BOOK SUMMARY

The Birth of Tragedy

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Why a culture capable of seeing life’s suffering still needs art.

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Key ideas

1. **Apollo and Dionysus.** Art develops through the tension between Apollonian dream and form and Dionysian intoxication, and the two meet in tragedy.
2. **The wisdom of Silenus.** The Greeks knew that it is best never to be born, and created the radiant Olympian gods to make life bearable.
3. **Born of the chorus.** Tragedy grew out of the satyr chorus of Dionysus, and its stage action was originally a vision of the suffering god.
4. **The limits of reason.** Socratic optimism, the faith that knowledge can correct existence, killed tragedy, yet reason pushed to its limits needs art again.
5. **Affirming existence.** Existence and the world are justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon, so art, not morality, makes life worth living.

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Preface: Attempt at a Self-Criticism

In 1886, fourteen years after The Birth of Tragedy first appeared, Nietzsche added this new preface, signed at Sils-Maria in August of that year. He begins by recalling where the book came from. He was brooding over the Greeks while the battle of Wörth thundered over Europe in 1870, still wrestling with his questions under the walls of Metz a few weeks later, and he settled his thoughts while recovering from an illness brought home from the war. The question that drove him, he now says, was whether the famous “cheerfulness” of the Greeks was what it seemed, and why such a healthy, beautiful people should have needed tragedy at all.

His answer, looking back, is that the book asked whether there could be a pessimism of strength: a hunger for what is hard, terrible and problematic that comes from overflowing health rather than weakness. And it turned the question around. What if the optimism, logic and “cheerfulness” of the later Greeks, the Socratism that killed tragedy, were the real symptoms of decline? Nietzsche now sees that the book’s true subject was science itself, considered for the first time as a problem, and its task was to look at science through the eyes of the artist and at art through the eyes of life.

He is harsh about the book’s faults. He calls it badly written, heavy, image-tangled, sentimental in places and uneven in tempo, a book for initiates that should have sung rather than spoken. He regrets expressing new and un-Kantian, un-Schopenhauerian valuations in the language of Kant and Schopenhauer, and he quotes Schopenhauer’s view that tragedy teaches resignation to show how far Dionysus spoke differently to him. He regrets even more having mixed the Greek problem with hopes for modern German music and the “spirit of Teutonism”, which he now regards as Romantic and narcotic.

What he still stands by is the book’s hidden hostility to morality. Its claim that existence is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon, he says, already set an artist’s view of the world against the moral one, and its silence about Christianity was a guarded enmity toward a faith that condemns art and life. He gave this counter-doctrine the name of a Greek god: Dionysian. He ends by imagining a critic who calls the book Romantic, and answers that young pessimists should first learn the art of earthly comfort, of laughter, closing with lines from Thus Spoke Zarathustra urging the higher men to learn to laugh.

Preface to Richard Wagner

The original 1872 edition opened instead with a short dedication to Richard Wagner, dated Basel, at the end of 1871. Nietzsche imagines Wagner receiving the book after an evening walk in the winter snow, seeing the image of the unbound Prometheus on the title page and knowing at once that its author has something serious to say. Throughout his thinking, Nietzsche writes, he communed with Wagner as if he were present. The tone is intimate and admiring, the voice of a young professor addressing an older artist he regards as a guide and an ally.

He links the book to Wagner's own essay on Beethoven, written at the same time, amid the horrors and sublimities of the Franco-Prussian War. Some readers, he anticipates, will see a contrast between patriotic excitement and aesthetic indulgence, as though writing about Greek art in wartime were an escape. He insists the opposite is true: the book addresses a serious German problem, which he places at the centre of German hopes. Such readers, he warns, will be surprised to discover how earnest the problem is once they actually read the book, and how closely it touches the future of German culture.

