedy is to be rendered rationally transparent.

This incommensurability is, I think, inseparable from the temporal structure of older tragedy. Fate, as older tragedy presents it, is a force that unfolds through time, gradually revealing a ruin already accomplished beneath the surface of the noble life. The recognition that arrives, the moment when Oedipus finally sees what time has disclosed, comes too late to alter anything. And this lateness is not accidental but structural. The gap between action and its full meaning, between what the hero does and what time reveals that he has done, is what makes fate incommensurable with rational accountability. Euripides cannot accept this gap because it forecloses the possibility of correction at precisely the moment it is most needed. For the Socratic mind, the point of rational inquiry is to close that gap, to bring knowledge to bear before the ruin unfolds rather than after. A drama structured around the retrospective revelation of fate is therefore not merely aesthetically unsatisfying to Euripides. It is ethically intolerable, because it presents suffering from transience as something that reason could never have prevented, and consolation as the only response available. Where older tragedy offers 'metaphysical solace' for a loss it presents as inevitable, Euripides demands something different. He demands a drama in which suffering has a rationally intelligible cause, one that

could, in principle, have been foreseen and corrected. This, I want to argue, is the animating impulse behind his campaign against older tragedy, and it is what makes that campaign not merely aesthetic but, in Nietzsche's deepest sense, murderous.

Yet Euripides does not, for that reason, abandon tragedy altogether. Nietzsche's view is that Euripides' response is more subtle, more infiltrating. Rather than attacking from without, Euripides mounts his campaign from within the genre itself. Nietzsche writes that,

in league with this man [Socrates] he [Euripides] could dare, from his isolated position, to embark on an enormous campaign against the works of art of Aeschylus and Sophocles — not in the form of polemics, but as a dramatic poet who opposes his idea of tragedy to the traditional one (BT 11, 59).

The campaign, then, is conducted through tragedy, not against it. Euripides retains the tragic form, the suffering, the ruin, but alters their cause in line with the demands of 'aesthetic Socratism'. The incommensurability of fate is to be replaced by the rationally transparent. The comet's tail is to be severed.

The first question this raises is who now occupies the stage, and what this shift means for the experience of time. The answer is not the philosopher but the ordinary person, the spectator who steps out of the audience and into the drama. Nietzsche claims that 'Euripides brought the *spectator* on to the stage', so that now 'people from everyday life pushed their way out of the audience and on to the stage; the mirror which once revealed only great and bold features now became painfully true to life, reproducing conscientiously even the lines which nature had drawn badly' (BT 11, 55). 'The spectator now heard and saw his double on the Euripidean stage' (BT 11, 56). The badly drawn lines, as I understand them, are not aesthetic flaws but the marks of psychological complexity, of passions, weakness, and self-deceptions that, as we will see, the Socratic ideal of philosophical reasoning cannot accommodate. Nietzsche observes that 'he excessive growth in the *presentation of character* and of

psychological refinement' is taken so far as 'to give such an impression of individuality that the spectator no longer senses the myth at all, but only the great fidelity to nature and the imitative skills of the artist' (BT 17, 84). The mythological framework is gone, replaced by psychological realism.

This shift is not incidental. It is the structural consequence of the demand for rational accountability. If suffering is to have a cause that reason can endorse, it must arise from the decisions and actions of a recognisable human agent, not from a fate exceeding human understanding. And if the drama is to be a mirror for the audience, that agent must be the ordinary person rather than the hero of mythological stature. Euripides' innovation is therefore not merely aesthetic but philosophical. By bringing the ordinary person onto the stage, he makes suffering rationally accountable in precisely the way Socratic ethics requires. The cause of ruin is no longer fate but the hero's own reasoning, his decisions, his arguments, his passions, and the consequences they set in motion through time. As Nietzsche observes in a note from the time of the *Birth*, 'the hero who must defend his actions by reason and counter-reason is in danger of forfeiting our compassion, for the misfortune that nonetheless later befalls him then shows only that he has made a miscalculation somewhere' (KGW 3.2, 39)²¹⁷. Misfortune is reduced to error, becoming the sign of a failed argument rather than the revelation of a fate larger than the individual. This reduction destroys the asymmetry on which tragic compassion depends. Compassion requires a gap between what the hero deserves and what they suffer, an excess that resists rational accounting. The moment the hero publicly submits their case to reason, they invite the audience to adjudicate rather than feel. In this way, Euripides attempts to close the gap that older tragedy left open, between action and its meaning, between what the hero does and what time reveals that he has done. The hero now knows what he is doing. He

²¹⁷ Donald J. Mastrorarde highlights how Euripides uses the *agon* (the formal debate scene) to show the failure of reasoning (Donald J. Mastrorarde, *The Art of Euripides: Dramatic Technique and Social Context* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 222–45). Although, as we will see, Nietzsche thinks that reason fails for different reasons.

reasons, plans, and argues. His suffering is not the retrospective revelation of a fate already accomplished but the prospective unfolding of consequences he himself has set in motion.

This is the Socratic ideal transposed onto the stage. Nietzsche states it clearly: ‘the virtuous hero must now be a dialectician; there must now be a necessary, visible connection between virtue and knowledge, faith and morality’ (BT 14, 70). The virtuous person is the one who can articulate the better account, whose actions are transparent to reason and whose suffering, if it comes, is the legible consequence of a failure of knowledge rather than the incommensurable verdict of fate. Suffering is no longer something that happens to the hero from outside. It is something the hero has, in a meaningful sense, argued themselves into. And this, Euripides appears to believe, is both more honest and more instructive than the older tragic picture. It places the cause of ruin within the reach of rational understanding, and therefore, in principle, within the reach of rational correction. The drama should, on this view, demonstrate the Socratic thesis that ignorance leads to suffering and knowledge to happiness, that the connection between virtue and fate is not incommensurable but intelligible.

Yet in making this move, Euripides does not get a drama of successful correction. He gets something quite different, and something that the Socratic framework cannot easily accommodate. He gets a tragedy of reason. And it is to that tragedy, and the new experience of transience it produces, that I now turn.

The irony on which much of this section turns is that Euripides does not resolve the problem he set out to address. He substitutes one form of incommensurability for another. Where the older tragedy’s incommensurability was metaphysical, the hero’s guilt exceeding human justice, fate both deserved and undeserved, suffering absorbed into a mythological framework that placed it beyond rational adjudication, Euripides’ new tragedy generates an incommensurability that is psychological and temporal. Reason does not triumphantly correct existence. It generates pathos. And it does so not because the hero reasons badly in any simple

sense, but because the conditions under which ordinary people reason are precisely those that the Socratic model cannot acknowledge. There are two pillars to this failure, and together they condition the new experience of transience that Euripidean drama produces.

The first is the character of reasoning itself. Because of Euripides, Nietzsche writes, ‘the people have learned to observe, to negotiate, and to draw conclusions artfully and with the most cunning sophistication’ (BT 11, 56), and ‘if the broad mass now philosophizes, conducts trials, and administers land and property with unheard-of cleverness, then this was his achievement, the successful result of the wisdom he had injected into the people’ (BT 11, 56)²¹⁸. What is at stake here is not the absence of reasoning but the emergence of a particular kind of reasoning, one that is instrumental, strategic, and oriented toward securing advantage rather than toward truth. The Euripidean hero ‘must defend his actions with reasons and counter-reasons’ (BT 14, 69). But this is not Socratic dialectic, which is oriented toward the good and remains open to revision at every turn. It is reasoning in the service of a position already taken, deployed to justify, persuade, and win rather than to inquire. The cleverness Nietzsche describes is real, but it is always deployed under conditions of competition, self-interest, and contingency²¹⁹. Reason is now operating in conditions where the good has been displaced by advantage as the measure of success.

The second pillar is passion. Nietzsche’s description of Euripides’ own divided nature, he is ‘the actor with the pounding heart’, drawing up his plan as a ‘Socratic thinker’ and executing it as a ‘passionate actor’ (BT 12, 51), captures something essential here. I take the split between the Socratic planner and the passionate executor not as a personal idiosyncrasy but as the structural condition of ordinary reasoning. The character reasons well enough to construct a strategy, but the passion with which they pursue it distorts the execution, introduces

²¹⁸ Cf. Justina Gregory, *Euripides and the Instruction of the Athenians* (University of Michigan Press, 2011).

²¹⁹ Mastrorarde, *The Art of Euripides*, 211–22.

consequences the plan did not anticipate, and ensures that the argument, however logically coherent, often serves ends that reason was never meant to serve. For Socrates, genuine knowledge of the good necessarily governs passion. Euripides stages the refutation of that claim. His characters know, plan, and yet act passionately in ways that undermine their own plans. This is not a failure of intelligence but a failure of integration. Nietzsche makes the point explicit in his account of what Euripidean drama substitutes for the older artistic drives. Older tragedy operated through the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Euripides replaces both through ‘cool, paradoxical *thoughts* — in place of Apolline visions — and fiery *affects* — in place of Dionysiac ecstasies — and, what is more, thoughts and affects most realistically imitated (BT 12, 62). Thought and passion are staged together and in tension, neither governing the other. This stands in direct contrast to the Socratic ideal, in which reason is meant to govern and suppress passion. The failure of reasoning in Euripides is therefore not accidental but the inevitable result of reasoning under conditions that the Socratic model does not, and cannot, acknowledge.

Euripides’ *Medea* illustrates both pillars with particular clarity, and shows with clearly what new experience of transience they together produce. The play opens not under an oracle or divine decree but with the Medea’s plain report of Jason’s betrayal: ‘I realize the man who was my all in all has now turned out to be the lowest of the low — my husband’²²⁰. The suffering that follows is not fated but set in motion by human opportunism, and it is from this condition of devastation that the chain of arguments develops. What the drama then traces is not the unfolding of a fate already accomplished but the progressive entrapment of a reasoning subject within the logic of her own actions.

²²⁰ Euripides, ‘Medea’, in *Euripides I*, ed. Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most, trans. Oliver Taplin (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 225–229.

Medea reasons well. This is, I think, the crucial point. Her logic is not defective. Given her goal, revenge, and her situation, betrayed, powerless, and facing exile, she works out with considerable sophistication the most effective means available to her. What is striking is the cunning with which she deploys reason not in the service of truth or the good but in the service of self-interest and strategic advantage. Before Creon, who has ordered her exile, she feigns submission and vulnerability, performing the role of a wronged woman who accepts her fate, when in fact she is working to secure the one day she needs: ‘Do you suppose I ever would have grovelled to him now except to gain advantage and resource?’²²¹ The argument she presents to Creon is not false in any simple sense. It draws on real grievances, real emotions, and a real request. But it is deployed with calculated precision to produce a specific effect, to disarm his suspicion and extract a concession. Creon is moved by what appears to be reason and feeling in alignment, not knowing that reason here is entirely in the service of a concealed purpose. Each of her moves is strategically sound, each argument correctly deployed for its intended purpose.

And yet the purpose is not what Socratic reasoning was designed to serve. Reason is working here with full sophistication, but it has been entirely conscripted by passion, by wounded pride, rage, and the desire for a revenge so complete that it cannot be undone. The murder of Jason’s new wife, and the filicide is not an irrational conclusion. It is the logical outcome of thinking carefully about how to devastate Jason most completely. It destroys what he loves most, what she loves most, and it is the one act that cannot be undone or compensated. Her reasoning is correct on its own terms. The problem is not the logic but what the logic is in the service of. Passion, wounded pride, rage, and the desire for revenge have set the goal, and reason, operating with full sophistication, works out the most effective means of achieving it.

²²¹ Euripides, ‘Medea’, 364–69.

Knowledge does not govern passion. Passion governs reason, and enlisted in that service, leads with perfect logical necessity toward the destruction of everything Medea valued.

By the time she reaches the wavering monologue before the filicide, the trap has closed: 'I'm overwhelmed by pain. I realize what evil things I am about to do, but it's my anger dominates my resolution'²²². This moment is, I think, the most interesting in the play. Medea knows. She recognises the evil of what she is about to do, and she recognises her own suffering in it. But she cannot stop. This is not weakness of will in the Socratic sense, not a failure of reasoning that better knowledge could correct. It is something more disturbing. The logic of her own actions has acquired a necessity that exceeds her. She set the reasoning in motion, each argument following from the last with its own internal coherence, and now it has closed around her. She is ensnared in the unfolding of consequences she herself generated, and the recognition that arrives comes too late to alter anything. Like the recognition in older tragedy, it confirms a ruin already accomplished. But unlike older tragedy, this lateness is not the work of fate. It is the work of her own reasoning.

This, I want to argue, is the new experience of transience that Euripidean drama produces. What is lost in Medea, the children, the marriage, the possibility of a life that might have been salvaged, was not always already forfeit. It was not disclosed by time as something that fate had always concealed beneath the surface of the noble life. It was destroyed in the passing of time, through the unfolding of a logic that Medea herself set in motion and could not arrest. Time in Medea is not the medium of fate's revelation but the medium of consequence, the slow, necessary closing of a trap built from argument itself. And the new incommensurability this produces is not between fate and agency, as in older tragedy, but between the correctness of the reasoning and the devastation of the outcome. Medea reasons well and loses everything. Reason is not irrational. But its consequences, unfolding through

²²² Euripides, 'Medea', 1076–1080.

time in the service of passion rather than the good, are not subject to rational control. The incommensurability has not been eliminated. It has been relocated, from the metaphysical to the psychological, and it is this relocation that marks the distinctive achievement, and the distinctive failure, of ‘aesthetic Socratism’.

What Euripidean drama ultimately achieves, then, is not the correction that ‘aesthetic Socratism’ promised but something quite different: ‘the passion and dialectic of the protagonist swelled into a broad and mighty stream’ (BT 12, 62), and ‘everything was a preparation for pathos, not for action; and anything that was not a preparation for pathos was held to be objectionable’ (BT 12, 62). Reason does not triumph. It swells into feeling, and the feeling it produces is not the serenity of the examined life but the devastation of a self ensnared in its own logic. The drama is structured from the beginning not toward correction but toward pathos, toward the suffering that results when reason is fully deployed and yet leads nowhere that reason was meant to go. And this, I think, is what gives the Euripidean experience of transience its distinctive character. As Jacqueline de Romilly observes, time in Euripides ‘is now seen but from the point of view of man’s sensibility. Hence comes this impossibility of mentioning its unsteadiness without adding, as we did, that it is a tiring and dispiriting disorder’²²³.

The suffering from transience that Euripidean drama produces is psychologically real, individually borne, and given no metaphysical remainder. It calls for a response. Euripides, as I read him, provides such a response not through the drama itself but through a framing structure that brackets the suffering at both ends. Nietzsche writes that Euripides

places the prologue before the exposition and places it in the mouth of a character who can be trusted: often a deity had to guarantee the course of the tragedy to the public [...] Euripides makes use of the same divine truthfulness again, at the end of his drama, in order to reassure the public about the future of his heroes; this is

²²³ Jacqueline de Romilly, *Le Temps Dans La Tragédie Grecque*, 109.

the task of the infamous *deus ex machina*. Between the epic retrospect and the prospect beyond the end of the action lies the dramatic-lyrical present, the drama proper (BT 12, 63).

I do not think it is helpful to treat the ‘prologue’ and the ‘*deus ex machina*’ as two separate devices. Rather, they form a single container. The prologue opens the frame. A divine voice foretells the course of the tragedy, giving the audience advance knowledge of what is to come. The *deus ex machina* then closes it, with the same divine truthfulness offering reassurance about the future of the heroes and compensation for their suffering: ‘after he had been sufficiently tortured by fate, the hero gained a well-earned reward in the form of a handsome marriage, or in being honoured by the gods’ (BT 17, 84). What lies between these two divine guarantees is the dramatic present, the ‘tiring’ and ‘dispiriting’ experience of time that reason has produced and cannot resolve.

It is this container, I think, that makes Euripidean experience of transience possible as an aesthetic experience rather than as an existential crisis. Nietzsche suggests that Euripides' stage is a mirror for the spectator (BT 11, 55), for the ordinary person who recognises themselves in the characters and sees their own potential ruin played out before them. Without the container, such recognition would risk becoming overwhelming. The advanced knowledge provided by the prologue gives the audience the distance they need in order to watch the suffering without being destroyed by it. They can identify with the characters, feel, and even enjoy, the weight of the failing arguments and the sense of the trap closing, and experience the pathos of the heroes' ruin. Yet they remain safe, because the divine guarantee at both ends ensures that the course of time will be resolved²²⁴. The suffering from transience may be real and devastating, but it will not continue indefinitely, and it will not be the last thing the

²²⁴ Mary Lefkowitz argues that by appearing at the end, the gods provide a divine perspective that places human suffering into the larger framework of history and fate, confirming that the world, however painful, is governed by divine will (Mary Lefkowitz, *Euripides and the Gods* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

audience carries away. The divine frame thus converts what might lead to the Silenic conclusion, that a life governed by such fragile and failing reason is not worth the suffering from transience it produces, into a dramatic experience that can be watched, felt, and then left behind in the theatre.

Yet the container is also, as I read Nietzsche, a confession. The '*deus ex machina*' is not simply a dramatic convenience but a revealing gesture. Nietzsche notes that 'as soon as the god appears on the machine, we realise that behind the mask stands Socrates, seeking to balance happiness and virtue on his scales' (KGW 3.2, 39). The '*deus ex machina*' responds to the Socratic expectation that virtue and happiness should be brought into alignment, and that existence should be corrected in this way. But the correction it offers is not 'metaphysical solace'. As Nietzsche makes clear: 'The *deus ex machina* has taken the place of metaphysical solace' (BT 17, 84). The distinction matters enormously for the argument I have been developing. Metaphysical solace, as I argued in chapter three, does not end suffering. It transforms the suffering individual's relation to loss, assisting them in bearing what remains irreparable. The '*deus ex machina*' does something entirely different. It does not transform the experience of suffering but replaces it, compensating the hero with this-worldly goods, marriage, divine honour, escape, so that the suffering simply stops (BT 17, 84). It is an attempt at Socratic correction by external intervention rather than transfiguration from within.

As the closing scene of *Medea* makes plain, Medea departs in a chariot drawn by dragons, sent by her grandfather Helios, placed beyond Jason's reach and assured of her arrival in Athens²²⁵. The chariot preserves her body and secures her revenge, but the self that reasoned itself into filicide remains unredeemed, carried away in its devastation. Medea is not solaced. She is extracted. The suffering ends not because it has been given a different meaning but because the conditions that sustained it have been externally altered, and what has been lost,

²²⁵ Euripides, 'Medea', 1316.

the children, the marriage, the possibility of a life that reason destroyed rather than corrected, is not restored. The *'deus ex machina'* therefore marks the moment when Euripides acknowledges, within the structure of the drama itself, that 'aesthetic Socratism' cannot accomplish what it set out to do. Reason was meant to correct existence from within. Instead, it has generated pathos, and the god who arrives to close the frame does not transform that pathos but simply brings it to an end. This is a very different thing from showing that existence, in its transience, is worth having.

In this way, aesthetic Socratism does not merely kill older tragedy. It produces a new and distinctively unstable experience of transience, one that is deprived of both mythological absorption and rational correction, and is ended only by the artificial intervention of the divine frame. The suffering from transience in Euripides is contained but not resolved, framed but not transfigured. This hollowed-out, de-mythologised encounter with transience, held together by a structure that can barely conceal its own inadequacy, prepares the way for what follows. When the minimal scaffolding that Euripides retained is no longer available, when even the divine frame has lost its credibility, the question of how to live with the losses that time imposes must be confronted without the support of myth, Socratic philosophy, or external intervention. It is to that moment that I now turn.

