



## NIETZSCHE (1844-1900)

Nietzsche's writings had a profound impact in the 20<sup>th</sup> century influencing a wide range of leading cultural figures from novelists and poets, playwrights, composers, painters, sculptors, architects Freud and Jung and the whole development of psychoanalysis would have been unthinkable without Nietzsche in philosophy his influence was felt first among proponents of so called *Life-Philosophy* and a major influence on the development of Existentialism on Jaspers, Heidegger, Camus, Sartre and in more recent years on "postmodern" thought

especially on French writers such as Blanchot, Bataille, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze

his influence on Existentialist thought can be discerned in both the differences and affinities he shares with Kierkegaard Nietzsche discovered Kierkegaard too late in 1888 to have read any of his works at first glance Nietzsche would seem to have little in common with the devout Dane Nietzsche's notorious announcement of the "death of God" his conviction that religious faith is no longer tenable contrasts sharply with Kierkegaard's emphasis on faith however, they both share a scathing critique of modernity of their respective contemporary societies both hostile to Hegelian systematic philosophy and the historical dialectic both look deeply into human existence and find man much more than a rational animal both sees little value in the moral philosophies of Kant or utilitarianism both emphasize a radical individualism there is also a similarity in approach to writing—the issue of style a similar challenge to the traditional notion of truth in some ways Nietzsche further radicalizes a critique of the notion of truth begun by Kierkegaard's notion of subjective truth and yet the differences with Kierkegaard are profound though he shared a critique of the overconfidence of reason he did not, like Kierkegaard, take that leap of faith where reason fails Kaufmann sums this difference up well: "Nietzsche was, no less than Kierkegaard, an apostle of passion and a critic of hypocrisy, but he did not extol passion at the expense of reason, and he repudiated Christianity not because he considered it too rational but because he considered it the archenemy of reason; and his caustic critique of faith, both in the *Antichrist* and elsewhere, reads like a considered censure of Kierkegaard among others."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian, 1975), p. 19.

perhaps another way to sum up the difference between the two is that Nietzsche is further distanced from Hegel not only by years David West notes that though Nietzsche is equally hostile to the historical dialectic of Hegel and shares Kierkegaard's scepticism of systematic philosophy

Nietzsche does not believe that nihilism can be outwitted by sophisticated manoeuvres of a Kierkegaardian kind either. He is determined to avoid the characteristic weakness of systematic philosophers and 'metaphysicians' of all kinds, who wish to 'solve with one stroke, with one word' and so become 'unriddlers of the universe.' Kierkegaard falls victim to a parallel temptation, although practical rather than intellectual, when he founds everything on the single decision to accept God. Nietzsche's response is very different. Rather than evade the logic of Enlightenment rationalism, he sets out to apply the critical force of reason with even greater ruthlessness.<sup>2</sup>

perhaps Nietzsche's most significant influence upon Existentialism is his attempt to respond to nihilism — the 'crisis of modernity' understood as an event that comes in the wake of 'the death of God' (*GS* §125) 'God' here refers not only to the Christian God—and thus the 'death of God' points to the untenability of faith as an adequate response to the crisis of modernity— 'God' refers also to the notion of 'Truth' understood as a universal, absolute something discoverable by reason that would provide a stable ground for a moral (and political) world order and a determinate conception of the meaning of existence thus pointing to the untenability of the Enlightenment confidence in reason

compare Nietzsche and Kierkegaard on "the death of God"  
would Kierkegaard regard Nietzsche's position as still stuck in the third form of despair?  
or might he find Nietzsche's thought an example of the "striving with God"?  
(*GS* §125) surely seems to suggest a crisis  
this theme of crisis would mark his last writings  
at the time of his collapse he was working on a book which opens with a confrontation with the crisis of nihilism:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. This history can be related even now; for necessity itself is at work here. This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect. (*The Will to Power*, Preface, 2)

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<sup>2</sup>David West, *An Introduction to Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 127.

the crisis of nihilism which comes in the wake of the “death of God”  
is also expressed well at (GS §343)

The greatest recent event—that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. For the few at least, whose eyes—the *suspicion* in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, "older." But in the main one may say: The event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having *arrived* as yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?

but then this passage is titled *The Meaning of Our Cheerfulness*

how does Nietzsche find a reason for cheerfulness in the wake of the “death of God”?

