Nietzsche contra Hegel:
The Death of Tragedy and the Birth of the Unconscious

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ABSTRACT: What exactly is the unconscious? Although this question has not been sufficiently addressed, the notion of the unconscious is often used in philosophy, literary and cultural theory, and of course psychology, as if it provided a relatively solid foundation or basis for the stories we tell about our culture and ourselves. This article is part of a larger project in which I argue that 'the unconscious' is not a basis for our narratives of self and culture, but is, itself, a narrative development — a way of organizing, and thus creating, knowledge. In my discussion, here, of Hegel and Nietzsche, I concur with the supposition that something like the unconscious appeared in Nietzsche's work (while being absent from Hegel's); but instead of maintaining that Nietzsche discovered this principle, I suggest that he invented it. More specifically, Nietzsche needed a narrative principle that would help free cultural values that he thought important from their 'entrapment' in the Hegelian dialectic.

RESUMÉ: Qu'est au juste l'inconscient? Malgré son indéterminité, la notion d'inconscient est souvent utilisée en philosophie, dans la théorie culturelle et littéraire, et évidemment en psychologie, comme si elle pouvait servir de fondement à la narration culturelle et personnelle. Cet article s'insère dans un projet plus large qui cherche à montrer que "l'inconscient" ne peux servir de fondement aux narrations de soi et de la culture, mais qu'il représente lui-même un développement narratif — une façon d'organiser et, de ce fait, de créer la connaissance. Dans la présente discussion sur Hegel et Nietzsche, je concède que l'inconscient est apparu dans l'oeuvre de Nietzsche (alors qu'elle est absente de l'oeuvre de Hegel); mais loin de l'avoir découvert, je prétends que Nietzsche l'a inventé. En effet, ce dernier devait recourir à un principe narratif qui libérerait les valeurs culturelles qu'il croyait importantes de leur emprisonnement dans la dialectique hégélienne.

Throughout much of this century the unconscious has been seen as something real. This is true even in contemporary critical theory — the context out of which I write — which has little use for the concept or "reality" in its traditional form. I use a vague word like "real," because despite the
widespread belief in something called the unconscious, people have had difficulty deciding precisely what it is. Fredric Jameson, who has done much to reinforce the current legitimacy of the unconscious, declares that "interpretation proper [...] always presupposes, if not a concept of the unconscious, then at least some mechanism of mystification or repression in terms of which it would make sense to seek a latent meaning behind a manifest one." The concept of repression, Arkady Plotnitsky tells us, "has dwelled in the historical unconscious of theory and returned in its text, as all repressed things do, often with a vengeance." Susan Stanford Friedman gives spatial detail to this sort of claim, suggesting that "like a palimpsest, both psyche and literary text are layered, with repressed elements erupting in disguised forms onto the manifest surface of consciousness" (26). Despite their confident use of the copula in their formulations, we are left with many questions. Is the unconscious a part of our physiology, an organization of psychic energy, an ontological order of being? Is it an epistemological principle, a theorem of hermeneutics, a precise understanding of language? To what extent are we dealing with analogy and metaphor?

I would like to begin my argument by proposing that the unconscious should not be referred to in a language of realism, as if it is something substantive. If, as I will further propose, the unconscious is "real" only in the realm of discourse, these questions are not only unanswerable but quite irrelevant. To suggest that the unconscious is "merely" discursive, would seem in keeping with recent literary theory, and does not seem to depart much from the passages I have just cited. But in these examples one can still witness the belief that even if individuals or cultures have an unconscious only because they are textual — structured like a language as Lacan has more or less suggested — then language or discourse itself is seen as having an unconscious. As Shoshana Felman has alleged, just "as the unconscious traverses consciousness, a theoretical body of thought always is traversed by its own unconscious, its own 'unthought,' of which it is not aware, but which it contains in itself as the very condition of its disruption."

I want to suggest something quite different, something more historical, more contingent: that the unconscious is a recent way of organizing and understanding knowledge. Instead of something with being, I see it as something with function. More specifically it is a mode of emplotment, a way of organizing the stories we tell about ourselves, our history, our culture, and the novels, philosophical works, and other cultural artifacts that we associate with our history and ourselves. Texts, people, "theoretical bodies of thought," "consciousness" in general "have" or are "traversed by" an unconscious only to the extent that this is the way Western culture has come to conceive of things in this way, only to the extent that it has begun to tell stories with this sort of plot.

Most critics and theorists who employ this mode of emplotment spend little time worrying about where their concepts came from; rather they are treated as if legitimately discovered and verifiable, if only by the weight of intuition and experience. These assumptions are, however, supported by a number of genealogies of the unconscious which tell stories of discovery, tracing back latent versions of the modern concept well into antiquity. Only we moderns — more brave, insightful, our vision less clouded by superstition — were able to translate vague signs of the unconscious into an epistemologically more dependable idiom. While most contemporary critical theorists would rightly balk at this sort of narrative, their belief in the reality of the unconscious nevertheless points implicitly in the direction of narratives of discovery. The best way to establish my hypothesis, in contrast, is to show the historical contingency of the unconscious in a way that explains its appearance in terms other than discovery: how did it arise? Under what conditions? What sort of intellectual, political or cultural work did it do? What needs or desires did narratives organized around principles of the unconscious fulfill?

I cannot of course address all these questions in a paper of this length. But I would like to tell one sort of story about one realm in which the plot of the unconscious arose — namely in the work of Nietzsche. Nietzsche makes a convenient subject for my story because of his importance to recent literary theory, and because of certain affinities with the other two most influential forerunners of contemporary theory, Marx and Freud.