Others, he expects, will be shocked to see an aesthetic question taken so seriously, because they think of art as a pleasant diversion, a court jester to the "earnestness of existence". Against them he states the conviction that frames the whole book: art is the highest task of this life and its properly metaphysical activity. This is a strong claim. It means that art is not decoration added to life but the activity through which life is understood and made bearable. Everything that follows, from the analysis of Greek tragedy to the attack on Socratic optimism, is meant to support this claim about the rank of art.

The dedication shows how closely the young professor tied his first book to Wagner, whom he had come to know well during his Basel years and whose music drama he would present at the end of the book as the hope for a rebirth of tragedy. The later Attempt at a Self-Criticism looks back on this alliance with regret, but in 1872 Nietzsche offered the book as a kind of duologue with the composer he called his sublime predecessor on this path. The dedication frames the book as both a study of the Greeks and an intervention in the cultural life of Nietzsche's own Germany.

CHAPTER 1

Apollo and Dionysus: Dream and Intoxication

The book proper opens with its central claim: the development of art is bound up with the duality of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, much as procreation depends on the two sexes, with constant conflict and only occasional reconciliation. Nietzsche borrows the names from the Greeks, who expressed their view of art not in concepts but in the clear figures of their gods. Apollo is the god of the shaping arts, such as sculpture; Dionysus is the god of the non-visual art of music. For a long time the two work against each other, until, in what Nietzsche calls a metaphysical miracle of the Greek will, they are paired and together produce Attic tragedy.

To make the contrast vivid he links each god to a physiological state. Apollo belongs to dreams, in which everyone is a perfect artist, enjoying vivid forms while still sensing, faintly, that they are appearance. Nietzsche recalls calling out in a frightening dream, “It is a dream! I will dream on!” Apollo is the shining god of light and of fair appearance, but also of measured limits and calm. Borrowing an image from Schopenhauer, he compares Apollo to a sailor sitting quietly in a small boat on a raging sea, trusting in the principle of individuation, the sense of being a separate self.

Dionysus belongs to intoxication, reached through narcotic drink or the approach of spring. In this state the principle of individuation collapses, bringing both terror and blissful ecstasy. Nietzsche sees the same power in the singing, dancing crowds of St. John and St. Vitus in the German Middle Ages. Under Dionysus, people are reconciled with each other and with nature; the slave is free, barriers fall, and each person feels at one with the rest, as if the veil of illusion had been torn. Nietzsche asks his readers to imagine Beethoven’s setting of Schiller’s Ode to Joy turned into a painting.

In section 2 he turns to history. Wild Dionysian festivals existed from Rome to Babylon, often centred on sexual licence and cruelty. For a time Apollo, embodied in Doric art, held them back from Greece. When similar impulses broke out from the depths of Greek nature itself, Apollo made peace with his rival, and this reconciliation, Nietzsche says, was the most important moment in the history of Greek religion. The Greek Dionysian festivals became festivals of world redemption, and Dionysian music, with its overwhelming power of tone and harmony, now struck the Apollonian Greek with awe, because he half sensed it was not foreign to him at all.

CHAPTER 2

The Olympian Gods and the Wisdom of Silenus

Section 3 asks what need gave rise to the radiant world of the Olympian gods. Anyone who comes to them looking for holiness, duty or spiritual love will be disappointed, Nietzsche says: they express only an exuberant, triumphant life in which everything, good or bad, is deified. To understand them, he tells the story of King Midas, who hunted for the wise Silenus, companion of Dionysus. Captured at last, Silenus laughed shrilly and told the king that the best thing for human beings is not to be born, not to be, to be nothing, and the second best is to die soon.

The Olympians, Nietzsche argues, are the Greeks' answer to this folk wisdom. The Greek knew and felt the terrors of existence: the pitiless Moira, Prometheus' vulture, the fate of Oedipus, the curse on the house of Atreus. To be able to live at all, the Greeks had to place the shining dream world of the Olympians between themselves and these horrors, as roses grow from thorny bushes. By living human lives in a higher glory, the gods justify human life. So strong was this effect that for Homer's heroes the worst thing was to die early, reversing the wisdom of Silenus.