Indeed, we philosophers and "free spirits" feel, when we hear the news that "the old god is dead," as if a new dawn shone on us; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright; at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an "open sea."

perhaps this is what most separates Nietzsche and Kierkegaard

Nietzsche's philosophy is existentialist in its attempt to confront the absurdity of existence

Kaufmann notes how Nietzsche's thought differs from the popular conception of existentialism

one theme that is prominent in Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre

(Kaufmann notes that these four might be considered the 'hard core of existentialism')

is a preoccupation with despair, anxiety, dread, failure and death

If we consider this striking preoccupation with failure, dread, and death one of the essential characteristics of existentialism, Nietzsche can no longer be included in this movement. The theme of suffering recurs often in his work, and he, too, concentrates attention on aspects of life which were often ignored in the nineteenth century; but he makes much less of dread and death than of man's cruelty, resentment, and hypocrisy—of the immorality that struts around masked as morality. It is not the somber and depressed moods that he stresses most but quite another state of mind which appears even much less often in the literature of the past: a "Dionysian" joy and exultation that says Yes to life not in a mood of dogged resolution, which is prominent in later German existentialism, but with love and laughter.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Kaufman, p.21.

Nietzsche's works are often divided into three major periods:

### **I. Early**

the early period is marked by his classical scholarship, preoccupation with Greek culture, art, and the influence of Romanticism, Schopenhauer and Wagner  
most important, of course, is his first major work,

*The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)

a work which led to a profound reexamination of Greek culture and which has had a lasting influence in the philosophy of art

there was also a couple of essays:

“Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks” (1873 )

“On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense” (1873)

and a number of collections of fragmentary reflections:

*Untimely Meditations, I, II, III, IV* (1873-76)

### **II. Middle**

the middle period is marked by a reaction against Romanticism, Schopenhauer, and Wagner at first glance seems to be characterized by a turn away from the earlier preoccupation with art and a turn toward science and positivism (especially in the first two aphoristic works)

*Human, All-Too-Human* (1878)

*Dawn* (1881)

however, I think this is misleading for art remains a key focus in his thought

what we see here, rather, is his attempt to become an “artistic Socrates”

to challenge and breakdown the traditional distinction between

philosophy (conceived on the model of rigorous science) and art

we see this especially in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882—the first four “books”)

translated as *The Gay (or “Joyful”) Science*

this period culminates in the work he considered his most important

his philosophical novel or “tone-poem,” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85)

### **III. Late**

the next period sees the final developments of his mature philosophy

*Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) regarded by some as his most “philosophical”

*The Genealogy of Morals* and the fifth book of *The Gay Science* (1887)

the last year (1888) his work comes to a shattering climax with four books:

*The Case Against Wagner* —in part a recollection of earlier writings

*Twilight of the Idols* —a summation of his final views

*The Antichrist* —a polemic against Christianity, supposedly the first book of a work that was to be his magnum opus

*Ecce Homo* —a very strange autobiography, recounting his life as a writer, includes chapter titles such as “Why I am so Wise,” “Why I am so Clever,” “Why I Write Such Good Books,” and “Why I am a Destiny”

his unpublished notes, some of which were drafts or pieces of the unfinished magnum opus were edited and published later by his sister under the title of *The Will to Power*

## LIFE

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844 in the small village of Röcken in Prussian Saxony in what is now the eastern part of Germany. Nietzsche came in a long line of Lutheran pastors and he lived in his early childhood at the parsonage in Röcken. His sister, Elizabeth, was born when he was two and a younger brother followed two years later. Tragedy struck the Nietzsche family the next year, however, when first Nietzsche's father and then his younger brother died. Nietzsche's mother moved the family to the city of Naumburg where they lived with her mother-in-law and her daughters. Nietzsche was raised then in a house with his sister, his mother, his grandmother, and two aunts.