The Hellenistic Greeks: The Comedy of Uncontained Transience

I want to begin with Nietzsche's claim that with Euripides and Socrates, tragedy dies (BT 12, 64). This death, as I shall argue, marks not simply the end of a literary genre but initiates what I take to be a double experience of transience. Nietzsche himself writes that when Greek tragedy died,

there arose a vast emptiness which was felt deeply everywhere; just as Greek sailors from the time of Tiberius once heard, on a lonely island, the devastating

cry, ‘the great God Pan is dead,’ so a call now rang like the painful sound of mourning throughout the Hellenic world: ‘Tragedy is dead! And with it we have lost poetry itself! Away, away with you, withered, wasted epigones!’ (BT 11, 54)²²⁶.

I take the allusion to the death of Pan as casting the collapse of tragedy in religious-historical terms. This death signals, for Nietzsche, the silencing of the divine voice, the end of myth (BT 23, 110)²²⁷, and the inauguration of a historical temporality of belatedness that stretches from the Hellenistic Greeks into the Roman world of Tiberius. But I want to attend more closely to this passage, since it seems to me to articulate a particular experience of suffering from transience.

The loss of tragedy is first and foremost a suffering that arises from the passage of time itself. The lament—‘Tragedy is dead! And with it we have lost poetry itself!’—expresses the position of those who find themselves after an irreparable historical rupture. What has disappeared is not simply a particular object or practice, but a form of life, the very horizon within which suffering could acquire meaning, and a way of being endured. Here, transience is not experienced as the loss of particular goods within a supporting worldview, but as the disappearance of the framework itself. Yet this initial suffering from transience has a further, and more unsettling, aspect. What is lost is not only something valued, but the very means by which suffering from transience could be rendered intelligible and bearable. Tragedy, however incomplete its resources, provided a way for a culture to inhabit its losses without succumbing to them. With its disappearance, the Hellenistic Greeks are left not only with the pain of loss,

²²⁶ In his writing on the decline of the oracles, Plutarch reports that ship travellers off the Greek coast heard a mysterious voice instructing the helmsman to proclaim at a certain point ‘that the great Pan is dead’ One of the participants in the conversation in Plutarch’s writing attempts to explain the decline of the oracles with the death of demons like Pan; Plutarch, ‘The Obsolescence of Oracles’, in *Moralia*, V, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Harvard University Press, 1999), 17.419b-e. Jochen Schmidt notes that Pan’s characteristic as a nature demon connects him to Dionysus, whom Nietzsche also links to nature and primordial life (Jochen Schmidt, *Historischer Und Kritischer Kommentar Zu Friedrich Nietzsches Werken* (de Gruyter, 2012), 224).

²²⁷ ‘The demise of tragedy was at the same time the demise of myth’ (BT 23, 110)

but also without any means of making sense of that pain. The loss thus acquires a reflexive structure. Suffering from transience becomes, in a sense, suffering from the impossibility of making sense of suffering from transience, since the resource that would have given this loss its meaning is itself what has been lost. The intensification of suffering here is not due to any further deprivation, but to the particular thing of what has vanished.

In this context, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche seems to think that the sense of emptiness precedes the explicit recognition of loss. It is not that the death of Pan is first announced and only then mourned. Rather, as the passage has it, ‘there arose a vast emptiness which was felt deeply everywhere’ before the loss is even named, much less understood. The void is produced prior to its articulation. The conditions for a bearable life have already disappeared before anyone has managed to identify what has gone missing. In this sense, the emptiness is not simply a consequence of loss, but its most immediate and fundamental manifestation. It is the felt absence of any means of inhabiting suffering from transience, now that no framework remains within which it might be resolved or endured. The spatial context reinforces this point. The cry is not heard from a settled, rooted place, but by sailors at sea, on a remote island, by people already in motion, already without secure ground beneath them. The Hellenistic Greeks do not begin with a stable world and then lose it. They are already adrift when the loss becomes perceptible, already living in a world that has lost its mythological foundation, and the emptiness they experience is precisely the absence of any means of making that condition endurable. The reference to Tiberius introduces a temporal dimension of belatedness that, I think, characterizes the Hellenistic situation more generally. The cry is not contemporaneous with the death of tragedy, but is heard centuries later, after the Greek world that gave rise to tragedy has itself become historical. The news of the loss reaches those who were not present at its occurrence. They inherit the emptiness before they inherit any understanding of its origins, and each act of mourning serves only to reaffirm a gap that was

already there. This belatedness is itself a mode of suffering from transience. The experience of arriving too late, of finding oneself on the far side of a loss that one neither witnessed nor can undo.

The death of tragedy is followed by the emergence of the New Attic Comedy, which appears in the early fourth century BC with the plays of Menander²²⁸. The apostrophe ‘Away, away with you, withered, wasted epigones!’ marks this transition, dismissing those who cannot relinquish tragedy and making space for a new form. Yet I do not think that the New Comedy is merely the abandonment of an outdated art form, or that it represents a culture moving on from what it has outgrown. Instead, I want to argue that it is the cultural institutionalisation of the experience of transience that the death of tragedy brings to the fore. The epigones of the New Comedy do not simply overcome the loss but also inhabit it. The New Comedy, then, is the form that this suffering assumes when it becomes embedded in the practices and expectations of a way of life.

Nietzsche writes:

But when a new branch of art did blossom after all—one which revered tragedy as its predecessor and mistress—it became painfully clear that it bore the features of its mother, but only those which she had shown during her prolonged death-struggle. It was *Euripides* who fought this death-struggle of tragedy; the later branch of art is known as the *New Attic Comedy*, in which tragedy lived on in degenerate form, as a monument to its own exceedingly laborious and violent demise (BT 11, 55).

Nietzsche’s description of the New Comedy as having ‘revered tragedy as its predecessor and mistress’, and the ‘passionate affection which the poets of the New Comedy felt for

²²⁸ The history of literature forms caesuras between the Old Comedy of the 5th century with Aristophanes as its main representative, the Middle Comedy, which extends from the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC, which was ruinous for Athens, to Menander, and the New Comedy, which began with Menander (342-291 BC).

Euripides'²²⁹, draws attention to a relationship in which the past provides the measure, and the present is experienced as derivative or diminished by comparison. This reverence, I take it, is not the reverence of creative continuation but rather of preservation²³⁰. A monument, after all, maintains the shape of what once existed but cannot restore its vitality. The New Comedy may honour tragedy, adopt its forms, and inherit its manner, but it cannot revive what has been lost. Furthermore, what is inherited is already not tragedy at its height, but tragedy in its period of decline, specifically the Euripidean phase. The longing is thus directed not at the origin itself, but at a version of the origin that was already marked by loss. The standard set by the past was itself already a departure from an earlier standard. In this way, the sense of belatedness is compounded. The New Comedy thus emerges as the product of a tradition already in the process of fading, carrying forward the marks of that decline rather than any renewed vitality. In this respect, the New Comedy does not overcome the suffering from transience that the death of tragedy has brought about. Rather, it gives that suffering a settled place within culture. The loss remains present, its outline preserved, but there is no means of working through it or finding another way to bear it. The monument, in this sense, is not a means of living with loss, but a way of remaining within it, and in so doing, the suffering from transience is not lessened but made enduring.

Nietzsche's reference to Philemon brings this self-compounding suffering to its most acute point. He cites 'Philemon's desire to hang himself on the spot, simply to be able to visit Euripides in the Underworld — provided he could be assured that the departed was still in his

²²⁹ In Menander's *The Shield* (342/41 BC – 292/91 BC), which survives only in fragments, the slave Daos cites four tragedians Aeschylus (410-412), Karkinos (416-418), Euripides (426-428), and Chairemon (426-428). Again, in Menander's *The Arbitration* (c. 300 BC), which also survives only in fragments, the slave Onesimos quotes from Euripides' *Auge*, a drama which is only preserved in fragments, too (1123-1126). See Menander, *Plays and Fragments*, trans. Norma Miller (Penguin Books, 1987).

²³⁰ Johann Gustav Droysen sees the Hellenistic Greeks as inheriting and creatively developing the legacies of both Classical and oriental antiquity into new direction (Johann Gustav Droysen, *Geschichte Des Hellenismus*, Band 3 (Tübingen, 1952).

right mind' (BT 11, 55)²³¹. Here, the present is experienced as so lacking in value that only death seems to offer access to what has been lost. This is, I think, a version of the Silenic verdict, but now cast in the form of nostalgia. It is not simply the abstract claim that existence is worthless because it is transient, but rather the more urgent sense that life, deprived of what tragedy once made possible, is no longer worth living, and that death is sought not as annihilation but as the last possible means of return. Yet even this imagined solution is not available, and the reasons for its impossibility reveal the depth of the emptiness at issue. The condition Philemon attaches, that he could be assured Euripides was still in his right mind, is significant. Even the prospect of returning to the origin is unstable. Euripides in the underworld might no longer possess the coherence that is longed for, and the origin itself may not have been as stable as the longing presupposes. The desire that sustains the epigonal condition is thus directed toward something that may never have existed in the form imagined. The suffering from transience cannot be resolved in life, since the means of bearing it have been lost, but may also not be resolved even in the fantasy of recovering what was lost, because the lost object may itself have been incoherent from the beginning. In this situation, one cannot live with the loss, nor recover what has been lost, even in death.

Relatedly, Nietzsche further claims that 'Euripides, the chorus-master, was praised endlessly, indeed people would have killed themselves to learn more from him, if they had not known that the tragic poets were just as dead as tragedy' (BT 11, 56). This remark points to a further aspect of loss. It is not only that tragedy itself has disappeared, but that those who once gave it form are no longer present. There is no longer a living tradition from which one might learn. What remains are monuments and the recognition that the sources of understanding are themselves inaccessible. The loss is thus not simply the disappearance of a form, but the

²³¹ Alongside the Athenian Menander, his successful rival Philemon of Syracuse (361BC -262 BC) is considered the most important representative of the New Comedy.

absence of those who embodied and transmitted it. Acts of praise, in this context, serve to mark the distance between ourselves and the past, and reverence becomes a way of acknowledging that distance, rather than overcoming it. I am tempted to use Freudian terms and call this condition the melancholy of belatedness²³², that is, by experience remaining transfixed by Euripides, the Hellenistic Greeks render themselves incapable of carrying tragedy forward into something authentic and new. Each attempt to honour Euripides confirms that the past is gone and the future closed, so that fixation becomes the very mode in which they endure historical time. As a form of suffering from transience, this belatedness is not simply the loss of an object of admiration, but the loss of the very conditions that once made existence bearable, conditions that no act of reverence can restore.

What emerges here appears to me to be the conclusion of the self-compounding structure I have identified. The suffering from the loss of tragedy, already a suffering from transience, has become so intensified that it produces the Silenic conclusion, as the concrete experience of being unable to endure a world in which the very resources for bearing suffering have been lost. The initial suffering, the loss of tragedy, has deepened into a second order suffering, the inability to make sense of that loss, and this in turn has led to the judgment that existence itself is no longer desirable.

With the death of tragedy a new way of coping with the suffering from transience is, therefore, needed, one capable of addressing suffering from transience as the Hellenistic

²³² Sigmund Freud's account of melancholia describes precisely the fixation on a lost object that blocks renewal and closes the future. According to Freud, mourning gradually detaches the subject from a lost object, whereas melancholia arises when detachment proves impossible. The lost object is taken into the ego, producing a self-reproachful fixation that blocks renewal (Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer Und Melancholie', in *Gesamelte Werke: Werke Aus Den Jahren 1913-1917* (Imago, 1991). For the Hellenistic Greeks, tragedy as a living art form is lost, yet their reverence for Euripides prevents them from releasing it. Nietzsche himself calls the New Comedy a 'monument' to tragedy's death-struggle. Just as the melancholic cannot redirect their libidinal energy to new objects, the epigones cannot direct their cultural energy toward new creation. This explains why Nietzsche regards the condition of belatedness as decline. Freudian melancholia closes off the future. By remaining transfixed by Euripides, they render themselves incapable of carrying tragedy forward into something authentic and new. For Nietzsche, the epigones of the New Comedy therefore seem to live time as melancholic attachment. Each attempt to honour Euripides confirms that the past is gone and the future closed, so that fixation becomes the very mode in which they endure historical time.

Greeks actually experience it, which includes the suffering that comes from the loss of tragedy itself. But the Hellenistic Greeks are epigones. They cannot create such a form. Oriented toward Euripides as their predecessor and measure, all three options that the history has made available are simultaneously closed off to them. They cannot transfigure suffering from transience because the mythological horizon required for that has been destroyed by Euripides himself. They cannot turn to Socratic reasoning because Euripides has already exposed its fragility when extended to ordinary life, and it is the Euripidean mode of reasoning, instrumental, self-interested, and passion-driven, that they have inherited. And they cannot fall back on Euripidean containment itself because the divine frame that held the tragedy of reason in suspension, the prologue and the *deus ex machina*, no longer functions. The gods have withdrawn, and with them the last remnant of the mythological that Euripides still invoked. What they produce instead, in New Comedy, is an art that sidesteps the problem entirely by removing suffering from transience from its subject matter. Nietzsche observes that

the New Comedy, for which Euripides, in a sense, had become the chorus-master, could now address itself to an enlightened and well-prepared mass, except that on this occasion it was the chorus of spectators who had to be trained. As soon as they were practised in singing in the Euripidean mode, a type of play resembling a game of chess came into existence, the New Comedy, where slyness and cunning are always triumphant' (BT 11, 56).

What strikes me in the first sentence is the suggestion of a line of inheritance. Euripides, as 'chorus-master', has, in effect, schooled the Hellenistic Greeks in a particular mode of reasoning, one characterized by cunning, sophistication, dialectical agility, and strategic self-interest. The poets of New Comedy reason as Euripides' characters reason, and their audiences have been trained to recognize and appreciate that mode of reasoning in the drama they encounter. In this respect, the Euripidean world can be said to belong to them.

Yet what is not passed down is the container that once rendered the consequences of such reasoning bearable. With the end of tragedy, the framing structure of prologue and *deus ex machina*, structures that bracketed suffering from transience with divine authority, has disappeared. The gods have, as it were, withdrawn from the stage of history, and the poets of New Comedy cannot even appeal to the diminished sacred that Euripides still invoked. What remains is the mode of reasoning, but not the means of containing what that reasoning brings forth. This absence is significant, not simply because it leaves the Euripidean experience of transience uncontained, but because of what it implies for their relation to the loss of tragedy itself.

In my reading of Nietzsche, tragedy was the means by which suffering from transience became bearable. To inherit the Euripidean mode of reasoning without its container is, then, to be left with a form of life that is always at risk of recalling what has been lost, and of one's own inability to do what tragedy once accomplished. If New Comedy were to stage suffering from transience as Euripides did, it would inevitably invite comparison with tragedy. Each performance would remind its audience that tragedy was the form capable of addressing such suffering, and that what they are witnessing is not. The wound of belatedness would be reopened again and again, confirming not only the loss of tragedy but also the inadequacy of what remains to the suffering it once contained. In this way, the staging of suffering from transience would reproduce the very condition New Comedy seeks to avoid. It would become a monument to its own insufficiency.

It seems to me that the avoidance of suffering from transience within the artwork is the very means by which New Comedy avoids the suffering that comes from the loss of tragedy itself. By constructing a world in which suffering from transience does not arise, in which the Euripidean mode of reasoning leads not to pathos 'comfortable pleasure' (BT 11, 57), and in which losses are always reversible, New Comedy sidesteps the comparison with tragedy

altogether. It does not remind its audience of what tragedy could do and they cannot. Instead, it offers something different, something that operates in a register where the question of how to cope with irreparable loss never even comes into view. In the ‘chess game’ of New Comedy, slyness and cunning are always triumphant’ (BT 11, 56). Where the logic of Euripides led to ruin, here it leads to success, but only because the board has been simplified to allow for this outcome. Slyness and cunning triumph not because the Hellenistic Greeks have become more adept reasoners than Euripides’ characters, but because the situations are never permitted to become grave enough to produce the consequences that Euripides explored. As David Konstan observes,

[i]f we take the basic engine of the plot [...to be] the drive to reaffirm the structure of the family or *oikos*, restoring lost or kidnapped children to their proper parents, joining citizen households through legitimate wedlock and demarcating such unions clearly from casual affairs with courtesans or other interlopers, then the parallels with a tragedy such as Euripides’ *Ion* stand out clearly²³³.

The situations, then, recall Euripides, but the stakes are, from the beginning, designed to be reversible. Where Euripides presents the slow accumulation of loss as an inescapable feature of human life, New Comedy imagines a world in which chance and wit are always at hand to prevent any loss from becoming irreparable.

Menander’s *The Shield*²³⁴ offers as a particularly clear instance of this logic. The play begins with the discovery of a distinctive shield, which leads the characters to believe that Kleostratos has been killed in war. His family enters into mourning, and his uncle Daos at once begins to pursue the inheritance by seeking to marry Kleostratos’ sister. The structure here is recognisably that of tragedy. We find solemn mourning, the apparent finality of death, and the

²³³ Cf. David Konstan, ‘Defining the Genre’, in *Cambridge Companion to Greek Comedy*, ed. Martin Revermann (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 40.

²³⁴ Menander, *The Shield*, trans. Norma Miller (Penguin Books, 1987), 123–41.

surfacing of destructive motives within the family. At this point, it is difficult not to be reminded of Euripides' *Alcestis*, where the household is thrown into mourning at Alcestis' self-sacrifice, and Heracles intervenes to restore her from death. The parallel seems to me intentional. New Comedy is, I think, fully aware of what it inherits, and of how it chooses to handle that inheritance.

But where Euripides requires divine or heroic intervention to confront and overturn death itself, Menander's reversal comes through cunning alone. The report of death is revealed to be mistaken. The shield belonged not to Kleostratos but to a companion. This accident of misrecognition is an arbitrary turn that could have sealed the tragic course but instead opens the way to comic restoration. A clever slave or family friend exploits the confusion to foil the uncle's plot, using deception to protect the sister and secure a better match. What begins in grief and apparent disaster turns toward reconciliation and marriage. The seriousness of death and inheritance collapses into a comic misunderstanding, and what threatened to fracture the family becomes the occasion for laughter.

What *The Shield* shows, I think, is precisely the nesting structure at work. The play sets up the conditions for suffering from transience, genuine grief, the threat of irreversible loss, the eruption of destructive self-interest, and then dissolves them before they can accumulate into deeper suffering. The tragic weight is invoked and then dispersed. Death is present but not final. Loss is threatened but not realised. And because the suffering from transience never materialises, the comparison with tragedy never becomes devastating. The audience is not reminded of what tragedy could do with such material, because the material never reaches the point at which tragedy's resources would be needed. The wound of belatedness is kept closed, not by healing it, but by ensuring that nothing in the drama reopens it.

It seems to me that what is at stake in the avoidance of suffering from transience is not simply the emergence of a new dramatic form, but a shift in the very experience of time. In the

older tragedies, time appears as the medium through which fate is revealed, always moving in one direction, toward the disclosure of a ruin that is, in some sense, already accomplished. With Euripides, time becomes the medium of consequence. What reason sets in motion unfolds slowly and inexorably, and cannot be recalled. The Hellenistic world, however, offers yet another experience of time, one that is structured as a series of opportune moments. Each moment presents the possibility of gain, and each is released without grief, since another will soon arrive. In such a world, there is no real commitment, no accumulation, no irreversible loss, for nothing is held onto long enough to be taken away by time in any serious sense.

