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# Nietzsche and Comedy: Provocative Laughter Amidst a Tragic Philosophy

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NIETZSCHE AND COMEDY:  
PROVOCATIVE LAUGHTER AMIDST  
A TRAGIC PHILOSOPHY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Michael Christian Rudar

August 2014

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2014

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A TRAGIC PHILOSOPHY

By

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Approved May 30, 2014

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ABSTRACT

NIETZSCHE AND COMEDY:  
PROVOCATIVE LAUGHTER AMIDST  
A TRAGIC PHILOSOPHY

By

Michael Christian Rudar

August 2014

Dissertation Supervised by Dr. James Swindal, Ph.D.

Nietzsche is well known as the philosopher of the tragic view of life. Because we are part of the world of becoming the tragic view maintains that human beings are given over to certain limits that we cannot transcend. These include ourselves as finite beings, the recognition that noumenal knowledge is not possible and, because we are subject to the flux of existence, that life can be both painful and destructive. However, for Nietzsche the tragic view of life ought not result in humorless resignation and he appeals to ancient Greek tragedy to demonstrate how cheerfulness is possible in the face of pessimism. But Nietzsche is equally clear that comedy and laughter too are ways to embrace the truth of tragic wisdom. In this work which examines three key texts that span Nietzsche's productive life—*The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Gay Science*, and *Thus Spoke*

*Zarathustra*—I will argue that comedy and laughter are central to Nietzsche’s endeavor to surmount pessimism, bring intellectual honesty (*Redlichkeit*) to *Wissenschaft*, and appreciate appearance where we become witness to the wonder and folly of the human being. Far from being a heuristic device used simply as a tool, the provocative laughter found in Nietzsche’s texts is the affirmation of *amor fati* that says “yes” to life, multiplicity, perspective, and tragic wisdom so that we may counter Schopenhauerian resignation. It is part of an authentic response of a subject in affirming *being here* as part of the world of becoming and, “living in *Schein* as goal.” In the end I will demonstrate that Nietzsche’s use of comedy and laughter is a herald that when sounded urges us to recognize the limits we are all subject to in order to return us to the humble, but noble, earthbound beings that we are. Set amidst all the serious issues that Nietzsche’s writings detail—the death of God, nihilism as the terminal sickness of the West, the will to power, the eternal return—comedy and laughter resound in his thinking so as to yoke the excessiveness that often attempts to transcend our being human, all too human.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My deepest gratitude to Dr. James Swindal for his wise insight and guidance, and Dr. Frederick Evans and Dr. Bernard Freyberg for their astute reading and incisive comments.

## NOTE ON TEXTS

Because there are now numerous translations of Nietzsche's texts into English, I will list not only the page number of the particular text I am referencing but also the aphorism and/or section number or the title of the aphorism if no number is given. The majority of my references are from the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge University Press) editions of Nietzsche's works that are themselves based on the now standard editions of Nietzsche's *Werke* edited by Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari.

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## Introduction

“Genuine honesty, assuming that this is our virtue and we cannot get rid of it, we free spirits – well then, we will want to work on it with all the love and malice at our disposal, and not get tired of ‘perfecting’ ourselves in *our* virtue, the only one we have left: may its glory come to rest like a gilded, blue evening glow of mockery over this aging culture and its dull and dismal seriousness!”

~Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*~

### I. The Play of Philosophy and Comedy

One might think it odd that comedy and philosophy share anything in common let alone be complimentary. The traditional image of philosophy and philosophers is one of deep thought by somber, pensive individuals who attempt to think through the greatest questions of humankind. This of course is true. Philosophy does attempt to give accounts of the most profound questions of human existence. Questions such as: What is the nature of reality? Are we free? How ought one live authentically? All of this lends a certain air of seriousness to philosophy that appears to efface anything comical or laughter provoking. Certainly this serious image of philosophy has held sway through the ages. However I argue that comedy and philosophy share a deep alliance even if not always apparent the same way philosophy and serious matters are aligned. More specifically, I argue that Friedrich Nietzsche understands, appreciates, and exploits this alliance between comedy and philosophy, an alliance that has until recently been almost

completely ignored. What then could possibly be the nature of philosophy and comedy?  
How do such apparently diverse phenomenon relate?