Paul Ricoeur and Michel Foucault have preceded me in linking together Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Ricoeur suggests that the three share a similar strategy of interpretation: "what all three attempted, in different ways, was to make their 'conscious' methods of deciphering coincide with the 'unconscious' work of deciphering which they attributed to the will to power, to social being, to the unconscious psychism." Foucault has likewise declared that "Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud placed us once again in the presence of a new possibility of interpretation. They founded anew the possibility of a hermeneutic." (61).

I would alter these approaches somewhat and focus more specifically on the hermeneutic plots they construct. The Freudian unconscious is governed by a strict conservation of energy and, as Ricoeur has also pointed out, combines the principles of hermeneutics with that of economy. The most important principle of this economy is "repression," which, according to Freud, is "the corner-stone on which the whole of structure of psychoanalysis rests." Repression is so important to Freud's narratives because of the way it works as a principle of necessity and meaningfulness, because of the way it insures that anything "lost," "forgotten," or "excluded," is nevertheless "there," ready to return and complete the narrative that is being told. Despite
many crucial differences, Nietzsche and Marx base their theories on similar narrative dynamics of repression and return, a comparable story whose structure Freud explicitly named "the unconscious." My task throughout the rest of this paper is to provide an account of Nietzsche's story of repression and the unconscious.

I

While it is common to point to Nietzsche as one of the discoverers of the unconscious, the lines of influence are usually traced back through Schopenhauer to German Romanticism. I would not erase these lines. But I will argue that it was in response to Hegel that Nietzsche (and, similarly, Marx) developed his concept (or plot) of the unconscious. Nietzsche scholars are quick to point out that Nietzsche read very little Hegel, but in so doing often ignore the rather obvious way in which Nietzsche rewrites Hegel's master/slave dialectic in On the Genealogy of Morals.11

Although Deleuze has done the most to demonstrate the significance of the relationship between the two philosophers he does not adequately identify the marks left on Nietzsche's thought by Hegel, putting them in opposition and arguing that "there is no possible compromise between Hegel and Nietzsche" (195). A close reading of The Birth of Tragedy will show that Nietzsche's thought, and most specifically his invention of the unconscious as a mode of emplotment, involves a titanic struggle with and through Hegelian dialectics. While Hegel is not as explicit a presence in that book as is Socrates, Schopenhauer, Wagner, even Kant, it is against Hegel, I will show, that Nietzsche was often forced to struggle. It is only by understanding this struggle with Hegel that we can understand some of the rhetorical conditions under which the unconscious was devised.

We can observe this relationship in its most general aspect by examining the topic of Nietzsche's book on tragedy, which focuses on its birth, of course, and its death. The importance of Greek tragedy to Nietzsche is well-known. But Hegel also places tragedy and the Greeks near (at least) the center of his philosophy. As Hayden White has pointed out, tragedy provides a model for the mechanism of cultural struggle within Hegel's work,12 but just as important to Hegel's historical narratives was the historical event of Greek tragedy and the cultural contradictions it represented. It turns out that for both Hegel and Nietzsche the Greek polis and the relationship, there, between politics, morality, and aesthetics is a sort of primal scene out of which modernity emerges. Upon this they agree; they are at odds, however, over what, precisely, occurred during Greek antiquity, over the role of tragedy in the Greek spirit, and thus over what the Greeks bequeathed to modernity.

Hegel believed that the Greeks achieved the sort of perfect unity and harmony that underwrites his understanding of the truth, a unity and harmony which, moreover, he thought his age needed in order to combat its alienated and fragmented essence. As he explained in the Aesthetics, modern man is an "amphibious animal, because he now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another."13 In contrast, the Greek polis was an ideal habitat in which humans were at one with themselves and their culture, thus manifesting the highest aesthetic ideals. Indeed, Hegel sees Greek religion and politics as an artistic form — one that actually achieved the "ideal of art." This ideal is "the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration," a truth which will "set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned" (55).

While Hegel joined much of nineteenth-century intellectual culture in admiring the immediacy, harmony, and unity that the Greeks had allegedly achieved, this aesthetic model of unity, he thought, remained beneath the contemporary development of Geist: its sensuous harmony was a limitation on Geist's need to transcend the sensuous realm, in which its freedom and self-determination could not be fully realized. Only a spiritual, rather than sensual, harmony could offer this: in his own age, Hegel explained, "art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone."14 "In all these respects," he concludes, "art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past" (11). Yet elements of its harmony are nevertheless maintained within the mediated form of self-conscious knowledge after which Hegel strived: "thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has been transferred into our ideas" (11). Instead of returning to the sensual immediacy found in Greek culture and in the ideal of art, Hegel tells a story about the way in which, through mediation (rather than by searching for immediacy), this artistic harmony would reappear at the level of self-consciousness and knowledge.