This leads Nietzsche to reinterpret what Schiller called the "naïve" in art, the apparent harmony of man and nature that modern readers saw in Homer. Far from being a natural starting point, he argues, such naïveté is the highest achievement of Apollonian culture, a victory won by overthrowing Titans and slaying monsters through powerful illusions. Homer, the naïve artist, stands before us as a monument to that victory over a deep capacity for suffering. Homer, in other words, is not the childhood of Greek culture but its first great victory over terror.

Section 4 develops the dream analogy into a metaphysics. Nietzsche suggests that the true ground of being, which he calls the Primordial Unity, is eternally suffering and contradictory, and needs beautiful appearance for its redemption. He finds this pictured in Raphael's Transfiguration, where the lower half shows the possessed boy and despairing disciples, and above them floats a radiant vision. Apollo, as an ethical god, demands measure and self-knowledge, "know thyself" and "not too much". But the Apollonian Greek could not hide from himself that his beauty and moderation rested on a hidden substratum of suffering, which Dionysus revealed: Apollo could not live without Dionysus.

CHAPTER 3

The Lyric Poet and the Folk Song

In section 5 Nietzsche turns to where the seed of tragedy first appears. The ancients set Homer and Archilochus side by side as the forefathers of Greek poetry. Homer is the aged dreamer, the model of the Apollonian artist. Archilochus is the passionate soldier poet who sings of his loves and hatreds. Modern aesthetics calls one objective and the other subjective, but Nietzsche thinks that tells us nothing, since true art always requires release from the ego. So how is the lyric poet, who keeps saying “I”, possible as an artist at all?

His answer draws on a remark of Schiller’s that before writing he felt not a series of images but a musical mood. Ancient lyric poets were also musicians. The lyric poet, Nietzsche argues, first becomes one with the Primordial Unity and its pain as a Dionysian artist, producing a copy of it as music; then, under Apollo’s influence, that music appears to him in images. The “I” of the lyric therefore sounds from the depths of being, not from the poet’s private self. He pictures Archilochus as a drunken reveller asleep in the noonday sun, touched by Apollo’s laurel, his dreams emitting poems.

This leads to one of the book’s most famous statements. Art, Nietzsche says, is not performed for our improvement or education, and we are not its true authors. The true author uses us as images and projections, and our highest dignity lies in being works of art, for only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified. We understand this about as well as soldiers painted on a canvas understand the battle they appear in. Only the genius, in the act of creation, glimpses the world artist from the inside.

Section 6 applies the theory to the folk song, which Archilochus is said to have brought into literature. Nietzsche reads it as a lasting trace of the union of Apollo and Dionysus: melody comes first and generates poems out of itself, which is why one tune can carry many verses. He notes how a Beethoven symphony provokes listeners into images, and how even a title like the Pastoral Symphony is only a symbol born from the music. Language, he concludes, can never fully render music, because music speaks of something that lies before and beyond all appearances.

CHAPTER 4

The Satyr Chorus and the Origin of Drama

Section 7 confronts the origin of tragedy. Ancient tradition says that tragedy grew out of the chorus and was at first nothing but chorus. Nietzsche rejects the two standard explanations. The chorus does not represent the democratic people against the kings, since tragedy began in religion, not politics. Nor is it August Wilhelm Schlegel's "ideal spectator", since a chorus existed before any stage action, and the chorus of Oceanids in Aeschylus treats Prometheus as really present, which no ideal spectator would do. Schiller came closer when he called the chorus a living wall that tragedy builds around itself to shut out the world of reality.