If one had to distill a single qualifying characteristic of this relationship, it would be, to quote Bernard Freydberg, one of *measure*.<sup>1</sup> Philosophy and comedy take each other's measure. How so? Philosophy and philosophers appear to be paradigms of restraint and measure, heeding the ancient oracle of Delphi whose advice was moderation in all things. Philosophical wisdom was attained in part from the knowledge that the appropriate measure was needed to live a good life in the philosophical sense or even in everyday, pragmatic affairs. It helped one to deal wisely with any given circumstance, whether political, social, familial or even concerning more mundane issues such as the appropriate consumption of food and drink. Moreover, thinking, which is the domain of philosophy, also requires a certain restraint at times. Socrates has traditionally been the personification of this since his wisdom lay in the recognition of his limits, that is, of his ignorance. This phenomenon is perhaps best understood in terms of Socrates' *daimon*. Playing a key role in his pursuit of wisdom, his *daimon*, ironically, restrained him in certain contexts and never compelled him to do anything. In other words, pursuit and restraint are coupled together in the image of Socrates.<sup>2</sup> So philosophy armed with measure appeared as most suited to a well lived life. Accordingly, this image of philosophy all but excludes and even requires one to, if not purge outright, at least dramatically temper any disruptive excess. It would seem that raucous laughter and comedy have no place within philosophic endeavors.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernard Freydberg, *Philosophy and Comedy: Aristophanes, Logos, and Eros* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 196-200.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche of course challenges this view of Socrates, especially in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche views Socrates as a philosopher who is overly consumed and driven by dialectical reason and the quest for certainty.

Comedy, on the other hand, embraces excess. Comedy attempts to point out, even ridicule, those moments when human beings have exceeded some measure that would otherwise call for restraint. In other words, comedy makes a spectacle out of the folly of human beings who have exceeded delimited boundaries. The spectacle itself in the form of comedy is a magnification of excess. Situations and people are exploited to show an excessive movement beyond conventional norms of behavior. Through comic, laughter provoking images we behold ourselves as the subject of great folly in order that this folly might be recognized, possibly corrected, and even celebrated in the sense that measure be restored.

What seems apparent at first glance, then, is that philosophy excludes comedy and comedy excludes philosophy. To put it more succinctly, philosophy excludes excess and comedy excludes seriousness. Nothing, though, is farther from the truth. What is true is that philosophy and comedy reciprocate one another in a timeless play, which is to say they are not mutually exclusive. This “play” however should not be considered frivolous but one worthy of the highest seriousness. Why? Because as finite human beings, from pauper to saint, *we are all subject to both wonder and folly.*

The question of the relationship of the play of philosophy and comedy, however, needs to be elaborated. There is a double layering that is composed of four relationships. First, it is possible, on the one hand, to approach an understanding of this play by simply taking the perspective of one of these phenomena and focusing it on the other. Thus one can maintain a foothold within philosophy and do an analysis of comedy. This could take the form of an historical analysis of comedy as seen from the perspective of philosophy, tracing the comments philosophers have made about comedy throughout philosophical

history in an attempt to discern its relative importance to each thinker. To give an historical overview I will present a short but cogent appraisal of this history below. It might also take the route of abstraction and attempt to distill the essence of comedy as well as its essential features. Second, it could also take the converse: from the side of comedy we can surely see how its sights have been set at times on what are considered the most serious of matters including philosophy and philosophers. One need only recall Aristophanes' *Clouds* in which he has the usual earthbound Socrates swinging in a basket examining heavenly phenomena. This layer is one where both elements speak *at* or *about* one another.

There is, however, a deeper relationship between these two phenomena. It is one that does not make the other an object for inquiry but instead sees the other in itself, thereby disclosing the true play of philosophy and comedy. This relationship constitutes the more fundamental layer of this play.