Nietzsche offers a suggestive account of this reorientation:

[t]he words of the famous epitaph, ‘frivolous and capricious in old age [*als Greis leichtsinnig und grillig*]’, also apply to the Hellenic world in its dotage. The present moment [*Augenblick*], wit [*Witz*], frivolity [*Leichtsinn*], caprice [*Laune*], are its supreme deities; the fifth estate, that of the slaves, now comes to power, at least as far as principles and convictions are concerned. If one can still speak of ‘Greek serenity’, then only as the cheerfulness of the slave who has nothing difficult to answer for [*der nichts Schweres zu verantworten*], nothing great to strive for, nothing past or future to value more highly than what is present [*das Gegenwärtige*] (BT 11, 56; translation modified).

The figure who most fully embodies this temporal experience, is the slave, and more specifically the ‘cunning domestic slave’ (BT 11, 55). I am inclined to see this figure as the outcome of a process that began with the democratisation of reason in Euripidean drama. The slave reasons, negotiates, and manages affairs with a practical intelligence that is recognisably descended from the Euripidean tradition. Yet the context in which he operates is one where the stakes are deliberately limited, and the reasoning he deploys is of a different order from the reasoning that drove Euripides’ heroes to ruin. The slave’s wit is the same sophisticated, self-

interested reason, but now detached from any larger commitment to some weighty end. It is not in the service of a plan that can fail or a goal that can be lost. Rather, it is directed toward the opportune moment, seized and then released, leaving no accumulation behind. Wit, then, is not a superior form of reasoning to that possessed by Euripides' heroes. It is reasoning that has relinquished the ambition that made Euripidean reasoning so destructive (the ambition to secure some personal) and has redirected itself entirely toward what can be gained now, in the instant, without attachment to what comes next. In this way, wit takes the place of the engine of transience in Euripidean tragedy. Where Euripidean reasoning generated pathos, wit committed to nothing generates only the light pleasure of the moment seized.

It is perhaps not surprising that Nietzsche identifies the present moment as one of the supreme deities of the Hellenistic world. In Greek myth, *Kairos*, the opportune moment, is depicted with a lock of hair on his forehead, to be grasped only as he passes²³⁵. The image is instructive. The opportune moment does not arise as the necessary outcome of preceding events. It appears, sudden and unanticipated, disconnected from any prior sequence that might demand reckoning. To seize that moment is to act without the burden of antecedent responsibility. Nor is that moment oriented toward the future. To strive toward ethical development is to be directed, to have a horizon that shapes the present. A life pursuing the opportune moment, by contrast, is defined by the absence of such orientation. It is opportune precisely because it is unforeseen, a possibility that presents itself and then vanishes, serving no larger purpose and pointing toward no further goal. Yet I do not think this renders the

²³⁵ 'Running swiftly, balancing on the razor's edge, bald but with a lock of hair on his forehead, he wears no clothes; if you grasp him from the front, you might be able to hold him, but once he has moved on not even Jupiter [Zeus] himself can pull him back: this is a symbol of Tempus (Opportunity) [*Kairos*], the brief moment in which things are possible (Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, trans. Laura Gibbs (Oxford University Press, 2002), Fable 536; Oscar Cullmann, *Christus Und Zeit* (EVZ-Verlag, 1962); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford University Press, 2005); However, Michael Theunissen suggests that this understanding of *kairos* predates Christianity, finding its origins in Pindar's poetry, where *kairos* transcends *chronos* and points towards an *aion* (eternal time), see Michael Theunissen, *Pindar: Menschenlos Und Wende Der Zeit*). For a further interesting discussion of *kairos* and *chronos* in Hellenistic Greek antiquity, see François Hartog, *Chronos: L'Occident Aux Prises Avec Le Temps* (Gallimard, 2020).

moment empty. The experience of the opportune moment is one of plenitude, a sense that everything can be decided in the present, that a well-timed action can secure a favourable outcome. For the slave who seizes the opportune moment, the present is not impoverished by the absence of depth, but is experienced as a moment in which the possibility of resolution is fully available. The satisfaction that results is real, if limited, a ‘cowardly contentment with comfortable pleasure’ (BT 11, 57)²³⁶.

The triad of wit, caprice, and frivolity that Nietzsche names as the supreme deities of the Hellenistic world can be taken as a way of describing the structure of this temporal experience. The Aesopic image of *Kairos* specifies that once he has passed, not even Zeus himself can pull him back. The moment is irreversible if missed. Wit is, in this context, the human disposition that matches itself to this irreversibility. It is the quickness of mind that seizes the opportune moment before it slips away forever. It is not the slow, deliberate reasoning of the Socratic dialectician, who can always return to the argument and revise it. Wit must act now, in the instant, or lose the chance entirely. In this sense, wit is the human faculty that the world of *Kairos* demands and rewards, that is, the capacity to read the situation fast enough to act before the lock of hair has passed.

Caprice, then, might be said to name the structure of time in the world of New Comedy. In older tragedy, decisive turns are governed by mythic necessity, by fate itself. In Euripides, events unfold according to the accumulation of arguments, each move following from the last with a kind of relentless consequence. But in New Comedy, the decisive turns are not governed by either cosmic necessity or logic. Instead, they arise from arbitrary accidents, mistaken identities, chance encounters, or tokens discovered at just the right moment. Caprice marks this

²³⁶ I am tempted to link this view to what Søren Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic view of life, which seeks fleeting pleasures without committing to deeper meaning. Just as Kierkegaard sees the aesthetic life as ultimately shallow and self-defeating, ending in despair, Nietzsche’s depiction of the Hellenistic Greek embrace of the pleasurable ‘present moment’ suggests a similar outcome. See Part I of Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987).

structural reliance on the contingent, the whimsical, the opportune. It is the recognition that the chess board shifts not because it must, nor because it should, but because of the unpredictable. Wit and caprice belong together as two aspects of the same temporal experience. Caprice provides the unexpected turn, and wit is the human capacity to exploit it before it disappears. In this way, the present becomes a time full of opportunity but curiously weightless, a moment in which everything can be decided and won, but only by the one who is quick enough to seize what appears and then vanishes.

Frivolity, or light-mindedness, is the affective tone that emerges when wit and caprice are brought into alignment. In New Comedy the destructive is held at bay, not because it is absent, but because wit is able to exploit the opportune moment. Obstacles are rendered temporary and reversible. problems are treated lightly, and the recognition scene that in tragedy would have revealed a terrible truth now produces laughter and relief. Frivolity is not a lack of feeling, but the feeling that fits a world from which the weight of past and future has been lifted by the pursuit of the opportune moment. It is, perhaps, the mood of someone who has won a chess game with a perfectly timed move and feels the pleasure of the moment, without concern for what the victory might lead to. These three terms together (caprice, wit, and frivolity) can be taken as describing the Hellenistic experience of time. Caprice marks a structure of time without (cosmic or logical) necessity, wit is the human capacity that responds to that structure, and frivolity is the mood that arises when the two are in harmony. What required divine intervention in Euripides, or was imposed by fate in older tragedy, is here decided by mental quickness and contingency, producing the light-minded pleasure of a present moment seized before it is lost.

Nietzsche's reading of Hellenistic cheerfulness is, however, not, one of simple endorsement. He draws on Goethe's epitaph, which traces a life from reserved boyhood, through arrogant youth and willing manhood, to a final stage marked by frivolity and caprice:

‘As a boy, reserved and defiant, as a youth arrogant and stubborn, as a man willing to do deeds, frivolous and capricious in old age!’²³⁷. The direction of this movement is important, for it can be read as a decline, a passage from seriousness to lightness, and it is the loss of the future that defines old age here. There is no longer a life to build, no horizon of striving, and the seriousness that once animated earlier stages no longer finds its object. Frivolity and caprice are not chosen, but are the result of a future that has disappeared. The present is all that remains, and it is this condition that Nietzsche attributes to Hellenistic Greek culture. This is not, in my view, a matter of age, but of the historical situation. The passage from seriousness to frivolity is, I think, not simply a matter of cultural exhaustion. It follows from the structure of belatedness itself. A culture fixated on a lost past, on the monument of what tragedy once was and can no longer be, cannot generate a genuine future. The fixation consumes the creative energy that a future would require. The past sets the standard, the present falls short, and the future horizon of contracts to nothing. With no future to build toward, no creative inheritance to carry forward into something authentically new, the present moment is all that remains. What presents itself as cheerful lightness is, on Nietzsche’s reading, a refusal to acknowledge the suffering of belatedness, a way of side-stepping decadence in the guise of youthful play.

Nietzsche characterises the Hellenistic Greek stance as a ‘flight from all that was grave and frightening’ (BT 11, 57). In my view, this flight is directed not only away from a melancholic sense of historical belatedness, but also from the full implications of that belatedness. What seems to be at stake is the recognition that with the loss of tragedy comes the loss of any means by which suffering from transience might be made bearable, and that nothing available can restore what has been lost. The response is to surround life with what Nietzsche calls a ‘pink glow of cheerfulness’ (BT 11, 57). I do not take Nietzsche to mean that

²³⁷ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Goethes Werke: Herausgegeben Im Auftrage Der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen I. Abtheilung: Goethes Literarische Werke: 2. Band*, ed. Gustav von Loeper (Böhlau Verlag, 1888), 289.

the Hellenistic Greeks have found a genuine solution to this predicament. Rather, it seems to me that they have constructed their artistic world in such a way that the full force of their condition need not come into view. The ‘pink glow’ does not illuminate but rather tints, colouring the surface of existence so that what lies beneath appears, if at all, only in a lighter register. New Comedy, on this reading, is the artistic form of such tinting.

Nietzsche identifies what he takes to be at stake in this arrangement when he remarks that ‘in the midst of all this the Hellene still sat with unstilled heart, until he learned how to mask this fever with Greek cheerfulness and Greek frivolity’ (BT 23, 110). The ‘fever’ here is not simply a metaphor for psychological malaise, but rather signals a condition in which something essential is lacking. It is not merely the absence of tragedy as an art form that concerns the Hellenistic Greeks, but the absence of a way to confront suffering that arises from the experience of transience, a loss that leaves behind a certain emptiness. In the absence of such resources, the heart, as Nietzsche puts it, remains unstilled, unable to find repose in a world that no longer offers the means by which suffering might be rendered bearable. Nietzsche appears to suggest that the Hellenistic Greeks do not so much resolve this condition as place a kind of cheerful mask between themselves and their own unrest, such that the fever does not become fully manifest and remains hidden from view. When Nietzsche turns to the New Comedy, he observes that ‘there are only masks with a *single* expression: frivolous old people, cheated pimps, cunning slaves, all tirelessly repeated’ (BT 17, 84)²³⁸. The uniformity of the mask, in this reading, serves to exclude other possibilities from consideration. It is in this sense, I take it, that ‘laughter was the soul of the New Comedy’ (KGW I.5). Laughter, in this context,

²³⁸ ‘The notion of a ‘stock character’ or ‘character type’ may combine up to four related elements: a restricted set of personality traits; a consistent social role (and/or profession); a restricted role within the fiction (plot function); and a name (or restricted set of names). These personal, social and fictional characteristics may be, and in the case of Greek comedy were, specifically signalled by visual cues: mask, above all, costume and props’ (Ian Ruffel, ‘Character Types’, 148).

is not a release for suppressed tension in the Freudian sense²³⁹, but the means by which the suffering of the unstilled heart is continually avoided, never directly confronted, never brought into view.

There are, however, moments when this mechanism fails. Philemon's joke seems to me to be one such moment. It is not that a suppressed recognition breaks through, but rather that the question New Comedy was constructed never to raise suddenly surfaces nonetheless. The longing for Euripides, the sense that life without what tragedy once made possible is scarcely worth living, finds expression not in a comic situation but in a dark joke that the comic frame cannot contain. Philemon would rather die than continue in a world from which what once made existence bearable has been irretrievably taken. The mask slips, and what becomes visible is the feverish heart, the suffering that the form of New Comedy was meant to keep from ever becoming a question.

²³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, Gesammelte Werke / Sigm. Freud 6 (S. Fischer, 1987). Henri Bergson analysis of laughter offers an alternative account to the Freudian view endorsed here. According to Bergson laughter is often elicited when something mechanical appears in what should be living and spontaneous, leading to the comic effect. This notion resonates with Nietzsche's portrayal of the characters in the New Comedy as mere masks who are stripped of mythic depth and reduced to mechanical, predictable figures (BT 17, 84). The repetitive, stereotyped nature of these characters echoes Bergson's idea that we laugh at the rigidity that results when individuals act as though they are merely following a script, devoid of the adaptability and vitality characteristic of truly living beings. Bergson also emphasizes that repetition is inherently comic, particularly when individuals repeatedly engage in the same action without variation. This perspective parallels Nietzsche's description of the New Comedy, in which stereotypical figures are 'tirelessly repeated'. Such repetition reveals a loss of originality and vitality, which, in Nietzsche's view would mean a movement away from the heroic engagement with existence that once characterized Greek tragedy. Bergson's emphasis on the comic potential of mechanical repetition finds a clear analogue in Nietzsche's lament over the decline of Greek culture, where once-rich characterizations devolve into predictable, one-dimensional roles. Despite these similarities, a crucial difference emerges between Bergson's and Nietzsche's interpretations of the comic. For Bergson, laughter serves a potential corrective function, encouraging a return to more dynamic, responsive behaviours by mocking the mechanized and rigid. However, Nietzsche reads the laughter of the New Comedy as symptomatic of cultural decay and not as a prompt for revitalization, but as a sign of resignation and withdrawal from a deeper mythic engagement with existence. In this way, while Bergson sees laughter as capable of reinvigorating the human spirit, Nietzsche views it as emblematic of a broader cultural stagnation, a retreat from the tragic, mythic heroism of the past into superficial cleverness and mechanical avoidance facing up to the suffering from time. See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Wildside Press, 2008).

Conclusion

This chapter has traced a single arc of decline across two stations, from Euripides to the Hellenistic Greeks, following the fate of suffering from transience as the resources available for bearing it are progressively withdrawn. Euripides inherits the Socratic conviction that reason can correct existence and brings it onto the stage, but in doing so, exposes its fragility when extended to ordinary people reasoning under passion and self-interest. The result is not a drama of correction but a tragedy of reason, in which time becomes the medium of consequence, the slow and inexorable unfolding of what reason itself has set in motion and cannot stop. This new experience of transience is still barely contained by the formal devices of prologue and *deus ex machina*, which bracket the suffering with divine authority and prevent the Silenic verdict from becoming the final word. But with the death of tragedy, even this minimal containment is lost.

The Hellenistic Greeks suffer in a double sense, from the loss of tragedy as the form of life that once made transient existence endurable, and from the inability to make sense of that loss itself. A new way of coping with transience is needed. What the Hellenistic Greeks create is a form of art that, rather than confronting the problem of suffering bound up with transience, chooses instead to set it aside, largely by excluding such suffering from its concerns. Situations are trivialised before they can accumulate tragic weight, losses are always reversible, and the present moment, seized by wit and coloured by frivolity, becomes the only available horizon. This evasion is doubly effective. It screens the suffering from transience the Hellenistic Greeks actually feel, and it also screens their own comparative inadequacy as artists, since if suffering from transience is never thematised, the question of whether their art is adequate to it never arises. New Comedy does not feel diminished beside older tragedy because it is playing a different game altogether, one in which the standard by which tragedy excelled simply does not apply. Thus, The Hellenistic Greeks do not look at their condition directly, not because

they are deceiving themselves about what they feel, but because they have constructed a form of life in which the question of their suffering from transience need never be raised.

I now want to argue that these two stations together help us see a deepening relationship to what I have been calling temporal nihilism. It is not simply loss or suffering that brings about this condition, but rather the recognition that transience is woven into the fabric of human existence itself. To be human, on this view, is unavoidably to suffer from transience, and the goods of life are, from the outset, subject to inevitable and irreversible loss. This does not merely make existence difficult. At its limit, it can render it undesirable. What I am tracing here is a history in which that recognition comes ever closer, while the means for resisting or containing it become increasingly fragile.

For the pre-Socratic Greeks, especially as we encounter them in Homer and tragedy, I find that the recognition of transience is not absent, but rather absorbed into the texture of their world. Suffering from transience is not denied but acknowledged as part of what it is to be human in a world ruled by fate. Yet epic and tragedy seem to offer a way of making this recognition bearable, by transfiguring it through artistic means. Temporal nihilism, if it is present, is averted by aesthetic means. Socrates, by contrast, takes a different approach, refusing the premise that suffering from transience is inescapable. If, as he suggests, the examined life can correct for this suffering, then the nihilist conclusion does not follow. This is, I think, a real answer, and for the philosopher perhaps a compelling one, but it rests on conditions that are not available to most people.

With Euripides, I think we see temporal nihilism coming closer to the surface than before. What is new is the way transience is staged. The self becomes ensnared in the consequences of its own reasoning, losing happiness and ethical standing with little possibility of escape. Here, the condition is not a matter of episodic misfortune, but seems to belong to the very structure of ordinary reasoning beings in a world where reason, unaccompanied by

Socratic virtue, brings about its own irreversible losses. Yet even here, the formal devices of the drama hold the nihilist conclusion at bay. The prologue and the intervention of the gods ensure that the audience remains at a safe distance, reassured that divine resolution will contain the suffering before it becomes final. Temporal nihilism threatens from the stage, but does not quite cross over into the world of the audience. It is present in the structure, but deferred by the form.

In the Hellenistic period, it seems to me that the earlier forms of coping are no longer available. Euripides' containing devices have disappeared, the mythic framework has faded, and the Socratic solution is out of reach for most. The constitutive nature of suffering from transience can no longer be held off by aesthetic or philosophical means. Temporal nihilism is, therefore, no longer merely a threat held at bay. Yet the Hellenistic Greeks do not, as far as I can see, fully embrace the nihilist conclusion. This is not because they have discovered a solution, but rather because they have found ways of avoiding a direct confrontation with what their situation demands they acknowledge. Suffering from transience is not averted but sidestepped, kept below the level of recognition by the ongoing pursuit of simple, momentary pleasures, work of laughter, wit, and frivolity. This strikes me as the most precarious relation to temporal nihilism in the history Nietzsche describes because suffering from transience is avoided without being resolved by a form of life in which the question of their suffering from transience need never be raised. Temporal nihilism does not erupt in antiquity, but in the Hellenistic Greek world it comes to the very edge, where only this ongoing work of avoidance prevents its emergence.

6.

Modernity: Progress, Faust, and the Flight from Suffering from Transience

Nietzsche is generally understood to argue that Socrates is the decisive influence on Western history up to his own modern times. He writes that Socrates' influence has spread out across all posterity to this very day, and indeed into the whole future, like a shadow growing ever longer in the evening sun' (BT 15, 71). It is tempting to read this as a simple story of expansion, as if Socratism, understood as the conviction that existence can be rationally understood and corrected through knowledge (BT 13, 66), has only grown in its reach, culminating in the culture of modernity. But Nietzsche's own language resists such straightforward continuity. However, at a certain point, this expansion reaches its limit. Nietzsche describes a moment in which the 'catastrophe slumbering in the womb of theoretical culture is gradually beginning to frighten modern man; in other words, he is beginning to suspect the consequences of his own existence' (BT 18, 87). Here, another figure enters, that of Goethe's Faust, whom Nietzsche

calls ‘the modern man of culture’ (BT 18, 86). I want to ask what it means for these two figures, Socrates and Faust, to stand together at the threshold of modernity. Is Faust simply the heir who carries the Socratic impulse to its logical conclusion, or does he represent something more complicated? I will argue that Faust is not the overcoming of Socratism but its dialectical consequence. Faust is the figure in whom the modern experience of time as progress is reversed into a new form of suffering from transience.