The sensuous aesthetic harmony of the Greeks thus forms a crucial stage in the progress of Geist, a transitory moment which will be revisited only at a higher level of development. Hegel is therefore concerned to stand above art. Although he will maintain aesthetic criteria of harmony and reconciliation for the Notion, truth, and so on, Geist's spiritual progression results in a relative declension of art qua art — of art seen in terms of the realization of its ideal ("the truth in the form of sensuous artistic shape"). If Geist is to be expressed within a more suitably "spiritual" medium, then, it must move beyond its sensuous expression, according to a progressive development which not only disrupts the ideal of art, but, historically speaking, unsettles the aesthetically ordered and harmoniously sculptured form of Greek ethical life and polis as well: "It [spirit] must advance to the consciousness of what it is immediately, must leave behind it the beauty of the ethical life, and by
passing through a series of shapes attain a knowledge of itself."15

Tragedy, Hegel argued, played the crucial historical role of disrupting the ideal perfection of art and therefore the harmony of a culture modelled after the ideal of art. But this disruption was necessary in order for Geist to be reconceived at its higher level. As always in Hegel’s dialectic, progress is spurred by alienation and contradiction. And we are all familiar with the first of these alienated and dissatisfied amphibians upon whose discomfort and misery the higher harmony of modernity would some day be built:

And it was in Socrates, that... the principle of subjectivity — of the absolutely inherent independence of Thought — attained free expression. He taught that man has to discover and recognize in himself what is the Right and Good, and that this Right and Good is in its nature universal... The Greeks had a customary morality; but Socrates undertook to teach them what moral virtues, duties, etc. were. The moral man is not he who merely wills and does that which is right — not the merely innocent man — but he who has the consciousness of what he is doing.16

Socrates marks the end of the Greek synthesis in Hegel’s account, for in his strange utterings and unsettling questions we see a welling up of the forces that were to move Geist toward Christianity and, ultimately, to the threshold of Hegelian philosophy, where its Absolute Self-Consciousness would finally be expressed. With Socrates art begins to give way to a higher expression of Spirit. Though the estranged nature both of Socrates and modernity are not “ideal” (in any sense of the word), it is a necessary step in Geist’s progress, for with Socrates, “Spirit has acquired the propensity to gain satisfaction for itself — to reflect” (270).

II

Nietzsche tells a much different story in The Birth of Tragedy, though it too is centered around the entrance of Socrates, which, in Nietzsche’s narrative, also marks the destruction of art: “Dionysus had already been scared from the tragic stage, by a demonic power speaking through Euripides. Even Euripides was, in a sense, only a mask: the deity that spoke through him was neither Dionysus nor Apollo, but an altogether new born demon called Socrates.”17 But in contrast to Hegel’s progressive dialectic, the entrance of Socrates into Nietzsche’s narrative represents only decline. Art, Nietzsche often proclaimed, was the highest truth, and the destruction of the Greek spirit

at the hands of Socrates does not result in spiritual progress but in the loss of Dionysian and the accompanying “tragic insight” that it had delivered.

Nietzsche’s potentially nostalgic attitude toward the Greeks and their artistic achievement should not lead us to believe that Nietzsche hoped to return to the serenely sculptured aesthetic and ethical harmony that Hegel had imagined to be at the root of Greek life. For Nietzsche’s attack on Hegel does more than dispute the progressive significance that Hegel had attributed to Socrates: rather, his condemnation of Socrates is established upon an altogether different understanding of the Greeks. Where Hegel, in effect, supposed that the essence of the Greek spirit lay in the plastic serenity of the Apollinian, Nietzsche will suggest that what was in fact most admirable in the Greeks lay elsewhere, in the synthesis of the Dionysian and Apollinian.

Thus while Nietzsche agreed with Hegel that the achievement of the Greeks may have been most visible in Apollinian serenity, he will amend Hegel’s view in two crucial ways. First, the Apollinian, Nietzsche argued, received its highest expression upon the tragic stage. It is possible, here, to see the way in which Nietzsche’s account is a rather direct response to Hegel: Hegel’s understanding of the Greeks was predicated on his understanding of sculpture, in which, he suggested, “the inward and the spiritual come into appearance for the first time in their eternal peace and essential self-sufficiency” (85). Sculpture is thus presented by Hegel as a metaphor for Greek ethical and political life: “the Greek Spirit is the plastic artist, forming the stone into a work of art.”18

Second, and more significantly, this appearance of harmonious Apollinian tranquillity was not “self-sufficient” in the way Hegel assumed, but was, Nietzsche insisted, enervated by the restless force of the underlying spirit of Dionysus. The disagreement over sculpture and the Apollinian thus carries over into their views of tragedy: while Hegel argues that tragedy represents an initial rift within the Greek harmony from which Socrates and his ideal of reflection and philosophy begins to emerge, Nietzsche will argue that tragedy was itself the true moment of harmony, the highest expression of “Greek cheerfulness,” as he calls it. The death of tragedy at the hands of Socrates is not, for Nietzsche, a matter of developing further the initial project of tragedy, in which, as Hegel had conceived it, the Socratic way of thinking had already begun; the death of tragedy is instead the destruction of what was most admirable in Greek antiquity.

We can summarize by noting that where Hegel argues that tragedy disrupts the Greek ideal (though in the interest of spiritual progress), Nietzsche argues that tragedy itself was the pinnacle of the Greek ideal, and that its destruction did not mark a moment of progress. For Nietzsche the birth of tragedy does not signify the loss of an ethical harmony or the serene “ideal of art”. This serene harmony, he will imply, existed only in the Hegelian
misinterpretation of the Greek spirit and the ideal of art, and in his misplacement of the center of Greek culture in sculpture.

III

As a preparation for our examination of the emergence of the unconscious in Nietzsche’s text — its rhetorical or discursive invention — let us examine more closely the place in Hegel’s historical dialectic occupied by Greek tragedy. In tragedy, as we have seen, Hegel finds the expression of conflicting forces which had previously been maintained in a precarious ethical and aesthetic balance. Now, however, the incommensurability of two equally justified moral views, one, more specifically, grounded in human law, the other in divine law, is revealed. The result of these two conflicting social forces will be tragic. As Hegel summarizes:

What appears [in the ethically harmonious world] as order and harmony of its two essences, each of which authenticates and completes the other, becomes through the deed a transition of opposites in which each proves itself to be the non-reality, rather than the authentication, of itself and the other. It becomes the negative movement, or the eternal necessity, of a dreadful fate which engulfs in the abyss of its single nature divine and human alike, as well as the two self-consciousness in which these powers have their existence. 19

This incommensurable “collision of duties” found in tragic conflict provokes a previously unrealized distinction between “the known and the unknown,” between the individual and the ethical community, and so on. It is out of this immanent collision that Socratic reflection begins and that “spirit transcends art in order to gain a higher consciousness of itself” (426).