At the age of 14 Nietzsche was accepted into the prestigious school at Pforta, the most famous classical school in Germany where Novalis, Fichte and the Schlegel brothers has been educated. At the age of 20 he started studying theology at the University of Bonn but then gave up the plan to follow in the line of his fathers and the next year enrolled at Leipzig University to study philology. It was at Leipzig that Nietzsche first encountered Schopenhauer's philosophy and also where he was able to meet the great composer Richard Wagner. Nietzsche excelled at Leipzig and on the basis of his professor's recommendation was appointed in 1869 at the unheard of age of 24 to a chair in philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland. He was forced to resign his Prussian citizenship but this was more than made up for by being in proximity to Wagner who was living a short distance away at Tribschen on the shores of Lake Lucern. In the early years at Basel Nietzsche often traveled to Tribschen, becoming quite close to Wagner.

In July of 1870 the Franco-Prussian war broke out and Nietzsche, having relinquished his Prussian citizenship and thus prevented from joining the army, volunteered as an ambulance attendant. He served in that capacity the rest of that summer and returned to Basel in the fall with severe dysentery and diphtheria. At the beginning of the war Nietzsche had been a patriotic enthusiast but by October after Prussia's unexpected triumph, which would soon lead to the unification of the German empire and the fall of Napoleon III, Nietzsche would write to a friend "Confidentially, I consider the Prussia of today to be one of the powers most dangerous of all of culture." This would be the beginning of Nietzsche's reaction against German culture and the politics of Bismarck's *Reich*. It also set Nietzsche on a course contra Wagner as the victory over the French and the consequent rise in German nationalism had led to Wagner's increased popularity and eventual triumphal return to Germany.

In late 1871 *The Birth of Tragedy* was accepted for publication. The book offered a radically different look at classical Greek culture and a new theory about the origin and the worth of Greek tragedy. The high point of Greek culture was not the serene rationalism of Socrates and Plato, but rather occurred a century earlier in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The book can be divided into three main parts, the first recounts the strange birth of tragedy from out of the diametrically opposed Apollonian and Dionysian art drives, the second tells the story of the death of tragedy at the hands of Socrates, and the third celebrates a new birth of tragedy—in Wagner's operas. The book endeared him to Wagner and the Wagner circle but by the mid 1870s Nietzsche's doubts about Wagner and the direction of German culture began to grow stronger. For the rest of his career Nietzsche would become ever more critical of the militant nationalism as well as the antisemitism that flourished within the Wagner cult and more and more throughout Germany. In the summer of 1876 Wagner returned to Germany in triumph, establishing the opera festival at Bayreuth (still an annual event today). It was at this inaugural festival that the break

with Wagner came, Nietzsche leaving in disgust with his Jewish friend, the psychologist Paul Rée.

These years that brought the break with Wagner also brought a sharp decline in Nietzsche's health. In 1879, only ten years after beginning his academic career with such promise, Nietzsche is forced to resign from the university because of poor health. Nietzsche would spend the next ten years living on a modest pension, traveling mostly between the Engadine and the cities of Genoa, Nice, Rapallo, Venice, Rome and Turin, constantly in search of a climate and setting that would enable him to write. During this time, during which he rarely traveled to Germany, Nietzsche further distanced himself from Wagner, Wagner's music and German culture. This eventually brought a split with his sister, Elizabeth, who had very much enjoyed being at the center of the Wagner cult during Nietzsche's early years in Basel. The final break came when she married a rabid anti-semitic member of the Wagner cult, eventually moving with him to Paraguay to found a German colony there.