The secondary literature on Nietzsche’s critique of modernity has largely read the relationship between Socrates and modernity as one of direct, continuous inheritance. The standard view, represented by Raymond Geuss, holds that:

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. This part of his view is not worked out in any great detail, but Nietzsche clearly holds that it is appropriate to call ‘modern’ nineteenth-century culture ‘Socratic’²⁴⁰.

It is not difficult to find textual support for this interpretation. Nietzsche himself, at several points, refers to modernity as a ‘Socratic culture’ (BT 18, 86, 88; 19, 89, 94), and he remarks, for instance, that our ‘whole modern world is caught in the net of Alexandrian culture and the highest ideal it knows is theoretical man, equipped with the highest powers of understanding

²⁴⁰ Raymond Geuss, ‘Nietzsche: The Birth of Tragedy’, in *Introduction to Nietzsche*, ed. Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 53, see also 48; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xvi–xvii; see further John Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 132–37; Günter Figal, *Nietzsche: Eine Philosophische Einführung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), 155–56; Douglas Burnham and Martin Jesinghausen, *Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy* (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), 102, 104; Paul Raimond Daniels, *Nietzsche and The Birth of Tragedy* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 132; Espen Hammer, *Philosophy and Temporality from Kant to Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 128–31; Wolf Zachriat, ‘Nietzsches Frühe Fortschrittskritik’, in *Der Tod Gottes Und Die Wissenschaft*, ed. Carlo Gentili and Cathrin Nielsen (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 245–66. For a monograph treatment of Nietzsche’s critique of progress in *the Birth* and the second *Untimely Meditation*, see Wolf Gorch Zachriat, *Ambivalenz Des Fortschritts Friedrich Nietzsches Kulturkritik* (Berlin: Akademie, 2001). However, Zachriat focus the Socratic-scientific dimension overlooks the complex inheritance and transformation that shapes Nietzsche’s account of modernity.

and working in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates' (BT 18, 86). The Socratic heritage, then, is not merely a matter of historical curiosity but is, as I agree with Geuss, a real and consequential inheritance. I argue that, at its core, what modernity receives from Socrates is a particular response to the suffering that arises from transience, namely, the conviction that reason and knowledge can correct our suffering from transience and, in so doing, justify existence. This inheritance brings with it a new experience of time, the experience of progress, the sense that the present is always provisional, a step toward a future in which the harms of transience will have been corrected or overcome.

But we should overlook a qualification that is present in Nietzsche's characterisation of modernity. Modernity, as Nietzsche presents it, is not simply Socratic. He insists that our modern world is caught in the net not only of Socratic culture but of what he calls 'Alexandrian culture' (BT 18, 86), and elsewhere he refers to a 'Socratic-Alexandrian type of culture' (BT 20, 97), tracing its modern origins to 'the re-awakening of Alexandrian-Roman antiquity in the fifteenth century' (BT 23, 111). The Alexandrian element is not, in Nietzsche's view, a mere historical embellishment. Rather, Alexandrian culture, as I understand it, is the culture of the Hellenistic age, centred on Alexandria as the intellectual capital of the Hellenistic Greek world, and it represents not Socratism in its original, vigorous form, but Socratism in decline²⁴¹. Alexandrian culture is, in this sense, an aged and exhausted version of the original impulse. To call modernity Alexandrian, then, is not simply to add a historical nuance to the Socratic inheritance. It is to suggest that the Socratic response to suffering from transience has, in modernity, already begun to exhaust itself, that it persists on borrowed optimism rather than

²⁴¹ Alexandrian is an older reference to the Hellenistic era, highlighting that the city of Alexandria, under the reign of Ptolemaic royal family, has become the cultural centre of the Greek world, see G. Knaack, 'Alexandrinische Literatur', in *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie Der Classischen Altertumswissenschaften*, ed. Georg Wissowa, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlerscher Verlag, 1894), 1399–1407. Jacob Burckhardt also uses alexandrian to refer to Hellenistic Greek literature, see the chapters 'The Alexandrian narrative story' and 'Alexandrian comedy and farce'. Burckhardt emphasises the significance of Alexandria for the cultural life of the Hellenistic period, see 1017-1019; Jacob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kultur Geschichte*, vol. 2, 2 vols, Das Geschichtswerk (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 2007).

genuine philosophical vitality, and that the decadence Nietzsche diagnoses in modernity is internal to the progressive structure itself, not imposed from outside.

What seems to me to be overlooked in the standard reading is that this decadence marks a genuine break within the Socratic inheritance, rather than simply its continuation. Modernity, at its inception, is indeed Socratic, inheriting both the corrective paradigm and the progressive temporal experience that comes with it. Yet by Nietzsche's own time, as the Socratic-Alexandrian project exhausts itself and the corrective promise begins to falter, it becomes, I think, Faustian. The figure of Faust, for Nietzsche, marks the moment at which 'modern man is beginning to sense the limits of the Socratic lust for knowledge' (BT 18, 86). At this point, the progressive structure, having failed to deliver the transformation it promised, gives rise to a new and distinctively modern form of existence, one that retains the forward movement but lacks the corrective telos, that is restless but without a positive vision, that rejects the present moment without any corrected future to justify that rejection. Faust, on my reading of Nietzsche, is not the representative of a culture wholly distinct from the Alexandrian-Socratic one. Rather, he is the figure in whom that culture reveals its exhaustion, once the mask of Socratic optimism has slipped. What emerges is a new and more acute form of suffering from transience, a kind of temporal homelessness in which one can neither correct the present nor inhabit it, neither achieve the earthly harmony the progressive project promised nor find in the finite moment anything worth remaining for. This specifically temporal reading of the break between Socratic and Faustian modernity, and the new form of suffering from transience that it brings to light, is, as far as I can tell, largely absent from the secondary literature. It is this line of inquiry that I want to pursue in what follows.

I want to approach the argument in three stages. First, I ask how the progressive structure of theoretical man sets out to address the suffering that comes from transience, and what kind of temporal experience is generated in the process. To do this, I need to pay close

attention to what modernity takes over from Socrates and where it moves away from him. I think the points of departure are as important as the inheritances, if we are to understand what the progressive response to suffering from transience really amounts to, and what it demands of us. Next, I turn to Faust, and try to see what this progressive structure looks like when it is lived from within and pressed to its own limits, to the point where the Socratic-Alexandrian project begins to feel its own exhaustion and the promise of correction starts to falter. Finally, I step back and ask what all this means for a whole civilisation. I read two passages in which Nietzsche diagnoses modernity's decadence, and I find in them the cultural form of the same temporal structure that Faust enacts at the level of the individual.

Theoretical Man and the Experience of Historical Progress

So far, I have traced a sequence of responses to suffering from transience in Greek antiquity. I began with the mythic transfiguration characteristic of the Homeric and tragic Greeks, moving through the Socratic commitment to the examined life, and then to the fragility that this Socratic answer reveals when Euripides brings it onto the stage. The Hellenistic Greeks, I have argued, inherit that fragility, but without the resources that once contained it, and respond with a kind of evasive cheerfulness. I now want to turn to Nietzsche's discussion of modernity. Here, I take it, something essential is inherited from Socrates, but transformed into what may be the most ambitious response to suffering from transience that this history has produced. The pivot between these two moments is, for Nietzsche, 'image of the *dying Socrates*, of a man liberated from fear of death by reasons and knowledge, is the heraldic shield over the portals of science, reminding everyone of its purpose, which is to make existence appear comprehensible and thus justified' (BT 15, 73). I want to pause over several details in this passage.

The first detail is the image of the 'heraldic shield' over the portals of science. A heraldic shield, as I understand it, is not simply an inspiring example but a declaration of

identity and purpose, displayed at the entrance so that all who pass through are made aware of what they are entering. The ‘*dying Socrates*’ is thus not merely a model for scientists to admire (cf. 15, 72, 74; 18, 86)²⁴². He becomes, in Nietzsche’s account, the founding image of science itself, the figure who announces what science is for. What he announces is not, in the first instance, the accumulation of knowledge, but something existential, that is, liberation from the fear that suffering from transience, and above all death, would otherwise produce. The second detail is the word ‘portals’. Science, on this view, has portals, an entrance through which one passes into something. This suggests that what is at stake is not simply a set of beliefs about the world, but a way of life, a world one enters and comes to inhabit. The ‘*dying Socrates*’ stands at this entrance, not as a warning but as an invitation, showing what kind of person this way of life produces and what relation to existence it makes possible.

A third detail is the phrase ‘liberated from fear of death by reasons and knowledge’. Here, the plural suggests a process, a working through, rather than a single insight or doctrine. Socrates does not simply possess the thought that death is nothing to fear; rather, he has reasoned his way to that position through a life of inquiry. The liberation, then, is the fruit of a practice.

A fourth detail, and perhaps the most important, is the two-step movement at the end of the passage. Existence is made to ‘appear comprehensible’, and therefore ‘justified’. Here, comprehensibility is the means, justification the end, and therefore is doing significant argumentative work. Nietzsche’s claim, as I read it, is that if existence can be understood, then it is thereby justified, and perhaps even worth having. This stands in sharp contrast to the tragic Greek sensibility, for whom fate marks the limit of all knowledge (BT 3, 23), the point at which

²⁴² ‘Socrates deserves the dignity of this kind of leading position, one only needs to recognize in him the archetype of a form of existence unknown before him, the archetype of *theoretical man*’ (BT 15, 72); ‘Socrates is the archetype of the theoretical optimist’ (BT 15, 74); ‘Our whole modern world is caught in the net of Alexandrian culture, and the highest ideal it knows is *theoretical man*, equipped with the highest powers of understanding and working in the service of science, whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates’ (BT 18, 86).

the intelligible gives way to what cannot be illuminated. For Socrates, and for the science that inherits from him, there is in principle no such limit. What this seems to imply is that the ground of suffering from transience is not pain as such, but unintelligibility, that is, the sense that what happens to us exceeds our understanding and therefore appears arbitrary and senseless. Reason's answer is not to remove the suffering directly, but to remove its apparent senselessness, to show that what seemed like a brute and meaningless loss is part of an order that can be followed and rationally understood.

Taken together, I take the passage to make a single claim. Science inherits from Socrates the conviction that the proper response to suffering from transience, including death in its most extreme form, is not consolation or transfiguration, but comprehension. To understand existence is to justify it, and to justify it is to remove the existential ground of the fear and suffering that transience otherwise produces. The question this raises, and the question I want to pursue in what follows, is how exactly comprehension is supposed to achieve this, and what kind of experience of time it requires.

Nietzsche offers his most complete account of this in his discussion of the cheerfulness characteristic of theoretical man.

The noblest form of that other, Alexandrian type of 'Greek cheerfulness' is the cheerfulness of *theoretical man* which exhibits the same characteristics as I have just derived from the spirit of the un-Dionysiac: it fights against Dionysiac wisdom and art; it strives to dissolve myth; it puts in the place of metaphysical solace a form of earthly harmony, indeed its very own *deus ex machina*, namely the god of machines and smelting furnaces, i.e. the energies of the spirits of nature, understood and applied in the service of higher egotism; it believes in correcting the world through knowledge, in life led by science; and it is truly capable of confining the individual within the smallest circle of solvable tasks, in the midst

of which he cheerfully says to life: 'I will you: you are worth understanding' (BT 17, 85)

I want to begin by attending to what is being exchanged here. The 'Dionysiac wisdom' of tragic myth and art offers 'metaphysical solace', which acknowledges that some suffering cannot be repaired and offers a vantage point from which such suffering might nonetheless be endured, is set aside in favour of what Nietzsche here calls 'earthly harmony'. Harmony implies order, a kind of peace, a situation in which conflicting elements have been brought into alignment or resolved. Its introduction presupposes that the prior condition is one of disharmony, of disorder, and it is this diagnosis that earthly harmony is meant to address. This structure appears again in the another passage where Nietzsche refers to 'the belief, which first came to light in the person of Socrates, that the depths of nature can be fathomed and that knowledge can heal all ills' (BT 15, 82). To heal is to presuppose a prior sickness, and ills is a term that, in its breadth, covers whatever might afflict existence as such. Taken together, these passages indicate that '*theoretical man*' does not approach existence as something simply to be understood, but as something already marked as pathological, already diagnosed as suffering from a disorder that knowledge, properly applied, might resolve. The movement at issue is not merely from ignorance to understanding, but from illness to health, from disorder to order. On this view, suffering from transience is not a permanent and necessary feature of existence to be endured, as tragedy would have it, but rather a symptom of a condition that can be cured, and 'earthly harmony' is the name for the state that knowledge is supposed to bring about.

But this view can only be sustained if knowledge is conceived as something that can, in fact, produce a cure. This is where a second step becomes necessary. Nietzsche is explicit about the kind of knowledge at stake when he refers to 'the imperturbable belief that thought, as it follows the thread of causality, reaches down into the deepest abysses of being, and that it is capable, not simply of understanding existence, but even of correcting it' (BT 15, 73). The

thread of causality is what allows understanding to become corrective rather than remaining contemplative. To follow such a thread is to trace the genesis of a state of affairs, and in doing so, to identify the mechanism by which it might be changed, forestalled, or brought about differently. This is a mechanical and efficient conception of cause, one that is concerned with how things come to be, not with their purpose. It is precisely this mechanical aspect that grounds the confidence that to understand a cause is already to have discovered a lever for intervention. Once the cause of an ill is known in this sense, intervention is possible in principle, and the earlier diagnosis of disharmony can be met not merely with resignation but with the real prospect of a cure²⁴³. This is what allows ‘earthly harmony’ to function as a plausible replacement for metaphysical solace. Such harmony is supported by a particular and, within its own framework, credible account of how knowledge can be converted into power over suffering.

A third step is required if this causal knowledge is to be put to work in producing, in lived experience, the sense of justification that Nietzsche attributes to the ‘*dying Socrates*’. Nietzsche identifies the vocation that this demands: ‘to penetrate to the ground of things and to separate true knowledge from illusion and error was considered by Socratic man to be the noblest, indeed the only truly human vocation’ (BT 15, 74). The crucial activity here is separation. Before any particular ill can be addressed, existence as a whole must be sorted, divided into what counts as true knowledge and what is to be set aside as ‘illusion’ or ‘error’. Only what passes this test becomes eligible for the kind of causal understanding described above, and only what is so eligible can be corrected. This work of separation is what enables the condition Nietzsche describes in his account of theoretical man's ‘cheerfulness’, namely, the ability to confine “the individual within the smallest circle of solvable tasks, in the midst

²⁴³ In an interview, both, Daniel Kahneman and Yuval Noah Harari have agreed that death will soon be optional thanks to the progress in modern medicine (Daniel Kahneman and Yuval Noah Harari, ‘Death Is Optional’, 2015, Edge.org, https://www.edge.org/conversation/yuval_noah_harari-daniel_kahneman-death-is-optional [Accessed: 15/6/2025]).

of which he cheerfully says to life: ‘I will you: you are worth understanding’” (BT 17, 85). The ‘smallest circle’ is what remains after the prior act of sorting. By limiting attention to what has already been certified as true knowledge, ‘*theoretical man*’ ensures that the tasks he faces are, by definition, those that causal understanding can resolve. Justification is thus achieved, not through a single act of comprehension, but through the repeated, cumulative experience of local and genuine success. Existence is found ‘worth understanding’ because, through the prior act of separation, what is being understood and willed is already that which can be mastered by understanding.

There remains, however, a case that resists explanation by appeal to the ‘smallest circle of solvable tasks’. It is easy enough to see how the repeated experience of problems posed and problems solved might sustain a certain cheerfulness in the ordinary course of life. Yet death, on any straightforward account, does not present itself as a task that can be solved. It cannot be corrected, prevented, or set aside, and in this respect it seems to stand outside the circle altogether, as a remainder that the apparatus of separation was perhaps designed to treat as ‘illusion’ or ‘error’ rather than to face directly. What we encounter here is a secularised form of the old problem of theodicy, addressed now to reason rather than to God. It is not immediately clear why death does not simply undermine the ‘cheerfulness’ that ‘*theoretical man*’ has constructed for himself, or how a mode of justification grounded in the solving of what can be solved could yield, as the heraldic shield passage claims, calm and composure in the face of a limit that appears to admit of no solution. If reason is to meet this challenge, it must show that death itself will, in time, be brought within the circle of the solvable by the same cumulative power that solves other problems.

I take it that this is what Nietzsche has in view when he describes the requirements of theoretical man’s strategy. At this point, the ‘thread of causality’ is asked to bear its greatest weight. If, as Nietzsche claims, thought is imagined to be able to reach into the deepest levels

of being and is capable not only of understanding existence but of correcting it, then it seems that death cannot be left as an exception to this power without calling into question the claim that knowledge can ‘heal all ills’. On this view, death must be approached as an effect among others, with a cause that reason, by pressing further into the ground of being and making use of the forces it uncovers, might in principle identify and master. The hope here is not that the fear of death will simply disappear once it is properly understood, but rather that the cause of death itself will eventually be discovered and brought under the same kind of control that human beings have already achieved over inert matter²⁴⁴. In this way, the mortal might, in time, be placed beyond mortality, approaching something like Freud’s image of the prosthetic god²⁴⁵, one who has equipped himself with powers that nature did not originally provide. The result, then, is a kind of cheerfulness that arises from the anticipated liberation from death itself, which is no longer something to be feared.

This modern relation, I think, marks a significant departure from the strategy pursued by Socrates and those who initially followed him. To see why this departure matters for the question of transience, I want to return to what Socrates himself claimed to know, and just as importantly, to what he refused to claim.

Socrates, as I understand him, turns away from the natural philosophy of his predecessors²⁴⁶, and he is as quick to disclaim divine knowledge²⁴⁷ as he is to disclaim

²⁴⁴ It is tempting to think, as René Descartes once did in the *Discourse on the Method*, that medicine might one day so advance as to extend human life far beyond its present limits. He writes: ‘It is true that medicine as presently practised contains little of such notable benefit; but without wishing to disparage it, I am certain that there is no one, even among those whose profession it is, who will not admit that what is known about it is almost nothing compared to what remains to be known, and that it would be possible to be free of innumerable illnesses of both body and mind, and perhaps even the decline of old age, if we knew enough about their causes and the remedies with which nature has provided us’ (René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian MacLean (Oxford University Press, 2006), 51–52). More recently this view is echoed by Daniel Kahneman and Yuval Noah Harari, ‘Death Is Optional’.

²⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (Penguin, 2002), 29.

²⁴⁶ Socrates famously renounces natural philosophy, turning from the study of nature to a focus on human questions and ethical inquiry (Plato, ‘Phaedo’, in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 96a-d, 99d-e; Plato, ‘Apology’, in *Plato: Complete Works.*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 18b-c, 19b-c).

²⁴⁷ Plato, ‘Apology’, 20d-23b. Nietzsche acknowledges this Socratic humility (BT 13, 65).

knowledge of nature. Death, and Socrates seems follow Greek tragedy here, belongs to this domain that he sets aside. It is part of the order of nature, the cosmos, an unavoidable necessity that Socrates, as I understand him, neither seeks to illuminate nor to alter²⁴⁸. What he does claim, and what I want to emphasise, concerns only what lies within his own competence, that is, the soul's relation to this unavoidable fact. Socrates' achievement, as I see it, is not to show that death can be avoided or corrected, but rather that the soul need not fear it, that a life rightly examined can relate to its own death without dread, even though death itself remains what it always was, an inescapable necessity belonging to nature and not to the soul. This is why the 'dying Socrates' is freed from 'fear of death' (BT 15, 73), even though reason and knowledge have not touched death itself. What is corrected, if anything is, is not the cosmic fact but the soul's standing relation to it.