Perhaps the best explanation of this deeper layer is given by John Sallis. In his *Transfigurements: On the True Sense of Art*, Sallis acknowledges the first layer and its two relationships, which he calls “segments,” spoken of above. But he also says, “Yet comedy not only can address—and be addressed by—philosophy but also can inhere as a moment within philosophy;...and...it can also happen that philosophy belongs to comedy.”<sup>3</sup> The two key words here are “inhere” and “belong.” What they disclose is a kinship between these two phenomena and not just a relationship in which a dichotomy takes place when one sees the other simply as an object to be analyzed. To be sure, much comedy harbors deep philosophical themes and truths. Yet philosophy itself can exceed

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<sup>3</sup> John Sallis, *Transfigurements: On the True Sense of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 126.

measure in and through its excess and thus become ripe for great laughter. What will become evident is that Nietzsche quite often has his sights set on what he views as dishonest thought in the history of philosophy. Better yet, it might be best characterized as *hubristic thought*, the kind of thought Nietzsche says fails to recognize the limits of science and our ties to the earth. He excavates this intellectual dishonesty, exposing the motives behind philosophical thought in order to show an agenda oriented toward protecting the one doing that thinking. To combat this excess Nietzsche rarely took the tact of the typical philosopher. He did not respond, for the most part, to his philosophical nemeses with lengthy, logically solid treatises. Instead as we shall see, to counter such hubristic thought, Nietzsche many times turns them into laughter provoking, comedic moments. Occurring not merely to ridicule, these laughter provoking moments erupt in a way that makes them teachable moments. What they teach more often than not is that some measure has been exceeded and thus needs restored—all this from the philosopher who philosophizes with a hammer and revels in transgression. We can begin to see then the distortion and inversion that begins to happen with this notion of measure when Nietzsche's gaze falls upon it.

As we begin to orient ourselves to the upcoming discussion of Nietzsche, what is important to recognize is that comedy, laughter, and philosophy belong together because both serious and comedic matters are prominent elements in the constellation of the human being. It is in and through this play of the serious and comedic that human beings become fully realized as the earthbound beings that we are.

## II. Comedy, Laughter, and the History of Philosophy

Why and how is comedy an important aspect of Nietzsche's thought? Many philosophers before Nietzsche have commented on comedy. But comedy, although mentioned by philosophers, has always played second fiddle, or no fiddle, to tragedy. This is now simply unacceptable. Dennis Schmidt gives voice to this concern stating, "In the end, the full treatment of the relation of tragedy and philosophy...needs to address the place of comedy in that relation."<sup>4</sup> Just as philosophy and tragedy take each other's measure, so too is comedy to be a measure of both and measured by both. For the most part, this is what has been absent in philosophical history.

Schmidt's concern in *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* is how and why ancient Greek tragedy had been appropriated by great German thinkers from Immanuel Kant to Martin Heidegger (he begins, however, with Plato and Aristotle as a backdrop). What is it about Greek tragedy that is so crucial to philosophical thinking in the West? For Schmidt, tragic art is not simply a spectacle. In other words it is not something to watch or read on occasion for mere entertainment so that we soon forget it once the tragedy has concluded. Instead, "tragic art nourishes an ethical sensibility that is crucial for the formulation of an ethics and politics responsive to contemporary life."<sup>5</sup> This is why tragic art is so important to the thinkers he examines including Nietzsche. Art allows for a disclosing of nature, a way of letting nature in its flux shine. Other methods, including science and philosophy and similar modes of reflection, simply can not grasp the appearing of nature the way art can. As Schmidt says, "Art lets *physis* shine in the

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<sup>4</sup> Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

work. *Art is a making that dwells near this origin of appearing and that is why art always—no matter how old—always has the feel of the new: it lives at the sources, the origins, of all appearing.*”<sup>6</sup> Tragedy, art, ethics, and thinking are so deeply intertwined that how we live, which is to say, how we disclose ourselves and our world, are profoundly shaped by it *whether we are conscious of it or not.*