Nietzsche collapsed on the streets of Turin, Italy on January 4, 1889. It is said that he collapsed while tearfully putting his arms around the neck of a horse which had fallen in the street pulling a carriage after being beaten by the driver and slipping on the ice. Some townspeople carried him back to his apartment and when he came to he was raving mad. He spent the next few days banging away at the piano and writing mad letters to his friends, all signed "The Crucified" or "Dionysus." One of the letters, written to Jacob Burckhardt, the famous professor at Basel whom Nietzsche respected, went like this:

Actually, I would much rather be a Basel professor than God, but I have not ventured to carry my private egoism so far as to desist from creating the world on his account. You see, one must make sacrifices, however one may be living, and wherever. . . . Since I am condemned to while away the next eternity with bad jokes, I have a writing business here which really leaves me nothing to be desired—very pleasant and not at all exhausting. The unpleasant thing, which offends my modesty, is that fundamentally I am every name in history. . .

After receiving these letters one of Nietzsche's friends traveled to Turin and brought Nietzsche back to Basel for examination at a clinic. The doctor's statement diagnosed 'mental degeneration' and reported that Nietzsche "claims he is a famous man and asks for women all the time."

Nietzsche's mother came soon after and brought him back to Germany, back to the home of his youth in Naumburg. At first his friends would visit and once, after hearing Nietzsche play the piano, Peter Gast expressed hope that he would recover but he never did. He lived the last eleven years completely insane, cared for first by his mother and then, after her death, by his sister who had returned from South America after the suicide of her husband. By the time Elizabeth came back and took over the care of Nietzsche, his books were selling wildly and his estate made her a wealthy woman. Against the efforts of his friends she managed to get control over his work, establishing a Nietzsche Archive, first in the house in Naumburg and then in a large villa in the city of Weimar. It was there where Nietzsche lived his last years, sometimes dressed by his sister in a white robe, a spectacle for the high society who had paid admission to see the famous philosopher. Elizabeth, who had never understood her brother's break with Wagner, nor anything of his philosophy for that matter, worked for the rest of her life on bringing Nietzsche back to the fold by cultivating a Nietzsche myth. She lived on into the 1930s and saw her efforts rewarded in meeting Hitler and seeing a bust of her brother in the Führer's office. It is

thus that we have the idea of Nietzsche as the philosopher of the Nazis, the one who spoke of a superman to come, of the will to power as the essence of all life.

In Nietzsche's very last published writing, at the beginning of each of the final three sections of the chapter titled "Why I am a Destiny" which brings *Ecce Homo* to a close, we find this question repeated thrice: "Have I been understood?," "Have I been understood?," "Have I been understood?" Is it important that we have an answer to this question? Is it important for those of us at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to try and understand this seemingly inscrutable philosopher, this thinker who was obviously so concerned that he be understood, knowing full well that he would be misunderstood, understanding as he did the problem of being understood? Is it even possible to unmask the masked philosopher?

Perhaps it is wise in the case of Nietzsche to refrain from ever becoming too confident that we have unmasked him. Nevertheless, I think that it is very important that we do try to understand him. In Nietzsche's case it is not because one thinks one might find a philosopher one might agree with that we should try to understand him. In 1888 Nietzsche writes this in a letter to a friend: "It is not at all necessary or even desirable to side with me; on the contrary, a dose of curiosity . . . and an ironic resistance would be an incomparably more intelligent position to adopt." Whether he is regarded as a philosopher or not by philosophers, what Nietzsche did, perhaps more so than most who think of themselves as philosophers, was live the life of a lover of wisdom. What Nietzsche did was to question perhaps more seriously than anyone had before, to question the most unquestioned assumptions that underlie not only Christianity and Christian morality but also the very foundations of the Western philosophical tradition. In June of 1865 the 20 year old Nietzsche outlines the path he would take in a letter to his sister:

. . . As for your principle that truth is always on the side of the more difficult, I must admit this in part. However, it is difficult to believe that 2 times 2 is *not* 4; does that make it true? On the other hand, is it really so difficult simply to accept everything that one has been brought up on and that has gradually struck deep roots—what is considered truth in the circle of one's relatives and of many good men, and what, moreover, really comforts and elevates man? Is that more difficult than to strike new paths, fighting the habitual, experiencing the insecurity of independence and the frequent wavering of one's feelings and even one's conscience, proceeding often without any consolation, but ever with the eternal goal of the true, the beautiful, and the good? Is it decisive after all that we arrive at *that* view of God, world, and reconciliation which makes us feel most comfortable? Rather, is not the result of his inquiries something wholly indifferent to the true inquirer? Do we after all seek rest, peace, and pleasure in our inquiries? No, only truth—even if it be the most abhorrent and ugly. Still one last question: if we had believed from childhood that all salvation issued from someone other than Jesus—say, from Mohammed—is it not certain that we should have experienced the same blessings? . . . Faith does not offer the least support for a proof of objective truth. Here the ways of men part: if you wish to strive for peace of soul and pleasure, then believe, if you wish to be a devotee of truth, then inquire. . . .

## MAIN THEMES

**I. Style of his writings**

relying on a rich metaphorical language and a wide variety of styles

(essay, aphorism, novel, polemic)

it is not surprising that Nietzsche's writings have been subjected to a wide range of interpretations

and some gross misinterpretation—most notoriously the Nazi appropriation  
his autobiography opens with this warning to the reader:

Seeing that before long I must confront humanity with the most difficult demand ever made of it, it seems indispensable to me to say *who I am*. Really, one should know it, for I have not left myself "without testimony." But the disproportion between the greatness of my task and the *smallness* of my contemporaries has found expression in the fact that one has neither heard nor even seen me. I live on my own credit; it is perhaps a mere prejudice that I live.

I only need to speak with one of the "educated" who come to the Upper Engadine for the summer, and I am convinced that I do *not* live.

Under these circumstances I have a duty against which my habits, even more the pride of my instincts, revolt at bottom—namely, to say: *Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else.* (*Ecce Homo* Preface, 1)

how can one read Nietzsche without mistaking him for someone else, especially considering his fondness for masks and masking?

Everything profound loves a mask. . . . Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely *shallow*, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 40)

The hermit does not believe that any philosopher—assuming that every philosopher was first of all a hermit—ever expressed his real and ultimate opinions in books: does one not write books precisely to conceal what one harbors? Indeed, he will doubt whether a philosopher could *possibly* have "ultimate and real" opinions, whether behind every one of his caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave—a more comprehensive, stranger, richer world beyond the surface, an abysmally deep ground behind every ground, under every attempt to furnish "grounds." Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy—that is a hermit's judgment: "There is something arbitrary in his stopping *here* to look back and look around, in his not digging deeper *here* but laying his spade aside; there is something suspicious about it." Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hideout, every word also a mask. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 289)

where does one start in reading Nietzsche?



perhaps best to begin with this advice to the reader, suggested in a letter from 1888:

It is not at all necessary or even desirable to side with me; on the contrary, a dose of curiosity, as if confronted with some unfamiliar plant, and an ironic resistance would be an incomparably more intelligent position to adopt.<sup>4</sup>

Nietzsche admits in *Ecce Homo* that he is a dangerous thinker and thus perhaps we should take seriously this warning to be as careful with his writings as with a dangerous plant in many instances we may find it is indeed a more intelligent position not to agree with him

Nietzsche obviously takes a very different position with the reader than most philosophers whom typically take the position of marshaling arguments that would lead the reader by force of reason to consent

When Nietzsche speaks of the ‘philosophers of the future’ he makes use of one of his favorite word-plays—he uses the word ‘*Versucher*’ in referring to these philosophers a *Versucher* is both an ‘attempter’ or ‘experimenter’ (a scientific ‘experiment’ is a ‘*Versuch*’) but also a ‘tempter’