The figure of modern '*theoretical man*' inherits the basic structure of Socrates' achievement. They, too, hold the conviction that reason produces an understanding through which transient existence is, in some sense, corrected and thereby justified. But this inheritance is applied in a markedly different way. Where Socrates left the order of nature, including death, exactly as it was, theoretical man does not. The 'smallest circle of solvable tasks', applied here, no longer treats death as belonging to a different order altogether, as Socrates did. It treats death as one more puzzle, currently unsolved but not in principle unsolvable, awaiting only the further extension of the same power that has already solved so much else, the power 'to grasp and solve, with the help of the seemingly reliable *aeternae veritates*, all the puzzles of the universe' (BT 18, 87; emphasis mine). Knowing the laws of nature '*theoretical man*' 'can heal all ills' (BT 15, 82; emphasis mine)²⁴⁹. This is language that extends the possibility of

²⁴⁸ Socrates speculates about death in the *Apology* but claims to not have certain knowledge, in fact it does not seem to matter for knowing now in life that one is virtuous one need fear death irrespective of what one knows. (Plato, 'Apology', 40c–42a).

²⁴⁹ For the modern origins of the idea that causal knowledge enables the mastery of nature, see Francis Bacon and Descartes. In *Novum Organum*, Bacon writes: 'Human knowledge and human power come to the same thing, because ignorance of cause frustrates effect. For Nature is conquered only by obedience; and that which in thought

correction from the soul's relation to the cosmos into nature itself, and therefore into death as one among the phenomena nature contains. If, as Nietzsche describes reason 'follows the thread of causality' to reach 'into the deepest abysses of being' (BT 15, 73), then nothing in principle prevents this same thread of causality from reaching death's own mechanism, and what it finds there from being corrected as anything else might be. The phrase 'the thread of causality', which once named Socrates' inheritance, now names something different in its application. For Socrates, the relevant causality concerned the soul. He asked what makes a soul good or fearful, ordered or disordered, and these questions are a teleological matter of what the soul is for²⁵⁰. For 'theoretical man', the causality in question is mechanical, properly concerned with how death comes about as a process of nature (ageing, decay, organic failure) the kind of cause that, once identified, can be acted upon²⁵¹. The shift from an ethical to a

is a cause, is like a rule in practice' (Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 33). For Bacon, causal understanding confers power over nature—obedience to nature's laws becomes the very means of mastering it. Nietzsche's critique of theoretical man echoes and radicalises this logic: once the causal chain is grasped, existence itself becomes a candidate for correction. Later in *Novum Organum*, Bacon reinforces the image of human dominion: 'Just let man recover the right over nature which belongs to him by God's gift, and give it scope; right reason and sound religion will govern its use' (Francis Bacon, 101). Descartes articulates a similar vision in *Discourse on the Method*, claiming that by understanding 'the power and action of fire, water, air, stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that are around us as distinctly as we know the different trades of our craftsmen,' we could 'put them to all the uses for which they are suited and thus make ourselves as it were the masters and possessors of nature' (René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian MacLean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 51). Descartes explicitly ties this to the idea of scientific progress as a collective, cumulative effort: 'Thus, as the last would start from where their predecessors had left off, thereby combining the lives and labours of many, we might together make much greater progress than any one man could make on his own' (René Descartes, 52). The ultimate goal is the effortless enjoyment of nature's fruits and the promotion of human health (René Descartes, 51). For an insightful analysis of the modern conception of the domination of nature, see William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, New Edition (Montreal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 2023).

²⁵⁰ As I argued, the language of the 'thread of causality' suggests a mechanistic model of causality which differs from the older Greek sense of *aitia* that included ends and reasons as well as logical grounds (Gregory Vlastos, 'Reasons and Causes in the Phaedo', *The Philosophical Review* 78, no. 3 (1969): 291–325).

²⁵¹ This mechanistic conception of causality is emblematic of early modern science, most notably formulated in Newtonian physics, where natural processes are governed by mathematically predictable laws operating in a chain of cause and effect. In the *Principia Mathematica*, Newton describes nature as governed by universal laws of motion that allow the future to be deduced from the present, provided sufficient data (see Isaac Newton, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Andrew Janiak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). René Descartes likewise advances a mechanistic model of the universe, conceiving of matter as extended substance (*res extensa*) moved entirely by external causes (see René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian MacLean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); René Descartes, 'Principles of Philosophy', in *Descartes Key Philosophical Writings*, ed. Chávez-Arviso, trans. S. Haldane and S. Haldane (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997). Pierre-Simon Laplace would later push this logic to its deterministic extreme. Given perfect knowledge of all forces and positions in the universe, a sufficiently powerful intelligence (Laplace's Demon) could predict the entire future and retrodict the entire past (see Pierre-Simon Laplace, *Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, trans. Andrew I. Dale (New York: Springer, 1995).

biological understanding of death is not incidental to theoretical man's cheerful optimism but is constitutive of it. Only once death has been relocated from the soul's domain to nature's mechanical domain does it become, even in principle, the kind of thing reason might correct, rather than merely the kind of thing reason might teach the soul not to fear.

This divergence, I think, shows that the legacy of *'theoretical man'* cannot be understood as purely Socratic. It is worth noticing that, just before the passage on theoretical man's cheerfulness, Nietzsche describes what he takes to be an older, Euripidean response to suffering, and he does so in terms that closely resemble those he later applies to *'theoretical man'*. Nietzsche claims that people sought an 'earthly resolution to tragic dissonance', and that they found it in the form of 'a well-earned reward', one that grants the hero 'his freedom after he had been thoroughly flailed and was covered in wounds' (BT 17, 84). The task of dispensing this liberating reward, Nietzsche continues, fell to the *deus ex machina*, which has, in his view, replaced 'metaphysical solace' (BT 18, 84). I take the convergence between this 'earthly resolution' and the 'earthly harmony' that *'theoretical man'* substitutes for metaphysical solace (BT 17, 85) to be intentional. It points to a structure already familiar from Euripides, in which a god arrives from outside, once suffering has run its course, and distributes a reward that brings the drama to a close, but does so without addressing the devastation that remains. If theoretical man's so-called *'deus ex machina'*, the mastery of nature's energies, operates in the same fashion, then what is offered in the face of death is not a transformation of the soul's relation to its own finitude, as in the Socratic tradition, but rather an external, compensatory solution of the Euripidean kind. In this light, longevity, the postponement of decay, and perhaps, in the end, the abolition of death's necessity itself, all arrive as technological rewards bestowed from outside.

Taken together, this, I take it, is the radicalisation Nietzsche has in view when he writes that 'what lies hidden in the womb of this Socratic culture is an optimism which imagines itself

to be limitless' (BT 18, 86). The optimism is, in Socrates himself, only dormant, present as a possibility in his conviction that reason can correct the self's relation to its own existence, but remaining bounded there, confined to the soul, by Socrates' own honest renunciation of the cosmos. '[T]heoretical man' inherits the conviction but not the renunciation, and because modern reason takes itself to encompass the whole of nature rather than only the soul, the optimism imagines itself as limitless precisely because nothing now stands outside its claimed domain, not even death. This entire movement, the energies of nature understood and applied 'in the service of higher egotism' (BT 17, 85), is, as I see it, the form egotism takes when reason no longer accepts, as Socrates did, that some things belong to an order it must leave alone.

For Nietzsche, the movement away from Socrates is not a strengthening of his insight but its overextension where Nietzsche locates the decadence of modern optimism. The confined perspective of the 'smallest solvable tasks' mistakes its own confinement for comprehensiveness, taking itself to 'solve all the puzzles' and 'heal all ills', including the one ill Socrates himself never claimed to heal²⁵². What was, in Socrates, an honestly bounded and therefore stable achievement becomes, in modern '*theoretical man*', an unboundedly confident claim, resting on foundations that are, as Nietzsche himself qualifies, only 'seemingly reliable' (BT 18, 87). And this is an optimism that can only 'imagine' itself limitless (BT 18, 86). The optimism of '*theoretical man*' rests on a confusion it does not recognise in itself, mistaking Euripidean compensation for correction, and borrowing its confidence from precisely the dramatic device that, as I have shown earlier, Nietzsche reads not as an achievement but as a confession, the moment at which a Socratic culture admits, through the very mechanism it deploys, that it cannot accomplish from within what it promises to the world outside.

²⁵² Nietzsche detects an undertone of violence in this narrowing of perspective: 'Anyone who has experienced the intense pleasure of a Socratic insight, and felt it spread out in ever-widening circles as it attempted to encompass the entire world of appearances, will forever feel that there can be no sharper goad to life than the desire to complete the conquest and weave the net impenetrably close' (BT 15, 74-75).

What I take this structure of correction and compensation to require, and what I have so far left largely implicit, is its particular experience of time. Nietzsche, as I read him, captures something of this experience in his phrase, the ‘restlessly advancing spirit of science’ (BT 17, 82). This restlessness is not, I think, merely a psychological trait of the scientist, but arises from the structure itself, from the relation between the ‘smallest circle of solvable tasks’ and the horizon that encompasses everything. Each task is, in principle, manageable, and each solution is real, a genuine achievement within its bounds. Yet the horizon these tasks serve is total, all-encompassing as modern ‘*theoretical man*’ wants to solve all puzzles, heal all ills, know the ‘laws of the entire solar system’. The circle is replenished from outside. As soon as one puzzle is closed, another appears, as soon as one ill is healed, another discloses itself. Nietzsche gives this dynamic its most vivid image in the pyramid: ‘a common network of thought was stretched over the whole globe, with prospects of encompassing even the laws of the entire solar system; when one considers all this, along with the astonishingly high pyramid of knowledge we have at present’ (BT 15, 74). These are images of a collective, historically extended enterprise whose scope vastly exceeds any individual life²⁵³. The word ‘prospects’ suggests futurity, the globe is already encompassed but the solar system is still a prospect, meaning the horizon is always further than the current achievement, exactly the dynamic between the smallest circle and all puzzles²⁵⁴. The pyramid is astonishingly high already, a genuine achievement, but it is still a pyramid under construction rather than a completed edifice. The height already achieved is real and generates genuine confidence, which is why the cheerfulness of ‘*theoretical man*’ is not

²⁵³ See Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind* (1750). Turgot offers an early articulation of historical progress as a causal continuum: ‘And if one looks at the human species from its origins, it appears in the eyes of a philosopher as a great whole, which itself, like every individual, has its childhood and makes progress’ (Anne Roberts Jacques Turgot, ‘Philosophische Darstellung Des Allmählichen Fortschritte Des Menschlichen Geistes’, in *Über Die Fortschritte Des Menschlichen Geistes*, ed. Johannes Rohbeck and Liselotte Steinbrügge (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 140). This developmental view depends on a vision of history as governed by a ‘series of causes and effects that link the present state of the world with all the states that preceded it’ (Anne Roberts Jacques Turgot, 140), an early example of how modern progress comes to be imagined as a temporal chain of efficient causality.

²⁵⁴ Rahel Jaegi, *Fortschritt Und Regression* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2023), 22–24, sees the all-encompassing aspiration of progress as one of its defining principles.

empty, it is warranted by actual, cumulative success. Yet the pyramid is always unfinished, its apex always further than its current height, its prospects always exceeding its attainments. The individual who contributes to it finds herself in a peculiar temporal position. She is surrounded by evidence of genuine achievement, but cannot inhabit any moment of completion, since completion, if it comes at all, will come after her. The present is always intermediate, always a point along the way, never a point of arrival.

This, as I understand it, is the temporal experience that underlies, as Wolf Zachriat stresses, the belief of scientific Socratism ‘in overcoming an existence that is perceived as deficient; the expected cure promises to abolish permanently the moments that cause suffering’²⁵⁵. In this light, the experience of progress is an experience of history as the continuous abolishment of suffering from transience²⁵⁶. The present, within this temporal structure, is always the moment of deficiency. It is always the moment in which the expected cure has not yet arrived, always the moment in which the ills, including death, have not yet been healed. Existence is justified not as it is now, but as it will be, once the cure has been administered, once the puzzle has been solved, once the pyramid has risen higher. The justification of the present is therefore always deferred, borrowed from a future instalment of the same accumulating project that the present itself does not contain. This, I think, is why, according to Nietzsche, the scientific spirit cannot rest: ‘this restlessly advancing spirit of science’ (BT 17, 82). To rest would be to accept the present state as sufficient, but the entire structure of justification depends on the present not being sufficient, on there always being

²⁵⁵ Wolf Zachriat, ‘Nietzsches Frühe Fortschrittskritik’, 247. The Saint-Simonians expressed this optimistic view well: ‘Tomorrow we will begin a new life [...] and we will no longer need to mourn’ (Barthélemy Prosper Infantin, ‘Notices Historiques’, in *Œuvres de Saint-Simon et d’Enfantin*, vol. 6, ed. François Barthélemy Arlès Dufour (Aalen, 1963), 11; Andreas Reckwitz, *Verlust: ein Grundproblem der Moderne* (Suhrkamp, 2024), 166.

²⁵⁶ Hannah Arendt recognises in this healing activity the fundamental mark of the philosophy of history. In *The Human Condition* she writes: ‘Hegel’s gigantic enterprise to reconcile spirit with reality (*den Geist mit der Wirklichkeit zu versöhnen*), [is] a reconciliation that is the deepest concern of all modern theories of history’ (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 300-1; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen Über Die Geschichte Der Philosophie III*, vol. 20 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 454–57).

further ills to heal and further puzzles to solve²⁵⁷. A spirit that could rest would be one that had arrived, but arrival would collapse the very mechanism by which the present is justified.

It is this temporal form, I want to argue, that Nietzsche has in mind when he calls theoretical man's cheerfulness "the noblest form of that other, Alexandrian type of 'Greek cheerfulness'" (BT 17, 85). The comparison to Alexandrian or Hellenistic cheerfulness is not, in my view, merely incidental colour, but a diagnostic claim. As I have already argued, Hellenistic Greek cheerfulness was the form existence took when a culture had lost the capacity to address suffering from transience directly and instead arranged its world so that the question need never arise, insulating the present from loss by refusing commitment to anything long enough for loss to register. Theoretical man's cheerfulness appears, at first, to be the opposite because it is ambitious, forward-directed, confident that all obstacles and all suffering will be overcome. Yet at the level of the present moment's relation to transience, the two structures, I think, perform the same operation. Where the Hellenistic Greek present was insulated from loss by never being committed to anything that time could take away, the modern present is insulated from loss by never being asked to bear its own justification alone, always deferring that burden onto what has not yet arrived. Neither structure asks the present moment to stand on its own before transience. One empties the present of weight by refusing commitment, the other empties it by displacing the weight of justification onto a future that, by the logic of the restlessly advancing spirit, is always receding. This, I take it, is what licenses Nietzsche's

²⁵⁷ On modern time-consciousness as centred on the rejection of the present as it is and the desire for new beginnings, see Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 18–38; Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Polity, 2007), 1–22; see further Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität Der Neuzeit* (Suhrkamp, 2020); Aleida Assmann, *Ist Die Zeit Aus Den Fugen? Aufstieg Und Fall Des Zeitregimes Der Moderne* (Hanser, 2021). While these accounts emphasise modernity's self-understanding as a break with the past, Pippin also highlights Nietzsche's ambivalent position within this framework (see Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 78–113). This ambivalence is reflected in Nietzsche's use of the term 'Alexandrian culture', which, as I argue, carries both a retrospective inheritance and a radically modern inflection (Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 78–113).

‘Alexandrian’ label, and it is what makes the ‘noblest form’ of that cheerfulness still a form of it, still a way of not looking directly at the suffering from transience that the present contains.

We can now describe the modern decadence of this structure more clearly. On Nietzsche’s measure, a culture thrives when it can justify the present moment from within itself, bearing transience without either denying it or deferring the question of its bearableness onto something else. Tragedy, as I have argued, achieved this through transfiguration, finding the present moment, including its suffering from transience, worth having as it is. Socrates achieved it iteratively, the examined life complete and self-justifying within each day lived rightly, the dying man already, at the moment of dying, everything he needed to be. Modern ‘*theoretical man*’, however, cannot achieve this, because his entire structure of justification depends on a future state of comprehensive correction that has not yet arrived and, by the logic of restless advance, perhaps cannot arrive. The present is never justified on its own terms but only as an instalment, a contribution toward a completion that is always outstanding. To live within this structure is to inhabit a present that is, by its own internal logic, always deficient, always the moment before the cure, always the point on the way rather than the point of arrival. It is this permanent inability to inhabit the present, this structural deferral of the very justification the apparatus was constructed to secure, that, I think, Nietzsche identifies as decadence. Not weakness, not failure of effort or intelligence, but a form of life that, in its very ambition to correct existence as a whole, has lost the capacity to affirm the suffering present as it is, to bear the transient moment in its transience, to say, without deferral and without condition, I will you, you are worth having now.

The Failure of Progress, Faust’s Pact and the Rejection of the Present

According to Nietzsche, Goethe’s *Faust* shows particularly clear instance of what becomes of the progressive structure of ‘*theoretical man*’ when it is pressed to its own internal limit and

begins to register its inadequacy. This is not, I should stress, a matter of total collapse. Faust does not simply give up or lose the animating drive. What emerges, rather, is a partial, yet significant failure, one that brings to light the limits of the Socratic-progressive response to the suffering from transience, without yet providing a genuine alternative. In this way, Faust's predicament marks the emergence of a distinctively modern form of temporal existence. Nietzsche puts it as follows:

How incomprehensible the true Greek must find Faust, the modern man of culture, although he is inherently understandable — Faust, who storms unsatisfied through all the faculties, who has devoted himself to magic and the devil out of the drive for knowledge; we only have to compare him with Socrates to realize that modern man is beginning to sense the limits of the Socratic lust for knowledge, and that he longs to reach some shore and get off the vast, barren sea of knowledge (BT 18, 86).

The contrast Nietzsche draws here deserves careful attention. Faust is, for the 'true Greek'—by which I take Nietzsche to mean the pre-Socratic Greek who lived within a mythic temporality and could affirm existence as it is through transfiguration—simply unintelligible. The restless dissatisfaction that animates Faust would not be available from within a form of life that found the present moment itself worth having. Yet Nietzsche also insists that Faust is inherently understandable, and here the point is that Faust's dissatisfaction is not a matter of personal failing or lack of will but follows from the very structure of the progressive project. Faust is intelligible on his own terms, and it is those terms that are at issue. The 'sea' is not only 'vast', the knowledge is not just too extensive for any individual to master, but 'barren', in the sense that however far one travels, there is no nourishment, no refreshment, no 'shore' where the journey might feel complete. The longing for a 'shore' is the experience of this barrenness from within the progressive structure. The modern subject senses, however dimly

and without full comprehension, that the accumulation of knowledge is not yielding the transformation it was supposed to bring. Nietzsche's comparison with Socrates locates the problem not in Faust as an individual, but in the very structure of the Socratic desire for knowledge, at the point where the drive that was meant to correct and justify existence reveals its own incapacity to transform the individual.