For Nietzsche the original chorus was a chorus of satyrs, the half-goat followers of Dionysus. In their presence the cultured Greek felt state, society and the gaps between people give way to an overwhelming feeling of oneness with nature. This is the metaphysical comfort every true tragedy offers: the sense that, beneath the change of appearances, life is indestructibly powerful and joyful. The Greek, who had looked into the cruelty of nature and history and was in danger of longing for a Buddhist denial of the will, was saved by art, and through art life saved him for itself.

Here Nietzsche compares the Dionysian man with Hamlet. After the ecstasy passes, everyday reality returns and fills him with nausea. Both have seen into the true nature of things and are loath to act, since action cannot change it. It is not too much reflection that paralyses Hamlet, Nietzsche insists, but true knowledge of an appalling truth. In this danger art comes as a healing enchantress, turning horror into the sublime and the absurd into the comic. The satyr chorus of the dithyramb is the saving deed of Greek art.

Section 8 explains how drama grows from this chorus. The satyr was not a crude goat-man but the archetype of humanity in its strongest feelings, unlike the sentimental shepherds of modern idylls. The Dionysian crowd saw itself transformed into satyrs, and the satyrs in turn saw a vision of the god. That vision, the scene and its action, is the Apollonian part of tragedy, born from the Dionysian chorus. At first Dionysus was only imagined as present; later an actor in a mask appeared, and the excited audience saw in him the suffering god. Tragedy, Nietzsche concludes, is the Dionysian chorus continually discharging itself in an Apollonian world of images.

CHAPTER 5

Oedipus, Prometheus and the Masks of Dionysus

Section 9 reads the great heroes of Sophocles and Aeschylus. The clear, simple dialogue of Sophocles seems to let us see straight into his characters, but Nietzsche says this clarity is like the bright spots we see after looking into the sun, in reverse: luminous images produced by a glance into the terrible depths of nature, to heal an eye seared by darkness. This, and not untroubled comfort, is the real meaning of “Greek cheerfulness”. Schiller had used the chorus, in the preface to his Bride of Messina, to declare war on naturalism in art, and Nietzsche agrees that the chorus lifts tragedy into an ideal domain.

Sophocles, Nietzsche argues, presents Oedipus as the noble man who, despite his wisdom, is destined for error and misery, yet whose suffering finally spreads a healing influence, as in Oedipus at Colonus. But the myth says more than the poet does. Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx, kills his father and marries his mother. Nietzsche connects this with a Persian belief that a wise magus can only be born of incest: whoever forces nature to surrender her secrets must break her holiest laws. Wisdom, the myth whispers, is a crime against nature.

Against Oedipus’ glory of passivity stands the glory of activity in Aeschylus’ Prometheus, the Titan who steals fire for humankind and suffers eternally for it. Nietzsche quotes the young Goethe’s Prometheus, who forms men in his own image and defies the gods. He contrasts this myth, in which the best that humans gain is won by a sacrilege they must pay for, with the biblical story of the Fall. Aeschylus’ Prometheus is both Dionysian, in his titanic striving beyond the limits of the individual, and Apollonian, in his yearning for justice. His formula: whatever exists is alike just and unjust, and equally justified in both.

Section 10 states the deeper thesis. In its earliest form, tragedy had only the sufferings of Dionysus as its theme, and until Euripides all its famous heroes were masks of that original god. Nietzsche recalls the myth of Dionysus Zagreus, torn apart by the Titans as a boy, and reads the dismemberment as the suffering of individuation itself. From this he draws the mystery doctrine of tragedy: the oneness of all things, individuation as the root of evil, and art as the hope that its spell may be broken. Through tragedy, dying myth bloomed one last time before Euripides, he says, killed it.

CHAPTER 6

Euripides and the Death of Tragedy

Section 11 opens with a striking image. Greek tragedy died differently from its sister arts: they passed away calmly in ripe old age, but tragedy died by suicide, in consequence of an irreconcilable conflict. Its death left a vast void, as though the cry “great Pan is dead” had rung through the Greek world. The art that followed, the New Attic Comedy of Menander and Philemon, bore tragedy’s features, but those of its death struggle. Philemon, Nietzsche notes, said he would hang himself to see Euripides in the underworld. The serenity of the Greek stage, on this reading, is a product of terror rather than ignorance of it.