Schmidt’s work, along with Sallis’s and Freyberg’s, presents a mirror that raises the same kind of questions I am interested in, although my focus is solely on Nietzsche. I want to bring these same concerns to bear on Nietzsche and the question of critical philosophy, ethics, comedy, and laughter. What is Nietzsche trying to disclose about comedy and the kind of laughter present in his writings that allows us not merely to function and “get by” in our lives but to come to grips and even affirm life here without illusions—illusions that are often times perpetrated by philosophers? As often is the case with philosophy, these kinds of questions serve to raise more questions than answers such as: “How are tragedy and comedy different?” “Is one art more primal than the other?” “Are there limits to comedy and the role of laughter?” Nonetheless, these are the kinds of questions to be addressed and there is no better place to begin than at the beginning, a beginning that still resonates with Nietzsche’s thought and hopefully ours.

Consider the first philosopher of the West, Thales. What is notable about Thales? When one reads the fragments concerning him, especially for the first time, what stands out? Of course there are many things that might top a list: his military prowess, the assertion that water (*hudōr*) is the first, eternal principle (*archē*) or the recognition that he is attempting a *logos* of physical nature that, for the first time breaks from purely

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<sup>6</sup> Dennis Schmidt, *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2005), 186.

mythical accounts. Notwithstanding the fruitfulness and importance of these insights and all the scholarly work done on them since, what still strikes one when reading Thales? I would assert that it is the comic images that leap from the page.

Take Thales the stargazer. The image we have of Thales, one handed down over millennia, was of a keen astronomer who spent much time looking at the heavens. At one point, his undivided attention at the stars caused him to fall into a well eliciting jeers (*apokōpsai*) from a female Thracian servant.<sup>7</sup> In other words, what we have at the very inception of philosophy in the West are its deep ties to laughter provoking images. Thales, in the very serious business of discerning a *logos* of the heavens has forgotten his earthboundness and in forgetting, indeed a forgetting of the kind of being he was, is returned to earth like a falling star eliciting laughter and jeers. I strongly suggest that this comic image is what stands out amidst the many serious philosophical enterprises of Thales.

In Plato's dialogues, we clearly see the role of tragedy. The focus on tragedy is evidenced in perhaps his greatest work the *Republic* where Plato seeks justice both in the city and the souls of human beings. Part of this justice is the ebb and flow of poetry and tragedy in the *polis* and the souls of human beings. For example, at first the guardians must be "protected" from the influence of Homer's poetry, specifically Achilles' thinking of his own death.<sup>8</sup> Here, tragedy and poetry ebbs, inasmuch as their influence recedes in order to ensure a healthy abundance of courage in the guardians. However, this same passage resurfaces again later in the dialogue, that is, flows back into those souls that

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<sup>7</sup> See Plato, *Theaetetus*, 174a.

<sup>8</sup> See Homer, *Odyssey*, 11:489-91. Indeed the very idea of fearless guardians, ready to battle real enemies in order to protect the *polis* but needing protection from poetry certainly is, to a degree, laughter provoking!

have made the liberating journey out of the cave.<sup>9</sup> And although Plato is concerned with admitting both tragedies and comedies back into the city,<sup>10</sup> nonetheless comparatively speaking comedy appears to play a limited role in the education of the guardians and hence in the constitution of the *polis*.

Aristotle comments on the origin and nature of comedy in his *Poetics*, asserting that whereas tragedy was rooted in the dithyramb, comedy was rooted in phallic songs.<sup>11</sup> However, unlike tragedy with its noble heroes, comedy “is an imitation of men worse than the average.”<sup>12</sup> Hence Aristotle’s major fault line between these two genres rests on a certain level of excellence (*aretē*) that tragedy achieves and comedy does not—tragic heroes being noble and of high virtue (*spoudaion*) and comic characters engendering petty motivations and character (*phaulon*). Moreover, says Aristotle, comedy was not taken seriously until much later in history as compared to its tragic counterpart. This was due to its supposed improvised style and lack of definite form. To be sure, Aristotle values the *mimēsis* found in tragedy, comedy, and poetry alike, all of which aim at intellectual pleasure. Moreover, he does not explicitly state that comedy is inferior to tragedy, but he does appear to suggest that tragic *mimēsis*, which deals with fear, pain, and the suffering of noble heroes, does hold the upper hand over comedy’s dealing in the *mimēsis* of the ridiculous and those of inferior rank.<sup>13</sup>