Goethe's text, as I read it, makes the nature of this failure explicit. Faust has mastered Philosophy, Law, Medicine, and, as he says, 'unfortunately also theology', and yet finds himself 'as wise as before'²⁵⁸. He is Master, Doctor, leading students 'by the nose', but recognises that 'we can know nothing'²⁵⁹. The accumulation is real, the mastery genuine, but nothing essential has changed for Faust himself. This is not a matter of insufficient effort or intelligence but, I think, it is a structural failure, the kind of failure already named by the word 'barren'. Knowledge accumulates but does not transform, and this is significant for the progressive argument I have been tracing. Knowledge was supposed to be the means by which '*theoretical man*' could correct existence, heal its ills, solve its puzzles, and thereby justify transience by making it comprehensible and correctable. If knowledge does not transform the knower, the promise collapses. What cannot alter the soul of the knower cannot alter the knower's relation to suffering from transience, however much it may change external circumstances. Faust's question, '[t]he parchment, is that the holy well? From which a drink quenches thirst forever?' receives the answer 'You have not gained refreshment'²⁶⁰. The thirst that knowledge fails to quench is not for more information, but for transformation, for something that would alter Faust's relation to existence itself, quenching rather than feeding the drive. The word refreshment here is significant, pointing not to intellectual satisfaction but to existential renewal, something that restores at the level of the soul rather than merely

²⁵⁸ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, ed. Ulrich Gaier (Reclam, 1999), 354–59.

²⁵⁹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 360–64.

²⁶⁰ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 566–68.

informing the mind. The sea is 'barren' not for lack of depth or greatness, but because its vastness, however far explored, yield no such renewal.

Faust's initial response to this failure is to seek a more fundamental form of the same pursuit. What he desires is not simply further accumulation of disciplinary knowledge, but access to the ground of being itself, 'to realise what holds the world together at its core'²⁶¹. Faust continues to desire the ultimate cause and principle of existence, which, if grasped, might finally deliver the transformation that knowledge has failed to provide. This connects with what I have already suggested about theoretical man's confidence that thought, by following the 'thread of causality', can reach into the 'deepest abysses of being' and so is capable of correcting existence (BT 15, 73). Faust's attempt to grasp what holds the world together is an effort to follow that thread to its ultimate end, to the ground of existence where the final cause of all ills might be found and mastered. Yet this attempt requires moving beyond what ordinary scientific and causal knowledge can offer, which is why Faust turns to magic²⁶². Here, the confession is clear. Magic is not a causal explanation in any scientific sense, perhaps even its negation, an appeal to forces that operate outside the rationality of '*theoretical man*'. To turn to magic is not to extend the progressive structure, but to acknowledge its limit, to concede that the causal-mechanical method, however powerful, cannot reach the core. The earth spirit's refusal marks this limit for Faust²⁶³. Even supernatural access to the ground of being does not deliver totality to the finite individual. The infinite is not available through any intensification of the causal-progressive pursuit, however much it is supplemented by magic or any other means.

At this point, Wagner, as Faust's student, articulates the problem in terms of time. He observes: 'Oh God, art is forever, and our life is brief [...] Before we have traversed but half

²⁶¹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 382–83.

²⁶² Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 482.

²⁶³ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 513.

the course, 'We wretched devils pass away'²⁶⁴. Here, Wagner identifies the disproportion between the boundlessness of what might be known and the limits of a single human life²⁶⁵. His response seems to be accepting that the course cannot be completed within one existence, and to regard this as a basic feature of our condition. Yet I think Wagner's response does not quite locate the difficulty Nietzsche identifies. He proposes that the answer lies in more time, in the possibility of further accumulation, as if the progressive structure could answer its own limitation by extending itself. But Faust, by this stage, has already reached the point toward which Wagner gestures, and has found that further accumulation does not yield what is sought. The difficulty is not that there has been too little accumulation of knowledge, but that accumulation itself is not the right structure. Faust's rejection of Wagner's answer is, I take it, a recognition, however inchoate, that what is needed is not simply more of the same, but something of a different order.

Yet Faust does not abandon the accumulative structure altogether. What he abandons is the specific medium of knowledge, turning instead to sensual experience, while retaining the promise of fulfilment through totality that had animated the progressive pursuit of knowledge. He cries: 'Nature shuts itself off from me. The thread of thought is severed, I have long been repelled by all knowledge. Let us quench our burning passions In the depths of sensuality!'²⁶⁶ The severing of the 'thread of thought' is the acknowledgment that the method of knowledge has reached its experiential limit, that following the 'thread of causality' into the depths of being has failed to deliver the ground Faust sought. Yet the burning passions that now seek sensuality are not simply animal desires. As I understand it, they are the same drive that

²⁶⁴ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 558–65.

²⁶⁵ This experience becomes especially pronounced in modernity with its new awareness of the infinity. According to Charles Taylor, the 'cosmic imaginary' changed during the transition to modernity. Before we experienced the world as a closed cosmos but now, we do so as an unlimited and infinite universe. Now, we experience unfathomable 'dark abyss of time' (Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 322–51).

²⁶⁶ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 1747–51.

animated the pursuit of knowledge, now redirected toward (sensual) experience as the medium that might achieve what knowledge could not, that is, the transformation of existence that the 'barren sea' has withheld.

The progressive structure thus migrates rather than dissolves. When Faust turns to sensuality, what he seeks is not mere pleasure or distraction, but a kind of existential transformation, a refreshment that knowledge, for all its promise, has failed to provide. The fullest expression of this hope is found in his own words:

My breast, healed of the thirst for knowledge, shall henceforth shut itself off from
no pain, and what is allotted to all mankind, I will savour within my inner self,
With my spirit grasping the highest and the deepest, Heaping their joy and sorrow
upon my breast, And thus expanding my own self into their self, And, like them,
in the end I too shall shatter²⁶⁷.

There are several details in this passage that seem to me directly relevant. When Faust speaks of his 'breast, healed of the thirst for knowledge', he is not abandoning the drive that knowledge once animated, but redirecting it, seeking in sensuality a medium that might finally quench, rather than merely sustain, that longing. The phrase 'shut itself off from no pain' signals an openness to all experience, suffering included, as if the new pursuit requires a willingness to endure rather than to correct. Here, it seems that the corrective structure that once gave the progressive project its telos is explicitly relinquished. When Faust speaks of what is 'allotted to all mankind' and of 'heaping their joy and sorrow' upon his breast, he names an ambition not for any particular experience, but for totality. He wants the full range of what humanity has experienced, gathered within a single self. This is, I think, the same horizon toward which the pyramid of knowledge once pointed, now transposed from the domain of knowledge to that of experience. To expand 'my own self into their self' is to aspire, within one life, to become the

²⁶⁷ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 1668–75.

universal subject of all human experience, to contain within the individual what time has distributed across generations. And when Faust finally says, ‘like them, in the end I too shall shatter’, he names the cost already inscribed in the ambition. The shattering is not a risk that might be avoided, but the necessary consequence of attempting to contain the totality within a single finite self.

But this ambition, as I see it, requires a relation to time that ordinary life cannot provide. Here, the disproportion Wagner identified returns with fuller force. If the aim is truly the totality of what is allotted to humanity, then the brevity of a single life is not just an inconvenience but signals an impossibility. What time has distributed across the whole of human history cannot be compressed into one existence. Faust’s response to this disproportion is neither Wagner’s resignation nor the trans-generational distribution of the task that the earlier progressive project imagined. He refuses both, reaching instead for a fundamentally altered experience of time. Hans Blumenberg has argued that this is precisely what the pact with Mephistopheles enables²⁶⁸. He reads the pact as Faust’s attempt to compress of world-time (*Weltzeit*), the vast time that outstrips any individual lifespan, into life-time (*Lebenszeit*). The pact enlists the help of the devil to enable the finite individual to traverse what Wagner believed could never be completed within a single life. Yet the totality Faust seeks is not a state to be achieved and then inhabited. World-time does not stop. There is no moment at which the expansion of the self into all of mankind’s experience could be declared complete. Where the progressive structure with correction had a telos (a future state without puzzles or ills toward which each solved task contributed) the progressive structure without correction offers only the inexhaustible horizon of more²⁶⁹. Death, when it comes, is not the fulfilment of this

²⁶⁸ Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit Und Weltzeit* (Suhrkamp, 2020), 73; see further Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung Die Veränderung Der Zeitsrukturen in Der Moderne* (Suhrkamp, 2016) who takes up Blumenberg’s observation and incorporates it into his sociology of the modern time regime.

²⁶⁹ Faust II, however, has often be read as portraying Faust as the incarnation of the modern spirit of progress. In the final parts, Faust pursues of a grand civilisational project of reclaiming land from the sea to engineer of a new world, a vision which is arguably a vision of mastery of nature not unlike Nietzsche describes (Johann Wolfgang

compression but its interruption, an arbitrary cut in a process with no natural end. Faust does not finish but is, in this sense, finished.

The pact then formalises this relation to time:

And blow upon blow! If I ever say to the moment: linger, you are so beautiful! —
then you may strike me in chains, then I will gladly go to ruin! Then let the death
knell ring, then you are free of your service, the clock may stop, the hand may fall,
and time be over for me!²⁷⁰

Blow upon blow, as I read it, names the temporal structure the pact produces. This is not a rhythm marked by pauses or intervals, but an unbroken succession, each moment immediately displaced by the next. The phrase describes the lived experience of Blumenberg's compression. There is no breathing space between moments, no interval in which one might inhabit the present before the next arrives. The pact does not simply grant Faust more time, although that too. But more fundamentally, it gives him a different relation to time altogether, one in which the present is always already being exchanged for what follows.

The death clause, I think, must be read in this light. Faust wagers that he will never say to the moment 'linger, you are so beautiful', and he offers this condition with a kind of contemptuous confidence, as if the possibility of ever meeting it is beneath consideration. But what, precisely, is at stake in this wager? It is not happiness or beauty as such, since Faust genuinely hopes that sensuality will bring both joy and sorrow. As I see it, what he wagers against is relinquishment, that is, the moment in which he would accept a finite particular as worth having on its own terms, without reference to what further experience it might open onto. To linger would be to treat the finite moment not as a mere contribution to the inexhaustible

Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 11539–80; BT 17, 85). For interesting readings of Faust as an embodiment of progress see Michael Jaeger, *Fausts Kolonie: Goethes Kritische Phänomenologie Der Moderne* (Königshausen & Neumann, 2011); cf. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (Verso, 2010), 37–71.

²⁷⁰ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 1698–706.

horizon, but as something complete in itself, a gift to be received for what it is, and to accept the grief of its passing as the price of having truly been present. This is precisely what the progressive structure, even without correction, cannot accommodate. The present is always deficient relative to the not yet experienced, always pointing beyond itself toward the highest and deepest not yet heaped upon the breast. To linger would be to accept the present's deficiency as permanent, to forgo all further potential for the sake of what is here now. For Faust, I think, this is equivalent to death, perhaps not biological death, but the death of the drive that constitutes his being, the cessation of the restless striving that the pact was made to serve. The confident contempt with which he volunteers the clause can then be read as expressing theoretical man's optimism that imagines itself limitless, now staked personally on the certainty that the horizon will never be exhausted, that no finite moment will ever demand to be lingered in.

Mephistopheles gives what the pact delivers, and what the death clause produces as its structural consequence, in different terms: 'no measure and no goal is set for you; you are free to taste everywhere, to snatch something in passing'²⁷¹. '[N]o measure and no goal' may sound like liberation, like the freedom of an existence unconstrained by any particular end. Yet it is also, I think, the description of a life without any principle of sufficiency, without any point at which the tasting would feel complete or the drive would find its shore. To taste everywhere is the fulfilment of the accumulative ambition in its sensual form. But to 'snatch something in passing' is the experiential texture of how that tasting must proceed. The word 'snatch' implies speed, incompleteness, the taking of something that cannot be fully grasped before the hand has already moved on. This is not the intensity of the finite moment inhabited with full presence, the moment that might expand the individual phenomenon into an 'image of the world' (BT 17, 83). It is, rather, the grazing of a succession of surfaces, each touched and

²⁷¹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 1760–62.

immediately released, none inhabited deeply enough to transform. What appears as total freedom is, in fact, the condition of total superficiality, the inability to be anywhere fully because the structure requires being everywhere in succession. The Faustian pact has produced, as the experiential consequence of its own logic, a life in which the accumulation of experience destroys the very quality of presence that experience was supposed to deliver.

What this new life feels like Faust's declares shortly after having made the pact with Mephistopheles: 'Let us plunge into the rush of time, into the rolling of events! Let pain and pleasure, success and frustration alternate as they will — only restlessly does the man act'²⁷². Faust, as I read it, adopts impermanence itself as the medium of pursuit. This is not the mastery of time through knowledge, not the alteration of time's course by following the thread of causality to nature's correctable source. Rather, it is immersion in time's passage and an embrace of succession as the element in which the totalising ambition must now pursue its aim. The corrective intent has been fully abandoned here.

'Let pain and pleasure, success and frustration alternate as they will' then describes, for me, the indifference to content that follows from the absence of the corrective telos. If there is no endpoint, no state of 'earthly harmony' toward which each moment contributes, then the content of any given moment becomes, in some sense, structurally irrelevant. Pain and pleasure are equally valid contributions to the heap, equally necessary components of the breath of all human experience. What matters is not so much what happens, but that something keeps happening, that the alternation continues, and the striving with it. This indifference is not Stoic equanimity, the calm of one who has located value beyond the reach of fortune. It is the indifference of one for whom the alternation itself has become the point, since the drive toward total experience requires the full range of outcomes and cannot afford to prefer any one over any other without betraying the totalising horizon.

²⁷² Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 1754–59.

The entire temporal structure then seems to be gathered in the phrase ‘Only restlessly does the man act’. This view is echoed unmistakably in Nietzsche’s early description of the ‘restlessly advancing spirit of science’ (BT 17, 82). Faustian restlessness is, in my view, the progressive restlessness without correction, the same movement that once moved toward ‘earthly harmony’ and the ‘healing of all ills’, now moving toward no determinate end, sustained only by the inexhaustible horizon of the not yet experienced. The Faustian man does not, like Socrates, contemplate or dwell, but acts ‘[o]nly restlessly’, meaning, I think, that his action is never completed, never arrived at, never settled into anything that would make the next action unnecessary. The compression of world-time into life-time then produces not a life that contains more, but a life that cannot stop, because stopping would mean accepting a finite present as sufficient, which is the one thing the pact has ruled out from the beginning.

What emerges, then, is that the hope Faust placed in sensuality is defeated by the very structure he brings to it. For Nietzsche, the progressive structure without correction, the Faustian restless advance toward an inexhaustible horizon, forecloses, at a structural level, the quality of presence that would be required for any experience to transform rather than merely occur. Faust cannot be refreshed by the depths of sensuality, because those depths, approached through accumulation and acceleration rather than through the intensity of the finite moment fully inhabited, prove as ‘barren’ as the sea of knowledge. The unfulfilled life that is shattered rather than ending is the necessary consequence of a structure that cannot linger, that cannot accept the finite as sufficient, that cannot allow the present to be a gift rather than a deficit. What this experience of time costs at the level of lived experience, and what it reveals about the relation between the Faustian structure and suffering from transience, is what the Gretchen prison scene from Faust I shows with such emotional intensity.

Gretchen offers Faust something that the temporal logic of the pact seems unable to accommodate, that is, a particular love, a particular place, a finite life that asks to be taken up

on its own terms, not simply seized and released in passing. She is not simply another moment in the sequence allotted to all, but a singular, finite particular that calls for lingering, for the relinquishment of further possibility in favour of what is present. However, as we saw, the pact, renders this commitment impossible, not because Faust is indifferent to what she offers, but because the succession of moments that the pact enforces does not allow for the kind of pause or inhabitation that Gretchen, on my reading, represents.

At the point when it becomes clear that Gretchen will not leave prison and that her death is now inevitable, Faust exclaims: ‘would that I had never been born!’²⁷³ I take this to be a moment in which the Silenic verdict (better not to be born or to die as soon as possible) surfaces, at the point of greatest exposure to finitude and irreparable loss. Yet this recognition is fleeting. When Mephistopheles appears and urges Faust act onward restlessly—‘up, or you are lost, useless hesitating, dawdling and chattering’²⁷⁴—Faust departs with him. He does not remain with the pain of losing Gretchen but moves on to the next moment. The logic of the pact reasserts itself at the very point where remaining might have seemed the only adequate, yet unbearable response, and Faust follows its demand. He does not linger and so avoids the death he has just wished for when faced with the irreparable loss of the person he held dear.

Yet this very success exposes something troubling about the Faustian arrangement, for what it prevents is not suffering as such, but presence, that is, the possibility of fully inhabiting a finite moment, acknowledging its irreparability, and remaining with it. Within the Faustian structure, each moment is marked by loss, by Gretchen’s inevitable death, by what time is poised to take away, and so the response is always to move on. The opening of Faust II seems to confirm this point. Faust awakens refreshed, without grief, having already forgotten what he suffered, the loss of Gretchen already behind him, the forward movement resumed²⁷⁵. The

²⁷³ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 1569.

²⁷⁴ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 4597–98.

²⁷⁵ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 4679–727.

wound that might have called for some form of inhabitation, as difficult as it is, is left behind, and the promise of the next moment, announced by Mephistopheles, has already begun its work.

This, I think, is the manner in which the Silenic verdict surfaces within the Faustian temporal experience of transience. It is not a settled conclusion, not a position reached through suffering and then lived out. Rather, it is a momentary recognition, quickly extinguished by the forward movement of the pact. The verdict surfaces in Faust's cry and vanishes quickly as Faust departs with Mephistopheles. Thus, the Silenic verdict is never fully confronted or answered, but is continually deferred by the restless advance. Each new moment offers the promise of something different, something not yet experienced, and this promise suffices to keep the movement going, never quite forcing a genuine encounter with suffering from transience. Faust thus lives, paradoxically, in a more transient way than anyone, precisely because he never remains with anything finite long enough to feel its loss as loss. It is this, I would argue, that marks the most significant limitation of the Faustian response to the suffering of transience. Not that the response produces too much suffering, but that it produces too little, structuring life so thoroughly around advance that even irreparable loss cannot compel the lingering that might be the first condition of any genuine response to the Silenic verdict.

The Faustian Condition of Modernity

The Faustian experience I have traced, at least as Nietzsche reads it, is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a concentrated expression of a broader civilisational condition. Two passages make this Faustian diagnosis explicit, and the temporal reading of Faust I have been developing now allows us to see more clearly what is at stake in these passages.

Nietzsche's diagnosis of modernity, as I understand it, begins with a catalogue whose very repetition is significant: 'place beside this type of mythical culture abstract man, without

guidance from myth, abstract education, abstract morality, abstract law, the abstract state' (BT 23, 108). The word 'abstract' here names a form of life organized in accordance with the demands of knowledge. But the term 'abstract' also points to what such a culture does not offer. It does not, as I see it, provide a concrete ground of orientation and rootedness in existence. In this respect, Nietzsche here echoes Faust's dissatisfaction with knowledge, which signals a longing for something more substantial than knowledge alone can supply. Modernity, for Nietzsche, is therefore 'a culture which has no secure and sacred place of origin, and which is condemned to exhaust every possibility and to seek meagre nourishment from all other cultures' (BT 23, 109). To my mind, the latter part of the passage most directly connects this condition to the Faustian structure. The condemnation, as I read it, is structural rather than chosen because modern culture is essentially propelled by the same logic that animates Faust himself. Both expect that the next possibility might deliver what the current one has withheld. The seeking of 'nourishment from all other cultures', the 'accumulation of countless other cultures' (BT 23, 109), becomes, in this light, the cultural analogue of Faust's compression of world-time into lifetime, that is, the attempt to find in the accumulated experience of all human history some form of fulfilment. Yet, the nourishment is meagre for the same reason that Faust's accumulated experience leaves him unsatisfied in every moment. He remains dissatisfied not because the material is insufficient in quantity, but because the structure of accumulation is itself the wrong relation to what is actually needed.