The poet of this death struggle was Euripides, and his decisive act was to bring the spectator onto the stage. Ordinary people with everyday speech replaced the demigods of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and audiences learned from him to observe, debate and draw conclusions. In Aristophanes’ comedy The Frogs, Nietzsche notes, Euripides boasts of exactly this. The heroic Odysseus shrank into the cunning household slave. With this came a new “Greek cheerfulness”: the cheerfulness of the slave, who has nothing great to strive for and values nothing above the present. Nietzsche argues that this late, shallow mood shaped the later image of the Greeks, as if the sixth century, with tragedy, the Mysteries, Pythagoras and Heraclitus, had never existed.

Why did Euripides do it? Not to please the crowd, Nietzsche argues, since he treated his public with defiance. He wrote for two spectators only. The first was Euripides himself as thinker, who sat in the theatre and found the old tragedies full of obscurity: a comet’s tail of the inexplicable behind every figure, a puzzling chorus, questionable ethics. Section 12 names the second: Socrates. Late in life, in The Bacchae, Euripides seemed to recant, showing the god Dionysus destroying the clever Pentheus who opposed him. But by then his tendency had already won. The god speaking through Euripides, Nietzsche says, was neither Dionysus nor Apollo but a new demon, Socrates.

Nietzsche names the principle behind Euripides’ reforms aesthetic Socratism: “to be beautiful everything must be intelligible”, the counterpart of the Socratic idea that only the knower is virtuous. He shows it at work in Euripides’ prologues, where a trusted figure, often a god, tells the audience in advance what will happen, and in the deus ex machina, which guarantees the heroes’ future at the end. Euripides, he suggests, saw himself as Anaxagoras saw himself among the philosophers: the first sober man among drunkards. Cool thoughts replaced Apollonian vision, and fiery but realistic passions replaced Dionysian ecstasy.

CHAPTER 7

Socrates and the Theoretical Man

Section 13 turns to Socrates himself. Antiquity linked him closely to Euripides: Athenians joked that Socrates helped Euripides write, and the Delphic oracle was said to have named Socrates the wisest of men and Euripides second. Socrates went through Athens questioning statesmen, poets and artists and found that they practised their callings only by instinct. That phrase, Nietzsche says, is the heart of Socratism. From it Socrates concluded that existing art and ethics were defective and that he was called to correct existence. The other arts, he says, died calmly and left heirs; tragedy died in agony.

The key to his character is his daimonion, the inner voice that only ever warned him away from something. In all productive people, Nietzsche observes, instinct is the creative force and consciousness the critic; in Socrates the roles are reversed, a monstrosity by defect. Socrates is the specific non-mystic, in whom logic is overdeveloped as instinct is in the mystic. He went to his death calmly, as he left a symposium at dawn, and the dying Socrates became the new ideal of noble Greek youth, Plato above all.

Section 14 describes Socrates' single great eye fixed on tragedy and finding it irrational and useless. Plato, a young tragic poet, burned his poems to follow him. Yet Plato's dialogue, mixing every form between prose and poetry, became the boat in which shipwrecked ancient poetry saved itself, and the model for the novel, with poetry now the handmaid of philosophy. The three Socratic maxims, virtue is knowledge, sin comes from ignorance and the virtuous are happy, spell the death of tragedy, and optimistic dialectic drives music out of it. Yet Socrates in prison, obeying a dream that told him to practise music, wrote verses: perhaps art is a supplement to science.