Of significance to our understanding of Nietzsche’s critique of Hegel and his invention of the unconscious is the way in which Hegel’s progressive, dialectic narrative contains no version of the unconscious — or at least the unconscious as it is, after Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, understood today. Although Hegel is interested in placing consciousness where unconsciousness had hitherto prevailed, there is no sense of the unconscious as an active, repressed force. His plots are a matter of Geist conquering its lack of consciousness, of invading territory previously uninhabited, rather than seeking lost archaeological treasures, repressed forces, hidden connections.

This can be seen in the temporal structure of the dialectic, in which conflicts and conceptual oppositions arise only as Geist develops. In contrast to Nietzsche’s untimely meditations, in which he uncovers buried or repressed secrets, Hegel’s philosophy is strictly “timely.” Hegel expresses this most forcefully when he insists that “to comprehend what is, is the task of philosophy, for what is, is reason. As far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a child of his time; thus philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts.” 20 Since one is always dealing with a current state of development, with newly arising contradictions, past philosophers or cultures cannot, according to Hegel, be guilty of repressing an aspect of their nature, time, or social reality.

Another way of explaining the difference in temporal structure of Hegel’s dialectical plot and the plots of the unconscious involves contrasting two forms of intellectual labor. Hegel’s (timely) dialectic involves a process of the “working-out” of the concept. As Hegel puts it, “It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual.” 21

If the timely work in Hegel is a matter of working-out the concept, the untimely labor that is developed in post-Hegelian discourse from Nietzsche to Heidegger to poststructuralism, as well as in Marxism (though in a different form), is a matter of working-through. I take this epigrammatic label from Freud’s essay “Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through.” 22 Freud’s term for analytic work in German is durcharbeiten, which translates quite literally to ‘working-through.’ Hegel, in contrast, frequently employs the word erarbeiten, which, though translated as “working-out,” has connotations of gaining or getting through work. In this way, Hegel is prospective and extrospective in contrast to Freud’s retrospective introspection; Freud turns inward, repeating and remembering; Hegel is an expansive thinker whose labor works centrifugally, spiralling outward as it accumulates consciousness, replacing contingency and chaos with purpose and plot. Freud’s quest involves re-seeing what is already there by overcoming the resistances to this clear sight. Instead of projecting a plot upon the world, it investigates the plots we have already imposed upon ourselves. Marx implies a similar need for working-through when he declares “that the traditions of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” 23

IV

At the risk of getting ahead of my story, let me note that Nietzsche’s critique of Hegel involves not only employing but inventing an untimely plot of working-through; ultimately, he will write a narrative in which he works-through Hegel’s understanding of tragedy, in order to discern what, in effect, it represses. But let us move in this direction by examining the way tragedy fits into Hegel’s broader narratives. As I mentioned earlier, tragedy for Hegel
represents the “truth” of any specific conflict. But as Hayden White has pointed out, these local conflicts are a part of large comic plot of reconciliation. White explains that for Hegel “the life of every people or nation is, like the life of every heroic individual in history, a Tragedy.” But “Hegel’s purpose is to justify the transition from the comprehension of the Tragic nature of every specific civilization to the Comic apprehension of the unfolding drama of the whole of history.”24 With this in mind, let us contrast Hegel’s philosophical dispensation to Nietzsche’s. While Hegel indicated that the essence of life, or rather its ultimate aim, was a reintegration of ethical life that would eventually recreate the Greek ethical harmony on the higher plane of self-conscious reason, Nietzsche was inclined to see the essence of life as tragic, unalleviated by higher comic purpose; life, he thought was an ordeal that could only be justified and endured if accompanied by tragic insight. As Deleuze puts it, Nietzsche is interested in “the affirmation of life instead of its higher solution or justification.”25

But this tragic viewpoint that Nietzsche was interested in forwarding had been ensnared in the Hegelian story, where it was a mere stage on the way to a higher form of development. The difficulty involved in releasing tragedy from its dialectical entrapment can help account for many features of The Birth of Tragedy, and beyond that, the later development of Nietzsche’s thought. And it is in relation to this entrapment that the unconscious emerges in Nietzsche’s account, as he begins to suggest that both the Socratic and Hegelian dialectic is based on a “repression” of the Dionysian.

The insatiable appetite of Hegel’s dialectic makes things complicated for Nietzsche; Hegel, as we have seen, had, through its placement of tragedy as a cultural and conceptual stage, inscribed in his dialectic something very much like the position Nietzsche wanted to adopt. While Nietzsche hoped to draw from Greek tragedy a very particular form of spiritual vigor and cultural strength, Hegel had already gone to great lengths to show how this sort of cultural vigor had severe limitations which, however necessary, had been subsumed in Geist’s march toward reason. Yet the general dispensation behind these views, Nietzsche’s admiration of Dionysus, the tragic view of life, and so on, remained for him undiminished. How, then, could he resuscitate these values?