Nietzsche's second passage, as I read it, then brings out the temporal dimensions of this condition more fully. Nietzsche claims that modern culture is characterised, among other things, by a "homeless roaming-about, a greedy scramble to grab a place at the tables of others, frivolous deification of the present, or a dull, numbed turning away from it, all of this *sub specie saeculi* — of the 'here and now'" (BT 23, 111). I want to begin with the 'homeless roaming-about', because it seems to me to capture something more specific than restlessness,

and to develop further what the reading of Faust has already brought to light. The homelessness in question is not merely the lack of a settled cultural home. Rather, it is the situation of a being for whom no moment can serve as a home, since every moment is already permeated by transience, marked as passing even before it can be fully inhabited. This, I take it, is what the Faustian pact brings about at the level of individual life, and what modern culture takes up as its prevailing mood. Each moment, even one that offers satisfaction, is already shadowed by the sense of its own inadequacy, the knowledge that Gretchen will die, that what is present is already slipping away. Yet, in Faust, this awareness does not become mourning or a lingering in sorrow. Instead, it manifests as the drive to move forward, the next moment already calling before the sorrow of the present has been lived out. The sorrow is not so much suppressed, as it is in the Hellenistic Greek context where the comic frame prevents suffering from transience from appearing at all. Faust gathers both joy and sorrow to himself. What the pact denies him is the possibility of letting sorrow shape his dwelling, of allowing loss to inform his relation to what has gone, of entering into the kind of grief that would require him to remain with what has been lost. He moves on, and the sorrow, unaddressed, is carried forward into the promise of the next moment.

This 'greedy scramble to secure a place at the tables of others' is, then, I think, the cultural manifestation of the same underlying structure. Just as Mephistopheles encourages Faust to seize whatever he desires in passing, so too does modern culture seek sustenance at the tables of other cultures and pasts, precisely because its own present cannot sustain it. Here, the scramble is not greed in the usual sense, but rather the effect of homelessness, that is, the effort to find elsewhere the rootedness that the fleeting present cannot offer, the sense of belonging that would make any moment feel worth dwelling in. Yet the nourishment taken from foreign tables, like the experiences grasped in passing, fails to provide what is truly sought. What is needed is not an increase in content, but a transformation in our relation to the

present itself, the ability to remain with what is here in its passing away instead of always reaching for what is not yet. The scramble, then, only deepens the homelessness since each foreign culture is briefly elevated and then left behind, adding to the accumulation but never to any genuine sense of being at home.

The homeless roaming-about, as I have been describing it, therefore names a particular kind of suffering from transience that belongs to the modern and the Faustian alike²⁷⁶. This is not the suffering that comes from losing specific things to time, not the grief of the Homeric hero who faces an early death, nor the tragic hero who loses his ethical self. Rather, it is the suffering of someone for whom no moment is ever enough, for whom life as something lived in time appears as a series of unsatisfying instants, each briefly lit up before its transience becomes apparent and the forward movement resumes. This, I want to insist, is not flourishing. For the pre-Socratic Greeks, flourishing required the ability to find value in the finite moment, to inhabit it fully and to let the sorrow of its passing enrich rather than undermine it. The Faustian life, by contrast, closes off this possibility. It is a life always in transit, each moment grasped and let go before it can be truly lived, the constant movement forward mistaken for vitality when it is, in fact, the sign of a deeper inability to be fully at home in time.

Yet, the 'homeless roaming-about' is not experienced as a uniform condition but as a rhythm, a repeated oscillation between two moments that together constitute the Faustian experience of the transient present. The 'frivolous deification of the present' and the 'dull, numbed turning away from it' together name, to my mind, a manic-depressive arc that my Faust reading renders legible, and whose deeper logic is the structure of suffering from

²⁷⁶ Nietzsche's depiction of modern man as a homeless wanderer finds an interesting parallel in Faust's Walpurgis Night adventure (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust-Dichtungen*, 3825–4222). There, Faust plunges into a kaleidoscopic swirl of experiences, hoping that each new spectacle or sensation might quell his inner disquiet. Rather than offering genuine rest or a deeper sense of wholeness, however, this frenzied immersion in novelty only underscores the restless hunger Nietzsche describes. Just as Nietzsche's 'mythless man' drifts among countless historical fragments without arriving at a stable cultural or metaphysical home, Faust ricochets from one bizarre Walpurgis tableau to another. He momentarily indulges each passing thrill, sorcery, revelry, and erotic fantasies, but gains no abiding fulfilment. This mirrors Nietzsche's diagnosis.

transience as it presents itself within the progressive culture that has lost the mythic perspective of eternity: 'that is the present, the result of Socratism's determination to destroy myth' (BT 23, 109). Both moments are not two different responses available to two different types of modern subjects. They are two moments in the same temporal experience, the high and low of any encounter with any new moment. The 'deification of the present'²⁷⁷ is the manic phase, the moment of initial encounter with something not yet exhausted, the investment of desire in a finite thing before its finitude has become apparent. Its structure is that of new love, the experience in which the finite object is, for a moment, experienced as if its transience did not apply, as if this particular thing might finally satisfy permanently, as if the loss that will come has not yet been inscribed in the having. This deception is not cynical but structural. Within the secular horizon of the 'here and now', bound to the Socratic perspective that sees transience as deprivation, the finite moment can only be found worth inhabiting by being temporarily misread as more than finite, by being deified precisely because its transience has not yet asserted itself. Faust's initial investment of desire in Gretchen has this structure of the deification of a particular love before death asserts itself.

The 'dull, numbed turning away' is what follows when transience asserts itself, when the finite moment reveals its passing and the loss can no longer be deferred. The deification runs its course, the moment shows itself as insufficient, and the suffering from transience that the deification was temporarily screening surfaces as disillusionment. What I want to emphasise is that the modern subject cannot remain with this suffering, cannot acknowledge the loss in its full reality and still find something worth having in what has passed. Without the mythic perspective of eternity (BT 23, 110), without the shift in vantage point from which the

²⁷⁷ This 'deification of the present' is not without precedent (BT 11, 56; 23, 110). The Hellenistic Greeks, as I argued in the previous chapter, similarly screened suffering from transience by constructing a dramatic world in which the moment yielded only achievable pleasures, situations designed from the outset to be reversible and the stakes kept light enough that no loss could accumulate into irreparable weight. The modern 'deification of the present' repeats this structure, though now transience is able to break into experience.

same finite moment of suffering might appear not as pure deprivation but as a unique expression of something that exceeds it, the loss can only confirm what Socratism has already taught modernity to see, that is, that transience is deprivation, that what passes was insufficient, and that the only available response is to move forward toward the next possibility that might compensate for what the last could not provide. The numb turning away is not indifference, but the only movement available to a subject who has encountered genuine suffering from transience and has no framework within which to inhabit it otherwise. Excitement gives way to dissatisfaction, deification to disillusionment, and the only movement available within the modern experience of time structure is forward, toward the next deification, which will in turn reveal its finitude and be turned away from in the same arc.

Faust's own trajectory, as I read it, enacts this arc at its most intense within a single, compressed life. The Gothic Room marks the depressive crash that follows the mania of intellectual accumulation. The parchment that cannot quench the thirst, the barren sea that offers no shore. The turn to sensuality and the pact is the manic upswing, the exaltation of a new possibility that promises what knowledge withheld. The prison scene is the depressive crash, the suffering from transience breaking through in its most irreparable form, the Silenic verdict surfacing in the ruins of the deification. The waking without grief at the opening of Faust II is the manic recovery, the structure reasserting itself, the forward movement resuming before the recognition of what has been irreparably lost can settle into genuine acknowledgement. Faust, I want to suggest, cannot remain with the loss. He cannot inhabit the suffering from transience that the Gretchen scene has produced and find, from within that suffering, something still worth having. He can only move on. The cultural condition Nietzsche diagnoses and Goethe's Faust enacts are, in my view, two scales of the same temporal structure, the civilisational arc made visible in its most concentrated individual form.

Both responses, as Nietzsche insists, are ‘*sub specie saeculi*’, from the standpoint of the secular here and now. Without the perspective of eternity that myth once provided, the human subject remains entirely bound to the human perspective, the view from within time rather than from the vantage of the timeless²⁷⁸. What the perspective of eternity that myth once provided made possible was not the denial of suffering from transience, nor the promise that the finite moment would last or lead somewhere better, but the shift in vantage point from which the same suffering could appear as part of a form of life worth inhabiting. From that perspective, the finite moment was seen as a ‘unique example of something universal and true that gazes out into infinity’ (BT 17, 83)²⁷⁹ precisely in its finitude and its passing. Without this perspective, the moment of suffering from transience cannot be transfigured in that way. And it is this loss of the transfiguring perspective, more than any particular belief or practice, that Nietzsche identifies as the deepest consequence of Socratism’s destruction of myth and the heart of modernity’s relation to suffering from transience²⁸⁰.

Conclusion

In tracing the modern response to suffering from transience, I have argued that we need to begin with Socrates and end with Faust. Socrates, as I understand him, sought calm before

²⁷⁸ Ernst Cassirer writes: ‘What distinguishes mythical time from historical time is that for mythical time there is an absolute past, which neither requires nor is susceptible of any further explanation. History dissolves being into the never-ending sequence of becoming’ (Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie Der Symbolischen Formen: Das Mythische Denken*, ed. Claus Rosenkranz, vol. 2 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2010), 125).

²⁷⁹ Nietzsche continues: ‘In true Dionysiac music we find just such a general mirror of the world-Will; a vivid event refracted in this mirror expands immediately, we feel, into a copy of an eternal truth [...] Dionysiac music enriches and expands the individual phenomenon, making it into an image of the world’ (BT 17, 83).

²⁸⁰ Cf. *Daybreak* §49: “*The new fundamental feeling: our conclusive transitoriness.* — Formerly one sought the feeling of the grandeur of man by pointing to his divine origin: this has now become a forbidden way, for at its portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts, grinning knowingly as if to say: no further in this direction! One therefore now tries the opposite direction: the way mankind is *going* shall serve as proof of his grandeur and kinship with God. Alas this, too, is vain! At the end of this way stands the funeral urn of the last man and gravedigger (with the inscription ‘*nihil humani a me alienum puto*’). However high mankind may have evolved - and perhaps at the end it will stand even lower than at the beginning! — it cannot pass over into a higher order, as little as the ant and the earwig can at the end of its ‘earthly course’ rise up to kinship with God and eternal life. The becoming drags the has-been along behind it: why should an exception to this eternal spectacle be made on behalf of some little star or for any little species upon it! Away with such sentimentalities!”

death not by denying its inevitability, but by altering the soul's relation to what cannot be changed. The transformation he achieves is a matter of how one bears transience in the present. Modernity, it seems to me, inherits this idea of correction, but shifts its focus outward. Correction is no longer the transformation of the soul's relation to death, but the hope for the eventual abolition of death itself. Calm is deferred to a future in which all ills will have been healed, so that the present is always experienced as lacking, measured against what has not yet been achieved. When this promise proves empty, when knowledge cannot deliver what it seemed to promise, Faust emerges as a figure who preserves the forward movement but abandons the hope of correction. Instead of seeking to heal all ills, Faust aspires to experience them all, to find fulfilment in the totality of what life offers. Yet this, I think, produces a life even more impermanent than the progressive structure it replaces. When the present no longer satisfies because what made it worth inhabit is irreparably lost (as Gretchen's prison scene reveals most sharply) Faust moves on, refusing to remain with the suffering that transience brings. What results is not calm, but flight, not a transformation of the soul's relation to transience, but its avoidance through constant restlessness. I am inclined to think that this is a kind of optimism, though not a deep one because it seems to mistake the inability to linger for the genuine overcoming of loss. When Nietzsche turns to Faust, he is not, as I read him, simply diagnosing a personal predicament, but rather identifying in Faust a concentrated expression of what he takes to be modernity's own encounter with transience. At the level of culture, this gives rise to what Nietzsche describes as the homelessness of modern life, a state in which no moment can serve as a home, since each is already permeated by its own passing, already bearing the mark of the transience that the drive forward seeks to escape. In this way, life, considered as a temporal process, comes to appear as a series of moments that fail to satisfy, each moment briefly elevated before its limitations become apparent and the movement

forward recommences. What results is not a flourishing, but rather a kind of impoverishment and suffering that arises from time itself, not only from what time removes.

I have used the term temporal nihilism throughout this dissertation to refer to the recognition that life's transience and its accompanying suffering from the irreparable loss of what we love, makes existence undesirable. It seems to me that, in modernity, this recognition comes closer to establishing itself as a cultural condition than at any earlier point in the history I have traced. The reason for this, I think, lies in the particular shape that the modern response to suffering from transience has taken. On Nietzsche's account, modernity, in a sense, shares Silenus' diagnosis of the present moment, but does not draw his conclusion. Silenus claims that transient existence is not worth having, and so concludes that non-existence is preferable (BT 3, 23). Modernity, I would argue, tacitly agrees that the present moment of transient existence is not worth staying with, that each moment, marked by its own passing, is insufficient and not worth inhabiting on its own terms. Yet it does not follow Silenus in concluding that existence as such is undesirable. Instead, modernity moves forward, sustained by what is perhaps a residual Socratic optimism that the next moment might deliver the satisfaction and fulfilment the present has withheld. Even when the corrective telos has been abandoned, this optimism persists as the promise of the next moment, the possibility that keeps the Faustian movement in motion without a destination. Silenus, as I read him, is a pessimist who takes the suffering from transience seriously enough to render a verdict on existence as a whole. Modernity, by contrast, inherits Socratic optimism and so never quite reaches that verdict, but enacts something structurally closer to it than any previous culture, that is, living as if no particular moment of existence is worth having because satisfaction with it will always be irreparably lost, while sustaining the hope that the next one might be. The result is, paradoxically, the most impermanent of all possible lives. Temporal nihilism, then, does not break out in modernity as the Silenic conclusion, but as the restless forward movement of a

culture that shares Silenus' diagnosis and refuses his pessimism, sustained by an optimism that takes present suffering from transience as the ground to reject present existence in favour of a future, more complete one.

Before I proceed, I want to consider an objection that might be raised at this point. It could be said that the Faustian life, rather than representing a kind of impoverishment, is in fact a form of affirmation, an embrace of becoming, of striving, of the satisfaction found in overcoming obstacles and surpassing limits. Reginster has developed this line of thought²⁸¹. Faustian striving, Reginster argues, does not require the elimination of loss, but rather values loss as a necessary and constitutive part of the activity of striving, and without thereby devaluing as deficient what is left behind²⁸². On this reading, the impermanence of Faustian life is a sign of vitality, of the will to power always moving forward, continually overcoming obstacles, without suffering from the transience its own activity produces.

I want to press this account at the point where, as it seems to me, it is most exposed. Reginster's distinction between Faustian striving and progress is careful, and his claim that the will to power can incorporate loss as part of further overcoming is a very interesting reading. Yet his account, I think, does not sufficiently acknowledge a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of powerlessness. The first is the powerlessness of not yet having overcome a particular obstacle. This powerlessness may motivate the next act of overcoming or breeds resentment at an overpowering world²⁸³. The second is the powerlessness that arises

²⁸¹ Reginster argues that Goethe's *Faust* anticipates later Nietzsche's conception of happiness as perpetual striving rather than final satisfaction. Against Schopenhauer's ideal of peace through the extinction of desire, Faust, and, following him, Nietzsche, revalue dissatisfaction itself. On Reginster's reading, happiness becomes the feeling of power that accompanies continuous overcoming, not the cessation of willing. The 'Faustian bargain' thus names the renunciation of repose in exchange for the joy of striving endlessly, a form of affirmation, Reginster argues, Nietzsche later recognises as the highest expression of life's vitality (Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 240–42; Bernard Reginster, 'Happiness as a Faustian Bargain', *Daedalus* 133, no. 2 (2004): 52–59).

²⁸² Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 244–45.

²⁸³ See Reginster's discussion in chapter two of resentment in later Nietzsche where Reginster mentions time as one source that breeds resentment (Bernard Reginster, *The Will to Nothingness: An Essay on Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morality"* (Oxford University press, 2021), 50).

when no further overcoming is possible. This powerlessness may arise not because the obstacle is too great, but because the very structure of overcoming has been suspended, because what is encountered cannot be surpassed but only inhabited. I think that genuine grief over irreparable loss is this second kind of powerlessness. It is not the powerlessness of not yet having overcome something, but the powerlessness of having encountered something that cannot be overcome at all, that asks the will to remain rather than to advance, to be present to what cannot be undone rather than to convert it into the occasion for the next movement forward.

Death is, I think, the most extreme instance of this second kind of powerlessness, and it is the test case that Nietzsche's account of modernity places at the centre of the argument. Death is not an obstacle that the will to power can overcome. It is the cessation of the will's activity altogether, the situation in which there is nothing further to overcome because the subject who would overcome has itself been dissolved. The will to power reaches its absolute limit here, not a limit that generates further overcoming, but a limit that ends the overcoming structure entirely. On Reginster's own terms, then, the Faustian striving he defends has no resources for the situation it most needs to address, that is, the situation that Nietzsche identifies as the decisive test of any response to suffering from transience in modernity.

Conclusion

I want to begin, and will end, with a question that Nietzsche's *Birth* places at the centre of its historical inquiry: why does the experience of suffering from transience so often lead to its condemnation? I have called this judgement temporal nihilism. As I have argued, temporal nihilism is not rooted in a metaphysical longing for permanence, nor does it arise simply from the accumulation of misfortune or the loss of those moral and cultural frameworks that once gave life its meaning. Rather, it emerges from the recognition that transience is not an accidental feature of our lives but is constitutive of what it is to be human. To be finite, to care and to love in a world shaped by time, is to be exposed to irreparable loss. Of course, not all losses are irreparable, and not every experience of suffering from transience leads to the nihilist conclusion. Yet some losses are irreparable, and it is from the encounter with these, the encounter with losses of the kind Nietzsche himself glimpsed in the death of his father, that the movement toward the Silenic verdict begins. The Silenic verdict, that it would have been better not to have been born and, failing that, best to die as soon as possible, is the most explicit expression of temporal nihilism in the *Birth*. This is a verdict rendered not on the particular misfortunes of a particular life, but on existence as such, on any life lived in time and therefore exposed to the suffering that time's transience makes unavoidable.

What I take to distinguish this account of nihilism from the standard treatments is its insistence that the temporal dimension is primary, not derivative. Reginster's influential account, to take perhaps the most rigorous example in the existing literature, locates nihilism in the collapse of the highest values that once gave human life its sense of purpose (either because those²⁸⁴. This is a real issue, and Nietzsche's own later writings give it considerable attention. Yet such an account presupposes a subject who has already found existence worth having and then lost the framework that made it so. Temporal nihilism, as I understand it, operates at a more fundamental level. It does not require the prior affirmation of existence and its subsequent disappointment. Rather, it arises from the structure of finite existence itself, that is, from the fact that any life that cares about anything is exposed to its irreparable loss, and that this exposure, once fully recognised, can generate the judgment that such a life is not worth having in the first place. This is the recognition that Silenus expresses, and it is what Nietzsche, in the *Birth*, takes as his starting point rather than his conclusion.