Section 15 widens the view. Socrates is the first theoretical man, who delights not in what remains veiled, as the artist does, but in the act of unveiling. Nietzsche cites Lessing's confession that he cared more for the search for truth than for truth itself. Behind science lies a sublime illusion that began with Socrates: that thinking, guided by causality, can reach the depths of being and even correct it. Socrates is thus the turning point of world history. But science, pushed to its limits, sees logic coil round and bite its own tail, and there a new tragic insight appears that needs art to be endured.

CHAPTER 8

Music, Myth and the Culture of the Opera

Section 16 turns to the present. Tragedy perishes when the spirit of music vanishes, just as it can only be born from that spirit. Nietzsche restates his debt to Schopenhauer, who held that music, unlike the other arts, is not a copy of appearances but a direct copy of the will itself, and to Wagner, who argued that music must be judged by standards other than beauty. Music, Nietzsche concludes, can give birth to myth, and above all to tragic myth. Only through it can we understand the joy we take in the destruction of the hero: “We believe in eternal life,” tragedy exclaims.

Section 17 develops the idea of metaphysical comfort. In tragedy we are for brief moments the primordial being itself, sharing its desire for existence even as we see individuals destroyed. Nietzsche then traces how the non-Dionysian spirit drove music from tragedy: through the New Dithyramb, whose music imitated battles and storms instead of expressing the will; through the growing focus on psychological character; and through happy endings in which the hero receives a reward for his sufferings, a kind of earthly resolution of the tragic dissonance. The Greeks, he says, quoting the Egyptian priests, were eternal children who did not know what a sublime plaything had arisen in their hands.

Section 18 describes three kinds of culture, each held together by an illusion: the Socratic, which hopes knowledge will heal the wound of existence; the artistic, which lives under the veil of beauty; and the tragic, which rests on metaphysical comfort. The modern world, Nietzsche says, is caught in Alexandrian culture, whose ideal is the scholar. He warns that its optimism, promising earthly happiness for all, needs a slave class while denying it, and is heading for a terrible reckoning. Yet Kant and Schopenhauer have used reason to show the limits of reason, winning the hardest victory over the optimism hidden in logic.

Section 19 calls the essence of Socratic culture the culture of the opera. Nietzsche examines the invention of recitative and the stilo rappresentativo, which put the words above the music so that unmusical listeners could follow them. Opera, he argues, grew from the demand of the theoretical layman, together with an idyllic dream of a good and artistic primitive man, a sentimental optimism. Against this he sets German music from Bach to Beethoven to Wagner, and German philosophy from Kant to Schopenhauer, as forces rising from a Dionysian root, which he hopes will lead to a rebirth of Greek tragedy.

CHAPTER 9

The Rebirth of Tragedy

Section 20 asks who in Germany has learned most from the Greeks. Nietzsche grants the honour to Goethe, Schiller and Winckelmann, but notes that their path to the Greeks has grown weaker since. He describes the culture of his time as a desert of dust and sand, and offers Dürer's engraving of the Knight with Death and the Devil, riding on without hope, as the symbol of Schopenhauer, who sought truth without consolation. Then he imagines the Dionysian magic transforming this wasteland into luxuriant life, with tragedy at its centre, and calls on his friends to believe in the rebirth of tragedy and to crown themselves with ivy.

Section 21 returns to the Greeks to show what tragedy meant for a people's life. The same people who had the tragic mysteries fought the Persian wars, and needed tragedy as a healing drink. Placed between India, with its denial of the world, and Rome, with its worldly politics, the Greeks found a third way. Tragedy, Nietzsche says, absorbs the highest ecstasy of music, then places beside it the tragic myth and hero, who carries the Dionysian world on his shoulders and relieves us of it. Only a reawakening of music, in this account, could restore the power of tragic myth.

His example is the third act of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde. He asks whether a true musician could hear it purely as a vast symphonic movement without being overwhelmed, with an ear pressed against the heart of the world will. Here the Apollonian element intervenes: we suddenly see only Tristan, motionless, asking why the old tune wakes him. Myth and hero protect us from the full force of the music and turn our feeling toward individuals. Yet at the decisive point, Nietzsche argues, the Apollonian illusion is broken, and the drama speaks with Dionysian wisdom.