What Nietzsche must do, to begin with, is somehow show that tragedy’s death at the hands of dialectical thinking (and not its death within a dialectic as Hegel would have it) is a loss not just for art, but for Geist as well. He must therefore re-tell the dialectical story of Greek art, Greek serenity and the nature of the polis in such a way that Hegel’s overriding narrative of dialectical progress is somehow displaced, re-situated, or undermined. But so vast and all-encompassing is Hegel’s dialectic that not only had the position that Nietzsche endorsed, but any strategy that he might adopt had already been “placed” and aufgehoben in one of Hegel’s imbricated histories of consciousness. Nietzsche’s task is arduous and exacting, and, I will show, there is evidence in The Birth of Tragedy’s equivocal strategy that he was uncertain of how he might best proceed.

Nietzsche’s initial strategy was to out-flank Hegel by recontextualizing the Hegelian dialectic within another, even more encyclopedic dialectic: while Hegel had suggested that it is in sculpture that the spirit of the Greeks achieved its highest point, Nietzsche suggests that the principles of sculpture represented only half of the true formula of Greek art:

Through Apollo and Dionysus, the two art deities of the Greeks, we come to recognize that in the Greek world there existed a tremendous opposition, in origin and aims, between the Apollinian art of sculpture, and the nonimagistic, Dionysian art of music. These two tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance; and they continually incite each other to new and more powerful births, which perpetuate an antagonism, only superficially reconciled by the common term ‘art’; till eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic will, they appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art — Attic tragedy.26

The references to sculpture, I have suggested, can be read as an allusion to Hegel; his description of the synthesis of the two forces is thus a matter of his attempt to displace the Hegelian understanding of both art and Greek culture. Against Hegel’s definition of the “ideal of art” as “the truth in the form of sensuous artistic shape,” Nietzsche suggests that the ideal of art (here a tragic rather than comic ideal) is instead to be found in the willful synthesis of the Apollinian and the Dionysian, the plastic and the musical. Against Hegel’s notion that the highest aesthetic expression of Greek art and culture lies in the plasticity of sculpture, Nietzsche construes sculpture as merely one side of a larger synthesis, suggesting that it is in tragedy that we find not just the highest expression of “art,” but of the “Hellenic will” as well.

The consequences that result from this Hegelian misunderstanding of Europe’s primal scene are, Nietzsche thinks, grave. By identifying “the Greek character” with the serenity of sculpture, Hegel fails to understand the way in which the Apollinian depended upon the Dionysian for its health and vigor, and the way Europe needed an influx of the Dionysian spirit of music if it too were to regain good health and spirits.
In the *Aesthetics*, for instance, Hegel supposes that the Apollinian deities maintain their serenity by distancing themselves from the flux and toils of mortal existence:

> What impresses us about these gods is in the first place the spiritual substantial individuality which, withdrawn into itself out of the motley show of the particularity of need and unrest of the finite with its variety of purposes, rests secure on its own universality as on an eternal and clear foundation.\(^{27}\)

Underlining his assumption that this serenity is born of remove, of protected repose, Hegel will accordingly refer to theirs as an “untroubled dominion” (481). Nietzsche implicitly rejects this view in *The Birth of Tragedy* when he looks “deeper,” searching for the needs that this serene plasticity responds to, the forces that instigate this majesty. The answer, he explains, will appear when we examine the proximity of the Greeks and their serene deities to the horrible, immobilizing, otherwise unbearable force of the Dionysian:

> With what astonishment must the Apollinian Greek have beheld him! With an astonishment that was all the greater the more it was mingled with the shuddering suspicion that all this was actually not so very alien to him after all, in fact, that it was only his Apollinian consciousness which, like a veil, hid this Dionysian world from his vision.\(^{28}\)

Thus the Apollinian serenity — the whole of Greek art and culture in Hegel’s view — is merely a surface, a mask that covers the Dionysian abysses of which Hegel is oblivious. Rather than a representation of a profound serenity that ran to the core of Greek life, “it was,” according to Nietzsche, “in order to live that the Greeks had to create these gods from a most profound need... How else,” he continues, “could this people, so sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so singularly capable of suffering, have endured existence, if it had not been revealed to them in their gods, surrounded with a higher glory” (42-3).

The dialectical thinking of Socrates — whose criticisms of tragedy and art in general are accepted by Hegel as a sign of progress — is thus shown by Nietzsche to be operating upon a fundamental omission. Nietzsche’s descriptions of an aesthetically-insensitive Socrates is in this sense a redescription of Hegel’s version of Socrates as the one who rose above unmediated ethical substance and “taught that man has to discover and recognize in himself what is the Right and the Good.”\(^{29}\) Nietzsche will instead describe Socrates’ alleged dialectical or theoretical “insight” in terms of a profound “blindness”:

> Let us now imagine the one great Cyclops eye of Socrates fixed on tragedy, an eye in which the fair frenzy of artistic enthusiasm had never glowed. To this eye was denied the pleasure of gazing into the Dionysian abysses. What, then, did it have to see in the “sublime and greatly lauded” tragic art, as Plato called it? Something rather unreasonable, full of causes apparently without effects, and effect apparently without causes.\(^{30}\)

The birth of dialectical thinking in Socrates is not a moment of progress toward the highest development of *Geist*; Socrates did not, as Hegel claimed, emerge from “the germ of their decline the classical gods have in themselves.”\(^{31}\) Rather his denial of the Dionysian as “unreasonable” caused the delicate synthesis of Apollo and Dionysus to fall apart. As Nietzsche says of Euripides, “And because you abandoned Dionysus, Apollo abandoned you.”\(^{32}\) The dialectic of reason that begins with Socrates and ends with Hegel is therefore a lifeless procession that stumbles blindly forth — obtuse, unartistic, and weak, destroyed from within by unelevated self-consciousness — because the Dionysian had been forgotten and the Apollinian had consequently dissipated. The blindness of Socrates and Hegel, according to the new metaphoricities that Nietzsche is devising, found its consequences in the decadence of modernity.