This temporal dimension of nihilism then shifts where I locate its origins in the history of Western thought. The standard account places nihilism's emergence either in modernity, as the consequence of the death of God and the subsequent devaluation of the highest values, or at the inception of the Platonic two-world metaphysics²⁸⁵. On the reading I have developed here, temporal nihilism is present at the very inception of what is often taken to be the origin of Western culture. The pre-Socratic Greeks already confronted it in the figure of Silenus, long before Socrates and Plato, long before the death of God, and long before any of the historical events that standard accounts take as nihilism's origin. They were not innocent of the

²⁸⁴ Reginster distinguishes two forms of nihilism in Nietzsche. Nihilistic disorientation arises when the highest values lose their objective standing following the death of God, leaving the subject without a framework that makes life intelligible or worthwhile. Nihilistic despair arises when the highest values, though still held, prove unrealisable given the conditions of earthly existence, since those values, paradigmatically the Christian ideal of permanence and perfection, define worth in opposition to the very conditions of finite, transient life. See my discussion of both forms in the Introduction, page 4 -6.

²⁸⁵ See my discussion in the Introduction, page 4-9.

recognition that suffering from transience is constitutive and irreparable. They faced it directly, in the wisdom of Silenus and in the suffering of their heroes, and they found a way of responding to it that neither denied it nor succumbed to it. The history I have traced is therefore not the history of nihilism's emergence but of its successive near-outbreaks and the increasingly inadequate means by which it has been held at bay.

In developing this history throughout this dissertation, I have arrived at two claims which, so far as I can tell, have not been brought together in quite this way in the existing literature on Nietzsche and nihilism.

The first of these claims is that nihilism possesses a temporal dimension that is, in a certain sense, more fundamental than the collapse of values and meanings described in the standard accounts. I do not mean this simply as a point about Nietzsche's intellectual development, as if the *Birth* merely anticipates themes that are later developed more fully. Rather, I take this to be a claim about the nature of nihilism itself. The collapse of values and meanings that many commentators have identified as central to nihilism is, on their view, a historical event, one that can be explained by reference to particular intellectual and cultural developments. But the possibility that transient existence might not be worth having is, I think, built into the structure of any finite life that cares and loves in a world governed by time. This possibility can arise independently of any specific metaphysical or moral framework, before such a framework has been established or after it has collapsed. The temporal dimension of nihilism, then, is not a late arrival in the history of Western thought but is a permanent undertow.

The second claim follows from the first. Because temporal nihilism is more fundamental than any particular cultural response to it, temporal nihilism, I think, precedes and survives each such response, and the history of those responses is a history of successive near-outbreaks of temporal nihilism and the more or less adequate means by which it has been held

at bay. This history is not teleological²⁸⁶. I do not think that for Nietzsche the movement from pre-Socratic transfiguration through Socrates to modernity had to happen, or that it represents a necessary movement of decline. It is a contingent sequence of transformations, driven by individual interventions, shifts in sensibility, and cultural forces that could have been otherwise. Nevertheless, what gives this history its significance is the pattern of adequacy and inadequacy it reveals, the way in which some responses hold temporal nihilism at bay more successfully than others, and the way in which the historically most influential response, the Socratic corrective paradigm, generates through its own internal logic a darker consequence that makes temporal nihilism more acute rather than less.

This internal consequence is what I would call the dialectic of Socratism. The corrective response to temporal nihilism begins with Socrates and becomes, through Euripides, the Hellenistic Greeks, and '*theoretical man*', the culturally sedimented default of Western civilisation, the assumption that suffering from transience is something to be eliminated or corrected rather than transfigured. Its historical influence has been so enormous that it has come to appear as the natural way of addressing the problem. But Nietzsche's point, as I read him, is that this elevation is mistaken, and mistaken in a specific way. By pathologising suffering from transience, treating it as intolerable rather than constitutive of a life worth having, the corrective paradigm ends up sharing a premise with the very nihilism it seeks to overcome. Socratism and temporal nihilism both agree, in their different ways, that transient existence as it presents itself is deficient and therefore not worth having as it is. This is, of course, the premise that underlies Silenus' wisdom. And although the corrective paradigm does not accept the Silenic conclusion, Socratism does accept the Silenic premise, and it is this shared premise, to my mind, that generates the dialectic of Socratism.

²⁸⁶ Heidegger suggest as much speaking of nihilism, the devaluation of the highest values, as the 'inner logic' of the history of the West since Plato (Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 6.2, 92; This view is echoed by Michel Haar, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*, 10).

As long as the corrective promise retains its credibility, as long as a positive vision of a life worth living remains both plausible and achievable, temporal nihilism can be kept at bay. Socrates, on my reading, supplies such a vision in the examined life where the individual is at peace with their own transience through the daily practice of rational self-examination, where such a philosophical existence is worth having not in its raw suffering form but in the corrected form that the examined life is supposed to achieve. The Silenic premise is thus accepted, but its conclusion is forestalled by the positive vision that correction supplies. When the corrective promise fails—as I have tried to show it does in the trajectory traced here, from Euripides’ exposure of reason’s fragility, through the Hellenistic Greeks’ abandonment of the corrective paradigm, to Faust’s restlessness—what remains is the shared premise, now stripped of the positive vision that was supposed to prevent the Silenic conclusion. The finite moment continues to be experienced as deficient, still rejected as insufficient, but nothing arrives to replace it. Each moment is abandoned for the next, which is equally insufficient, equally abandoned, in the succession of disappointing moments that, on my reading, constitutes the Faustian condition and the modern homelessness Nietzsche diagnoses. In this way, Socratism generates its own nihilistic tendency. It does so not by directly concluding that existence is not worth having, but by accepting the premise from which that conclusion follows and then failing to deliver the positive vision that was supposed to prevent it from being drawn. The corrective ambition was to overcome suffering from transience, and what it produced instead was a form of life more thoroughly colonised by the premise of that suffering’s intolerability than the one it set out to cure.

For Nietzsche, transfiguration is therefore not simply one response among others in the history of temporal nihilism. It is the name for the response that does not generate this dark consequence, because it does not pathologise suffering from transience. Transfiguration acknowledges the constitutive character of suffering from transience and finds a way of

inhabiting it such that the finite moment appears worth having including its irreparable losses, even through them. It does not promise correction or offer compensation. It offers, on my reading, a perspective from which the same suffering appears differently, as part of a form of life that can be affirmed rather than as a verdict against existence. This is why the pre-Socratic Greeks' response to temporal nihilism is, in Nietzsche's evaluative terms, more adequate than Socratism's one, not because it eliminates more suffering but because it does not undermine itself, because it does not create the conditions for its own failure. And it is why the history of the corrective paradigm, however culturally dominant and historically influential, is for Nietzsche a story of decline and impoverishment, a movement from pre-Socratic greatness to modern homelessness that the dialectic of Socratism has made both inevitable, given the corrective paradigm's own assumptions, and unnecessary, since the alternative was always available even when it ceased to be chosen.

The argument I have developed here remains within the boundaries of the *Birth*. Yet the reading I have offered inevitably gestures toward connections with Nietzsche's later work that, while I cannot pursue them in detail, seem to me important to acknowledge. Especially two connections suggest that the temporal dimension of nihilism I have traced throughout the *Birth* is not merely a feature of that early text, but may rather persists, in various forms, throughout Nietzsche's philosophical development.

The first of these connections concerns the role of Platonism. I have argued that Socratism's destruction of myth marks a historical rupture from which the subsequent history of responses to temporal nihilism emerges. What I have not been able to pursue here is the question of how Platonism enters into this story, and how the argument of the *Birth* might relate to Nietzsche's later diagnosis of Plato as the root of nihilism in Western thought. The Platonic creation of a two-world metaphysics, which devalues the temporal world in favour of a timeless realm of truth and perfection, can be seen as a response to the demand that the loss of mythic

transfiguration created. In this light, Plato's metaphysics is an attempt to restore a form of life worth living by securing what makes such a life worthwhile in something untouched by transience, and yet accessible, if not to all human beings, at least to the educated philosopher²⁸⁷. Once the perspective of eternity that myth provided is lost Platonism seeks to restore that perspective through metaphysics, locating the truly real not in the temporal world but in a timeless realm beyond it. Later Nietzsche, in the *Twilight of the Idols*, reference the *Birth* when again identifying 'Socrates and Plato as symptoms of decay, as agents of Greek disintegration, as pseudo-Greek, as anti-Greek (*Birth of Tragedy*, 1872)' (TI 'The Problem of Socrates' 2, 162). And, on Nietzsche's view, philosophers have historically seen 'death, change, and age, [...] as objections, - refutations' of the value of this world and therefore formed values '*sub specie aeterni*' (TI 'Reason' in Philosophy, I, 167; BGE 2) as a flight from the temporal. This later diagnosis, I think, both confirms and extends the argument I have developed here. Where Socrates pathologised suffering from transience at the level of ethical practice, Plato pathologises the temporal world itself, establishing the metaphysical framework within which transience appears not merely as something to be corrected but as the mark of a deficient order of being, one that the truly real transcends altogether. The connection between the *Birth's* account of Socratism and the later account of Platonism as the root of Western nihilism seems to me a significant direction for future research. It would extend the temporal reading I have developed here into Nietzsche's mature thought, and would raise the question of whether the history of Western metaphysics can be read, in its entirety, as the progressive deepening of the dialectic of Socratism that I have traced in miniature.

The second connection I want to mention concerns the figure of the 'last man', as he appears in the prologue of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (TSZ, 'Zarathustra's Prologue', 5, 9-10). At first sight, it is tempting to regard the 'last man' as entirely unlike Faust. Faust,

²⁸⁷ Republic education, cave simile.

after all, is the figure who moves restlessly through life, dissatisfied with every moment. Yet I want to propose that the 'last man' is not so much Faust's opposite as his successor. The 'last man' represents a form of life that arises when the energies of Faustian striving have been spent, and when the resulting impoverishment is no longer resisted but instead accommodated. Where Faust continues to demand the totality of experiences in all their joyous and sorrowful intensity, and continues to expect that the next moment might finally yield the depth that all previous moments have failed to provide, the 'last man' has let go of such expectations. He no longer aspires to what is highest or deepest. Instead, he has recalibrated his desires to fit the diminished reality that the Faustian project has left behind.

In this, he comes to resemble, in certain respects, the Hellenistic Greeks as Nietzsche described them, that is, as those who sought to shield themselves from the suffering from transience by pursuing attainable pleasures and avoiding what is grave or terrifying. There is, however, a difference. The Hellenistic Greek, as I understand Nietzsche, still experienced a kind of epigonic longing beneath the surface, still felt the pull of tragedy, and still risked the unsettling recognition that could break through, as it does in Philemon's wish to commit suicide so as to be united with Euripides in death. The 'last man', by contrast, seems to lack even this residual longing. He has not only screened himself from suffering, but has removed the very conditions that would make such suffering possible, namely, genuine attachment to anything of great value.

If, as I have argued, temporal nihilism requires that one care and love in a world marked by time, since only through such attachments can the loss of the finite give rise to the sense that transient existence is not worth having, then the 'last man' has so thoroughly diminished his attachments, and so carefully arranged his life around what is safe, achievable, and reversible, that the possibility of such a verdict no longer arises. He does not confront temporal nihilism and nor straightforwardly suppress it. Rather, he has never quite had to confront it,

since nothing in his life carries the weight required to generate the suffering from which temporal nihilism would follow²⁸⁸. What was once a mask has become, in effect, the face itself. This, I take it, may be temporal nihilism in its most complete and least visible form. Such nihilism is not the explicit judgment that existence is not worth having, but the condition of a being for whom the question itself has lost its urgency, because the capacity for the kind of caring and commitment that would make it pressing has been so thoroughly eroded that nothing remains to sustain it. It is, I want to suggest, the cultural outcome toward which the dialectic of Socratism has tended in the history I have traced. On this reading, the ‘last man’ stands for the form of life that persists when the corrective ambition has exhausted itself, and the capacity for transfiguration has been absent for so long that its loss is no longer even registered.

Nietzsche’s call for the ‘*rebirth of tragedy*’ (BT 16, 76; 17, 82; 19, 95; 20, 97, 98; 22, 106) at the end of the *Birth* is often taken as a puzzling, perhaps even antiquarian, aesthetic preference, as a longing for the return of a cultural form that modernity has left behind for good. I do not find this reading compelling. Instead, I want to suggest that what is at stake in this call is not simply the restoration of a lost art form, but the rebirth of transfigurative practices itself. The urgency of this call, as I see it, does not lie in nostalgia for the past, but in the fact that the need it addresses has only grown more acute in the time since Nietzsche wrote.

Two contemporary thinkers help to make this urgency visible. Hartmut Rosa has argued that the defining feature of contemporary life is acceleration, the increase in the tempo of experience through the pursuit of progress and exponential growth to the point where no moment lasts long enough to allow what he calls *Anverwandlung*, the experience of genuine resonance with the world and with life, the sense that one’s engagement with the world has

²⁸⁸ Robert Pippin argues that Nietzsche treats nihilism as ‘the flickering out of some erotic flame’, a loss of existential eros that renders commitment, striving, and affirmation increasingly untenable in modern life (Robert Pippin, *Nietzsche, Psychology, & First Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 54).

genuinely touched and transformed the self and its experience of the world and life²⁸⁹. This is Rosa's sociological description for what transfiguration also achieves, that is, the experience in which the suffering moment is not merely navigated or consumed but dwelt in, found significant, felt as genuinely worth having. Yet, Rosa argues this experience is increasingly unavailable in contemporary life because life's acceleration makes life increasingly transient, no moment last long enough to resonate, and we therefore become more and more alienated²⁹⁰, or, in the terms developed here, we become homelessness. Andreas Reckwitz, in extending this line of thought, draws attention to a particular difficulty that arises when the progressive structure begins to lose its hold²⁹¹. He argues that the paradigm of progress, as we have come to understand it, leaves little room for loss. What is left behind is not so much mourned as reinterpreted as a necessary cost, a step on the way to something better. Yet when the promise of progress weakens, as it appears to do in late modernity, the losses that have always accompanied it begin to stand out as grievances, but without any framework that might allow us to absorb or even acknowledge them. The only response that the progressive paradigm seems to offer is to move forward, to seek the next improvement. In this, I see a sociological parallel to what might be called the dialectic of Socratism. The corrective paradigm, like progress itself, can only deal with loss by seeking to overcome it. It does not provide us with a way of what Reckwitz calls 'doing loss'. The result of those sociological observations of contemporary modern life, it seems to me, is that life becomes both more transient and less able to bear its own transience, a sense of suffering from loss growing just as the means for inhabiting it are withdrawn.

In light of these considerations, the '*rebirth of tragedy*' can be read as calling for a response this very deficit. However, it seems to me that we must approach the call with some

²⁸⁹ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz: eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Suhrkamp, 2023); Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung Die Veränderung Der Zeitsrukturen in Der Moderne*.

²⁹⁰ Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung Und Entfremdung*, trans. Robin Celikates (Suhrkamp, 2019).

²⁹¹ Andreas Reckwitz, *Verlust*.

caution. We cannot simply assume that what was once possible for the ancient Greeks remains available to us, given that the mythological framework which once sustained the perspective of eternity has, for us, receded. The cultural horizon that made such a perspective intelligible is no longer ours. Nietzsche, I think, came to see this himself, as is evident in his later self-critique of the *Birth*, where he distances himself from the Schopenhauerian metaphysical apparatus that had originally shaped his argument (BT 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism' 2, 5). Yet he does not, for all that, abandon the sense that the book had touched on something real, had touched a genuine difficulty concerning art, suffering, and existence. What I want to propose now is that the phenomenological insight at the heart of the work can survive the rejection of its metaphysical trappings. The value of the perspective of eternity did not lie in its supposed disclosure of the Olympian gods or the primordial One, but rather in its capacity to effect a shift in vantage point, that is, to see the moment of suffering not merely from within the confines of suffering individual, but as an expression of a form of life that might be worth having, rather than as a simple verdict against existence. Achieving such a shift, I would argue, does not require metaphysical scaffolding. To take up Goethe's term, what transfiguration does require is the capacity for lingering, the ability to dwell within an existence marked by transience, rather than seeking to escape it through denial or correction. By lingering, I mean the willingness to remain present to the suffering that comes with transience, to allow irreparable loss to be felt as part of what gives life its value, and to mourn what is lost without letting that mourning harden into a judgment against existence itself. It is this non-metaphysical aspect of transfiguration, I want to suggest, that is most essential and most capable of being carried forward into our own time.

Here, I find Faust's trajectory instructive in more than one respect. On the one hand, his failure illustrates what becomes of the drive toward transformation when it is pursued through accumulation and acceleration, rather than through the kind of lingering that allows

one to remain with a moment marked by irreparable loss. I think that for Nietzsche, Faust reaches toward something important, namely, the recognition that knowledge, in its abstractness, fails to transform because it remains at a distance from the sensual conditions under which genuine transfiguration might occur. Yet the way he seeks what he seeks is, as I see it, fundamentally misguided. He seeks the intensity of a worthwhile life through the totality of experience, not the depth of a singular moment. Faust snatches rather than dwells, moves rather than stays. It is his inability to linger that the pact with Mephistopheles formalises, and which, in the end, forecloses the transformation Faust's longing seeks. But there is another sense in which Faust's longing is instructive. When Nietzsche imagines a new generation, one capable of facing what is grave and terrifying, and thus desiring a new art, he has them call out with Faust, 'and shall I not, with all my longing's vigour, draw into life that peerless, lovely figure' of Helen (BT 17, 85). Here, Faust's cry is not simply the mark of a failed life, but the expression of a longing for transfiguration (remember, Nietzsche referred to Helen in Goethe's *Faust* to name the experience of hovering that transfiguration produces). Faust's is, in itself, right because it is the longing for a sensual experience (of transfiguration?) that only an aesthetic practice achieves. In this way, Faust stands both as the decadent endpoint of the history of Socratism and as the figure whose longing gestures beyond it.

Nietzsche himself describes the '*rebirth of tragedy*' as accompanied by the rebirth of the '*aesthetic listener*' (BT 22, 106). As I see it, this '*aesthetic listener*' is not simply a passive recipient of aesthetic content, but rather the subject of a practice of attentiveness, of a dwelling presence to the melody that unfolds in time. This practice, as I understand it, does not rest on any metaphysical claim about what lies beneath the music. Its significance lies in the quality of presence it both requires and cultivates. In this sense, listening becomes the paradigm of lingering. To listen genuinely to music is to inhabit each moment as it arrives, and to let it go as it passes, without grasping ahead or moving past, without succumbing to the Faustian

restlessness that seeks the next moment before the present one has been lived. Music, in this way, demands stillness, as it asks that forward movement be suspended, that the present moment be given its full weight. In so doing, it accomplishes, at least in Nietzsche's estimation, something that knowledge cannot, namely, the transformation of the self's relation to existence, not by accumulating information or correcting conditions, but through the quality of presence that the practice of listening makes possible. And it does this without recourse to any metaphysical ground beyond the music itself.

Perhaps the most immediate and recognisable instance of this kind of transformation is found in the experience of music during grief. I do not think music makes heartbreak bearable because the loss is lessened. Rather, it is because the loss is held within a form that allows it to be felt fully, while also revealing the significance of what was loved, the worth of having committed oneself to something finite and irreplaceable. This, it seems to me, is transfiguration in its most accessible modern form, available to anyone who has found that a piece of music made a loss bearable not by resolving it, but by giving it a shape within which it could be inhabited rather than avoided. What music achieves, without metaphysical scaffolding, is a shift in perspective from which grief appears not as a verdict on existence, but as the measure of what it meant to have been genuinely present to something worth having. Whether this capacity can be cultivated through music alone, or whether other aesthetic and cultural practices can achieve such a transformation as well, is not something I take up here. What I have tried to show is that the response to temporal nihilism must, I think, take this form: the form of transfiguration rather than correction, of dwelling rather than overcoming, of a practice that gives suffering from transience a shape within which it can be inhabited, and from which, to quote Nietzsche again, 'lament turns into a song in praise of being' (BT 3, 24).

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