Section 22 describes the aesthetic hearer that such tragedy requires. Watching a musical tragedy, he feels a kind of omniscience, seeing the hidden motives and the swelling stream of passions, and yet longs to go beyond seeing. Nietzsche contrasts this hearer with the "critic" who has dominated modern theatres: the spectator with half-moral, half-learned pretensions, a type that education and the newspapers had trained even in students and schoolboys. He recalls people who were overwhelmed by a successful performance of Wagner's Lohengrin without understanding why, and suggests that they then divined what the aesthetic hearer is.

CHAPTER 10

Myth, Dissonance and the Justification of Existence

Section 23 makes myth the test of a culture. Ask yourself, Nietzsche says, how you react to a miracle on stage: if your historical sense, demanding strict psychological causality, feels insulted, you belong to the Socratic critics. Without myth, every culture loses its healthy creative power. He pictures the modern “abstract man”, with abstract education, law and state, living without a native myth and ransacking every foreign culture for nourishment. He traces this condition to the revival of Alexandrian and Roman antiquity in the fifteenth century, and hopes German music, from Luther’s chorale onward, can restore the German myth.

Section 24 asks why we take pleasure in tragic myth at all, when it shows us the suffering and destruction of the hero. Moral explanations, such as pity or a moral triumph, do not explain the aesthetic delight. Nietzsche repeats his earlier proposition that existence and the world appear justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon, and adds that tragic myth shows even the ugly and discordant to be an artistic game the will plays with itself. Music makes this intelligible through dissonance: we want to hear and at the same time long to go beyond hearing.

He compares this to Heraclitus’ image of the world-building power as a child that builds sandhills and knocks them down again. The Dionysian capacity of a people can therefore be measured by both its music and its tragic myth, which rise and fall together. Nietzsche ends the section with a veiled appeal to his friends who believe in Dionysian music, lamenting the long degradation of the German spirit “in the service of malignant dwarfs”. This is the book’s most direct appeal to Wagner’s music as a living example of what it has been describing, and exactly the kind of hope the 1886 preface would later regret.

Section 25 closes the book. Music and tragic myth both express a people’s Dionysian capacity and are inseparable. Each transfigures a world in which even dissonance dies away, and each justifies even the “worst world”. The Apollonian and the Dionysian must develop in strict proportion, so where the Dionysian rises as powerfully as now, Apollo cannot be far. Nietzsche ends with a scene: a stranger walking among the Ionic colonnades of ancient Greece praises the beauty of the Greeks and the greatness of their Dionysus. An old Athenian, with the eye of Aeschylus, answers by asking how much this people must have suffered to become so beautiful, and invites him to a tragedy.

About Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844 in Röcken, a village near Leipzig in Prussian Saxony, the son of a Lutheran pastor who died when Friedrich was four. He studied theology and then classical philology at Bonn and Leipzig, and in 1869, at just 24 and before he had formally completed his doctorate, he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. There he became a close friend of Richard Wagner, whose music and cultural ambitions shaped his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, in 1872.

Chronic illness forced Nietzsche to give up his professorship in 1879. For the next decade he lived on a small pension, moving between the Swiss Alps, the Italian Riviera and Turin, and wrote the books for which he is best known: Daybreak, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality and the works of 1888. In January 1889 he suffered a mental collapse in Turin from which he never recovered, and he died in Weimar on 25 August 1900.

After his collapse his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, took control of his papers and published selections from his notebooks, most famously The Will to Power, shaping his reputation in ways later scholars rejected. The critical edition by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari restored his texts. His ideas about the death of God, the will to power, eternal recurrence, the Übermensch and the genealogy of values went on to influence existentialism, psychoanalysis, modern literature and much of twentieth-century philosophy.

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