But if, near the beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche establishes — or in contrast to Hegel, attempts to reestablish — the dialectical unity of Greek art and culture in tragedy; by the end of his book he expresses his hope for a dialectical return to the vigor he associates with the unity of Apollo and Dionysus. At this stage of his career, Nietzsche was captivated by Wagnerian opera, which he optimistically believed would reunify Apollo and Dionysus:

> If, however, in the exemplification here indicated, we have rightly associated the disappearance of the Dionysian spirit with a most striking, but hitherto unexplained, transformation and degeneration of the Hellenic man — what hopes must revive in us when the most certain auspices guarantee the reverse process, the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit in our modern world! (119)

Tragedy was to be reborn; its metaphysical insight would return as Dionysus reappeared at the limits of the dialectic of enlightenment:
But science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck ... When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail — suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, tragic insight which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy. (97-8)

The illusion that Nietzsche refers to is that of Absolute knowledge — “a profound illusion,” he reminds us, “that first saw the light of the world in the person of Socrates: the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of correcting it” (95). But if this illusion had gripped the consciousness of Europe during the two-century reign of dialectical thinking, Nietzsche ventures that this reign will also come to a dialectical end, as “tragic insight” “breaks through.”

The advantage of this dialectical approach is the way it allowed Nietzsche to criticize his age without appealing to what Hegel would refer to as “a pliant medium” of a transcendental imagination. I have suggested that Nietzsche will ultimately devise an untimely approach, but here he is strictly “timely”: as in Hegelian dialectics, the solution to the cultural problems he identifies is both immanent and imminent; it must merely be allowed to work itself out. But there are nevertheless two strategic problems with this formulation — or at least two that seemed to have later (perhaps even vaguely at the time) bothered Nietzsche. First, and most obviously, science did not reach its self-destructive limit, nor, excepting his own perspicacity, did tragic insight burst upon the European landscape with the flash of illumination that Nietzsche predicted. Dionysus remained excluded from the dialectical stage.

The other problem has to do with the specific genre of Nietzsche’s narrative of the return of Dionysus. By adopting a dialectical model of cultural development, even one that was able to “contextualize” dialectical Reason, Nietzsche is hardly escaping dialectics. “It smells offensively Hegelian,” he noted in his discussion of The Birth of Tragedy in Ecce Homo:

An “idea” — the antithesis of the Dionysian and the Apollinian — translated into the realm of metaphysics; history itself as the development of this “idea”; in tragedy this antithesis is sublimated into a unity; and in this perspective things that had never before faced each other are suddenly juxtaposed, used to illuminate each other, and comprehended — opera, for example, and the revolution.33

But science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly toward its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck. For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points; and while there is no telling how this circle could ever be surveyed completely, noble and gifted men nevertheless reach, e’er half their time and inevitably, such boundary points on the periphery from which one gazes into what defies illumination. When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail — suddenly the new form of insight breaks through,
tragic insight which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and remedy.35

When examined closely, there are two models of the “unthought” registered in this passage. The most obvious one — a model which is characteristic of dialectical narratives of progress — is a model of horizons. The unthought lies at the limits of knowledge, beyond its outer periphery, past the farther side of its boundary, at a point not yet worked-out. But within the horizon of the known and the thought there lies another unthought, one that can only be obtained by a different kind of labor: this one an internal unknown, an “illusion” which “spurs” science toward its limit. If the primary unknown of “Science” — that which Nietzsche believed at this point would immanently “break through” — lies beyond its limits, Nietzsche nevertheless implies that it is driven by an internal flaw in its modus operandi: its optimism, he suggests, is “concealed in the essence of its logic.”

I want to mark the significance of this passage. Although its potential (seen retrospectively as potential, that is) is not fully developed, Nietzsche will create from the metaphoric and narrative resources he buries half-concealed (yet half-visible) in this passage and elsewhere in his early work a new cultural meaning of blindness, one that is self-willed, one that evokes a moral indictment in the name of the authenticity that is, through blindness, evaded; this is the sort of blindness that Derrida attributes to Hegel when he suggests that “Hegel saw this without seeing it, showed it while concealing it.”36 It is upon the image of the eyes growing dim not simply at the limits imposed upon them by their age, but at the center of their field of vision that the contemporary critical gaze is so often fixed. The notion of a blind-spot (and all its correlatives) suggests an internal impediment to clear sight, one that could be overcome if not with the will, by the skill of the archaeologically minded analysts who is willing to work-through the past. And this, in its historical, narratival form, I am suggesting, is the only criticism that Hegel — that great thinker of the horizon — did not foresee, had left unthought, repressed, or had not fully worked-out.

Again, although Nietzsche develops these implications later, by attributing to dialectical Reason lapses described in terms of forgetting, blindness, and omission, Nietzsche’s own dialectical account in The Birth of Tragedy is never, in the way Hegel’s is, an account fully dedicated to the idea of development, in which one’s predecessors are seen merely as undeveloped. The rhetoric of the veil of appearances and dark abysses, of the serenity of the Apollinian and the violent restlessness of the Dionysian, the metaphors of something close and disruptive lurking beneath the serenity of thought — these figures, so close in imagery to those of the unconscious, are already there in this early book. Thus when Nietzsche realized that the legacy of Socrates will not dialectically destroy itself, it is the idea of the blind spot and the metaphors associated with Dionysus that Nietzsche will develop or replot, creating what we are now able to associate with the unconscious.