A new species of philosophers is coming up: I venture to baptize them with a name that is not free of danger. As I unriddle them, insofar as they allow themselves to be unriddled—for it belongs to their nature to *want* to remain riddles at some point—these philosophers of the future may have a right it might also be a wrong to be called (*at*)tempters (*Versucher*). This name itself is in the end a mere attempt (*Versuch*) and, if you will, a temptation (*Versuchung*). (*Beyond Good and Evil* 42)

much of Nietzsche’s writings (perhaps the whole of it) can thus be taken as a kind of thought experiment  
the reader is tempted to take up the thought experiment  
and the reader is left with the responsibility of coming to their own conclusions  
it is this stance toward the reader that perhaps  
best sums up Nietzsche’s legacy to postmodern thought

or another way to make this same point is to bring out how, for Nietzsche, the traditional boundary between philosophy and art, or philosophy and literature, breaks down consider the concluding aphorism of a book that includes some of Nietzsche’s most dangerous thoughts (from which I took the title for my dissertation: *Written and Painted Thoughts: Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Turn*):

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<sup>4</sup>Ronald Hayman cites this letter in his biography of Nietzsche. Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 320. The letter is to Carl Fuchs, 29 July 1888.

Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices—you made me sneeze and laugh—and now? You have already taken off your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull! And has it ever been different? What things do we copy, writing and painting, we mandarins with Chinese brushes, we immortalizers of things that *can* be written—what are the only things we are able to paint? Alas, always only what is on the verge of withering and losing its fragrance! Alas, always only storms that are passing, exhausted, and feelings that are autumnal and yellow! Alas, always only birds that grew weary of flying and flew astray and now can be caught by hand—by *our* hand! We immortalize what cannot live and fly much longer—only weary and mellow things! And it is only your *afternoon*, you, my written and painted thoughts, for which alone I have colors, many colors perhaps, many motley caresses and fifty yellows and browns and greens and reds: but nobody will guess from that how you looked in your morning, you sudden sparks and wonders of my solitude, you my beloved—*wicked* thoughts! (*Beyond Good and Evil* 296)

here at the end of the book the author looks back over what he has written and raises the question about what he has written—just what are they, these ‘written and painted thoughts’? in so doing he raises the (postmodern) question about the status of the philosophical text it is worth noting that it is not simply by chance that Nietzsche draws the connection between writing and painting

if we go back to Plato and recall the system of oppositions that structures Platonic thought which proceeds from the primary distinction between:

<u>Appearance (the cave)</u>	<u>Reality (the upper world outside the cave)</u>
the Visible World	The Intelligible World
the changing	the unchanging
particular things	Universal Forms
the body	the soul
the senses (and passions)	Reason
the artist	the philosopher

there is also the opposition between:

writing	speech
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Plato favors speech over writing because (he thinks) with the spoken word there is less distance from speaker to auditor and less chance of the hearer missing what the speaker has said this is why, insofar as he has to resort to writing, Plato writes dialogues in the *Phaedrus* Plato marks out this distinction between speech and writing and explicitly connects writing with painting

Derrida focuses on this connection between writing and painting in a remarkable, sometimes

hilarious essay entitled "Plato's Pharmacy."<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche is thus warning the reader not to take his 'written and painted thoughts' as "truth" thus perhaps Nietzsche further radicalizes the breakdown of the traditional distinction between philosophy and art, philosophy and literature that we noticed already underway in Kierkegaard

## **II. Art as the response to nihilism**

perhaps one might even say that the key to Nietzsche's thought lies in his thinking about art Richard Schacht, in summing up his treatment of Nietzsche, comments that "of all the points he seeks to make none is of greater interest and importance than his contention that art is the clue and key to the possibility of discovering a way beyond nihilism."<sup>6</sup>

how is art a key to the way beyond nihilism?

how is it that art provides the reason for cheerfulness in the wake of the death of God?

in short, this is Nietzsche's answer to the existentialist dilemma:

in the absence of God we are left with the responsibility to *create* the meaning of existence for ourselves

in response to the nihilism in which it seems that everything would be permitted

we have to take responsibility to *create* the values by which we live

we see this notion of art as the answer to the absurdity of existence, the crisis of modernity already in *The Birth of Tragedy*

it is the principle theme of that work and despite whatever ways he distanced himself from that youthful work he never really abandoned that theme