V

Let us be clear: the dynamically repressed unconscious is not fully developed in The Birth of Tragedy. Indeed, only if we are under the spell of the contemporary acceptance of a Freudian idiom will something resembling “the unconscious” appear to emerge from The Birth of Tragedy; but we nevertheless tend to see something of Freud’s id in the blind fury and ecstasy of the Dionysian. What, after all, could be closer to the return of the psychological repressed than “the shuddering suspicion that... [the Dionysian] was not in fact so alien to him after all” — a suspicion that Nietzsche attributes to the Greek cultural psyche? Nietzsche’s topography, however, is not analogous to Freud’s, and the exclusion of the Dionysian does not fulfill all the requirements of a real repression. Nor, for that matter, can the imagery of blindness and exclusion that are associated by Nietzsche with the suppression or abandonment of the Dionysian support a plot of repression and return. While most genealogists of the unconscious would see Nietzsche’s effort in The Birth of Tragedy as part of his struggle towards the truth of the unconscious, I see it as a rhetorical strategy whose strategic shortcomings were later improved upon. The problem with this early book is that it lacks the closed economy and the accompanying principle of necessity that ensures nothing will be lost, that the repressed will return, and so on. As Freud put it, “actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. What appears as renunciation is really the formation of a substitute or a surrogate.”37 In the dynamics of Nietzsche’s plot in The Birth of Tragedy, there is nothing to ensure that the Dionysian cannot simply be lost or forgotten, nothing to make its return inevitable.

In his later writings, Nietzsche does seem to develop a principle of necessity. In Beyond Good and Evil, for instance, he refers to post-Socratic culture as a “bent bow” whose “damped up” energy and strength will be released.38 Or in Human, All Too Human he says of his projected “free spirits,” “I see them already coming, slowly, slowly; and perhaps I shall do something to speed their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes, upon what paths, I see them coming?”39 We don’t, however, have any such principle in The Birth of Tragedy. Unlike Freud’s conception of the unconscious (or even the imagery of the bent bow or the imminent advance of the free spirits) the exclusion of the Dionysian discussed in The Birth of Tragedy is not, according to the causal chain that Nietzsche devises, configured in such a way that its return is necessary. The Dionysian and
Apollinian do battle, intermingle, and are eventually synthesized. But the end of their union, though precipitated by the introduction of Socratic dialectics, is more like a dissolution than a repression. The synthesis of Apollo and Dionysus may have been a spiritual high-point, but its union, born of a seemingly contingent (“miraculous”) convergence of the forces of the Greek will, may never again occur.

Although he will (for these reasons, I am arguing) reject the mode of emplotment employed in his early book, in other respects the project Nietzsche establishes in *The Birth of Tragedy* is not completely abandoned. He continues to view his moral, philosophical, and cultural life according to a set of normative hierarchies, to which his time (characterized by “the denial of life, a principle of disintegration and decay”) does not live up. His initial opposition between Dionysus and Apollo gives way to his division of the world into the active and the reactive, noble and slavish, the life affirming and life denying, yea-saying and nay-saying, valuation and nihilism, expression of the will and its denial. These oppositions bear resemblance to his initial dualism, but are, we shall see, configured in a way that will open up new possibilities for Nietzsche’s historical plot.

His task continues to involve explaining how it is that his culture came to embrace the second term in this list, and how it might return to the first. What changes throughout Nietzsche’s career, however, has less to do with the terms with which he represents his discontent, and more to do with the narrative structure which he employs to forecast and encourage the coming of a new epoch. The metaphor of the bending and unbending of the bow — similar, certainly, to repression and its return — represents one of the simplest plot structures, yet is absent from *The Birth of Tragedy*. One of the crucial changes in his post-*Birth of Tragedy* work is the development of a concept of, or perhaps like, repression. Indeed, Nietzsche sounds quite Freudian when he speaks of “dammed up energy.”

An in-depth treatment of Nietzsche’s trajectory as a scholar would examine in detail the way the opposition between Dionysus and Apollo was replaced by the single, monistic principle of the will to power: “This world is the will to power — and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power — and nothing besides!” We need only note that as a monism the will to power cannot be escaped, for escaping it is by definition a matter of the will to power. One can embrace or deny the will to power, but one cannot transcend it; in this way it provides the sense of necessity and inescapability lacking in Nietzsche’s earlier notion of the Dionysian.

This can be seen in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which, after *The Birth of Tragedy*, is Nietzsche’s most extended effort to put into a narrative form the account of the rise and fall of Christian morality, dialectic thinking, abnegation of the will, and so on. In his *Genealogy*, however, we see the development of repression, necessity, and what could be called a plot of the unconscious. Nietzsche tells an allegorical story of the origin of valuation, and the ensuing reversal of the terms in the series of oppositions referred to above. In the beginning, the strong named themselves “good,” while referring to the weak as “bad”; “the good” themselves, meaning the noble, the mighty, the high-placed and the high-minded, who saw and themselves and their actions as good, I mean first-rate, in contrast to everything lowly, low-minded, common and plebeian.” This birth of concepts, Nietzsche does not deny, is a matter of power. Indeed it is his point that all truth is a matter of forceful naming, based on a will to power that cannot be escaped.

The will to power can, however, be distorted — and the history of dialectical Reason becomes a history of this distortion, the denial of the will to power which drives one’s concepts. Nietzsche refers to the “slave revolt,” in which power and strength were renamed as “evil,” while weakness, humility, pity, and self-abasement were labelled “good.” As with the original conception of values, these valuations are born of an egoistic set of needs; they too are a matter of the will to power.