*The Birth of Tragedy* tells the story about the birth of tragedy in ancient Greece

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<sup>5</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61-171. Writing is condemned by Plato because it is a *pharmakon*, a word that is often mistranslated, as Derrida points out, in that in the original it contains both the sense of "remedy" and "poison." Writing is thus condemned because of an inherent dangerousness that can be attributed to its pharmaceutical operation (perhaps like the dangerous plant Nietzsche refers to), its double nature, its undecidability that subverts the logic of identity upon which the hierarchy of oppositions depends. The deconstruction of Platonism is already at work in Plato's text, as Derrida's title playfully suggests, since the condemnation of writing takes place in "Plato's Pharmacy," that is, since the condemnation of writing also relies upon the *pharmakon* and thus cannot escape its effects. This all goes on in the "back room" of the pharmacy in the sense that, on the one hand, Derrida focuses on the "myth of Theuth" recounted at the end of the *Phaedrus*, a myth regarded by traditional interpretations as extraneous to the main argument of the dialogue, and thus relegated, so to speak, to the "back room" of the pharmacy. But there is also the further sense in that, for Derrida, it is explicitly "in the back room, in the shadows of the pharmacy, prior to the oppositions between conscious and unconscious, freedom and constraint, voluntary and involuntary, speech and language, that these textual 'operations' occur."

<sup>6</sup>Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 529.

how tragedy was born from two opposing art impulses  
 which he named the Appollinian and Dionysian  
 and then how tragedy died—at the hands of Socrates (in Euripidean tragedy)  
 and then about the rebirth of tragedy in German music (Wagner)  
 Nietzsche later repudiated Wagner, and the Romanticist and Schopenhauerian influence  
 but the core theme of *The Birth of Tragedy* still developed in his mature thought<sup>7</sup>

the main theme of *The Birth of Tragedy* is that the high point of Greek culture was not Socrates  
 and Plato, but rather, a century earlier with the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles  
 what impressed Nietzsche about the Greeks of the tragic age  
 is that they did not yet have the optimistic view of Socrates  
 that if we just have reason we will have virtue and happiness as well  
 instead these Greeks had a very pessimistic mythology  
 this is relayed in the story Nietzsche recounts of the legend in which King Midas captured  
 Silenus, companion of Dionysos, and forced the demigod to tell what is best and most excellent  
 for human beings

Silenus' reply:

Wretched, ephemeral race, 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. (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 3)

here were the Greeks, without the 'metaphysical comfort' of Plato that Truth is beautiful and  
 within the grasp of human reason  
 instead they had this most pessimistic mythology  
 in which truth was truly abysmal  
 Nietzsche's question was: how did these Greeks even manage to go on living?  
 his answer was that they had art  
 in particular, this strange offspring of the Appollinian and Dionysian art impulses—tragedy  
 consider the end of section 7:

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.

Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, *art* approaches as a saving  
 sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about  
 the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live. . .  
 . (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 7)

*The Birth of Tragedy* was certainly influenced significantly by Schopenhauer  
 and through Schopenhauer it contains a strong Romanticist element  
 the Romanticists celebrated art as a means of access to truth

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<sup>7</sup>This is the thesis of an excellent recent interpretation of *The Birth of Tragedy*. John  
 Sallis, *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,  
 1991).

whereas Kant had forcefully argued that reason only gives us the world as it appears to us  
the Romanticists turned toward art to get where reason could not  
access to the world as it is in-itself

Schopenhauer presented Kant's opposition between

The Phenomenal World	and	the Noumenal World
the world as it appears to us		the world as it is in-itself
	in terms of	
The World as Representation		The Will (reality as it is in-itself)

Schopenhauer's thesis is that art provides, on the one hand, a brief respite from the underlying  
reality of the Will which leaves man in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction  
but art, and specifically music, provides access to reality itself  
it reveals to us the underlying Will at the core of existence  
and thus leads to resignation

for Schopenhauer, we have art so that we see the futility of existence  
for Nietzsche, on the other hand, we have art in order that we may live