If both are born of the will to power, how does Nietzsche support his hierarchy? If no one can transcend the will to power, upon what grounds are some of its expressions better than others? The slave morality, Nietzsche argues, is an attempt to deny the will. This morality of the negation of the will eventually becomes synonymous with the philosophical search for timeless and transcendent truths. In contrast, the valuation of the nobles is honest and forthright: “the noble man is confident and frank with himself” (22), acting upon instinct and with an absence of cunning or calculation, he “conceives of the basic idea of ‘good’ by himself, in advance and spontaneously, and only then creates a notion of ‘bad’” (24). The slave morality is thus a distortion of this frank and cheerful spontaneity. Nietzsche refers to the “sublime self-deception whereby the majority of the dying, the weak and the oppressed of every kind could construe weakness itself as freedom, and their particular mode of existence as an accomplishment” (29). In short, the revaluation of values that forms the basis of Western philosophy, religion, and morality is built on a fundamental dishonesty, in which the life-affirming values of the strong are subject to a “distortion that results from the feeling of contempt, disdain, and superciliousness” (22).

We can now note the difference of this genealogy to Nietzsche’s earlier account of the rise of Western culture. Where the Socratic tradition was initially described by Nietzsche as a matter of abandoning Dionysus, now it is described as a matter, in effect, of repressing the will to power. This form of repression comes through most vividly in the third essay of *The Genealogy*, where Nietzsche describes a character type, the ascetic priest, as the master of the negation of the will, the first “repressed” individual whose psychic
labor works in the name of a sick and perverted form of the will to power. Like the repressed psychoanalytic subject, the ascetic priest can only rechannel his unconscious instincts; both operate according to the economic principle of the conservation of energy: "Every animal, including the bete philosophe, instinctively strives for an optimum of favorable conditions in which fully to release his power and achieve his maximum of power sensation." More specifically, Nietzsche continues, "on seeing the ascetic ideal, the philosopher smiles because he sees an optimum condition of the highest and boldest intellectuality, — he does not deny 'existence' by doing so, but rather affirms his existence and only his existence" (81). The pose of selflessness and disinterest is merely a disguise. Far from escaping the will to power, the philosopher-priest displays a "power-will which wants to be master, not over something in life, but over life itself" (91). Nietzsche's story, in outline, is quite simple. A pure beginning, in which the will to power operated without dissimulation, guilt, or guile, gives way to a repression of this will by itself.

While Nietzsche is often seen here as anticipating Freud's later, clinically verified, psychological insights, it is just as possible to understand Nietzsche's formulations as the basis for a particularly effective narrative, one that can, among other things, undermine Hegel's. One can easily see the advantage that this narrative has over Nietzsche's earlier one: he is more plausibly (than before) able to suggest that "we stand on the threshold of this occurrence. After Christian truthfulness had drawn one conclusion after another, it will finally draw the strongest conclusion, that against itself; this will, however, happen when it asks itself, 'What does all will to truth mean?'" While this has not yet happened, Nietzsche declares, "without a doubt, from now on, morality will be destroyed by the will to truth's becoming-conscious-of-itself: that great drama in a hundred acts reserved for Europe in the next two centuries, the most terrible, most dubious drama but perhaps also the one most rich in hope..." (127).44

We are more or less at the same place, the same hopeful moment of narratival resolution, that we discovered near the end of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The difference, however, is the way that this ending has less contingency to it. Now Nietzsche has explained much more fully how and why European culture, as he knew (and hated) it, would of immanent necessity come to an end in a way that ties up the main strands of development; the ending that Nietzsche desires emerges more fully from the forces and peripeties that occurred along the way. In short, Nietzsche has created the illusion of an untimely necessity and attached his critical ethos to this necessary return of the repressed. By inventing a notion of repression, a principle which could organize a plot of necessity, immanence, and the conservation of cultural forces and energy, Nietzsche has found a way to outwit Hegel.
My efforts have considerable affinity with the work of Foucault, especially in *The Order of Things*. It is interesting to note, however, that *The Order of Things* is organized according to a narrative of the repression and return of language. I discuss Foucault’s struggle throughout his work with the concepts of repression and the unconscious in a forthcoming work which focusses on the construction and (partial) deconstruction of the unconscious in Foucault and Derrida.


Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 269.


Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 550. Kaufmann discusses this issue at length in his chapter on “The Discovery of the Will to Power.” In summary, he writes: “When Nietzsche introduced the will to power into his thought, all the dualistic tendencies which had rent it previously could be reduced to mere manifestations of this basic drive. Thus a reconciliation was finally effected between Dionysus and Apollo... “ (Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Anti-Christ*, 4th edition [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978], 178).


Nietzsche’s creation of a plot of necessity based on a sort of conservation of energy is only half the story. Just as quickly as he constructs this sort of plot he deconstructs it. One way of looking at this would be to draw an opposition that Derrida takes from Bataille, the distinction between a restricted and a general economy. While the plot that I am attributing to Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche is restricted, in which even negativity and loss is preserved as meaning within a closed system, Nietzsche places this restricted economy into a general economy, one based on expenditure and loss, “without reserve.” He does this, I would argue, by virtue of his perspectivism and the will to power, which, like Derrida’s understanding of “writing,” is inimical to the conservation of meaning. Although I do not have the space, here, to elaborate, let me offer a fragments from Nietzsche that suggest the lines along which his general economy proceeds, and upon which the notion of a hermeneutically accessible unconscious is deconstructed: “‘Truth’ is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered — but something that must be created and that gives name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end — introducing truth, as a processus in infinitum, an active determining — not a becoming conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined. It is a word for the ‘will to power’” (*The Will to Power* 298).