Because Aristotle’s writings were appropriated first among Islamic thinkers before their European counterparts, many of these philosophers offered their own

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<sup>9</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 386c and 516d.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 394d. I don’t subscribe to what has become the dogmatic assertion that Plato rejects poetry and wanted it banished from the *polis*. The work of John Sallis, Bernard Freyberg and others have conclusively shown this not to be the case. Indeed, this incorrect view of Plato and poetry is itself ripe for laughter.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1449a32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1449a32-37.

commentary on these writings. Among them was Avicenna who, in his *Commentary of the Poetics of Aristotle*, echoed Aristotle's assertion that comedy was the imitation of the base although, "not of every thing evil; rather of that genus of evil which is immoral and is intended for ridicule and mocking."<sup>14</sup> The Arabic word for immoral, *yustafhash*, as the translator of this Avicenna text makes clear in a note, means also "exorbitant, indecent, or shameful." If we focus on this first word then we see that for Avicenna comedy is an imitation of that which is exorbitant, that is, it is essentially an attempt to imitate that which is beyond a given limit. Because the commentary revolves around the ancients, in this case then the given limit might be the moral and ethical norms of the ancient Greeks. But to imitate that which lies outside of these limits presents a contradiction and tension in that imitation (*mimēsis*) requires an original from which to imitate. That which is exorbitant and stands outside cannot simply be imitated due to its status as something other, as something transgressing the very limit that provides the horizon of given social norms. This contradiction and tension, however, is a fruitful one. The attempt to imitate that which is other, that which has no original, can give us only the distorted, absurd art we call comedy. Comedic imitation can only twist and turn what is already given, in this case ethical deviation, so that appearance itself within limit becomes distorted and absurd so that its manifestation is indeed exorbitant.

Perhaps the greatest symbol of this exorbitant appearance is the comic mask that Avicenna goes on to describe as possessing three qualities. The first is ugliness, "because it is necessary to change from the natural shape to contempt." Second is bad-temper, "because it is meant to portray a general lack of esteem towards someone." Last is

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<sup>14</sup> Avicenna, *Avicenna's Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle: A Critical Study with an Annotated Translation of the Text* by Ismail M. Dahiyat (Leiden Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1974), 82.

freedom, “from any sign of grief.” Hence the mocker’s mask was held up as a mirror image of that culture, one that was, “neither dispirited, sad, nor pained.”<sup>15</sup>

Avicenna concludes his commentary of Aristotle and comedy by speaking about origins. Because the comic imitation of that which is exorbitant lies outside all bounds, its cultural genesis appears less understood than tragedy. For Avicenna, it seems as though the mask of comedy somehow never betrayed the kind of delimited origin that the performance of tragedy supposedly has—“Comedy is, however, different [from tragedy]: not being a thing that requires the care of serious, virtuous and knowledgeable men, its provenance was overlooked and its origin and how it began were forgotten.”<sup>16</sup> Even though an outsider to the ancient Greeks and born much later (as we all are today), Avicenna may well be reminding us that some of the most significant things, even though they may appear absurd, contemptible, and exorbitant, do nonetheless provide a ruling image that influenced who the ancient Greeks were 2,500 years ago and who we, as their heirs, are today.

Scholastic philosophers also commented on comedy and laughter. In St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, God’s covenant with Abraham harbors within it the play of concealing and unconcealing in terms of the old and new. When Isaac was born of the elderly Abraham and Sarah (100 and 90 years old respectively!) the covenant was revealed as the new born of the old. Moreover, this play of concealing and unconcealing in the old and new is expressed most aptly through Abraham’s *laughter*. Augustine draws the distinction between the laughter of exultation and the laughter of derision (scorn) stating, “The laughter of Abraham is the exultation of one who rejoices, not the scornful

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

laughter of one who mistrusts.”<sup>17</sup> Abraham laughs not because he doubts, even though nature surely suggests reason for doubt (his and Sarah’s age), but because he believes. To mark this occasion they named their son Isaac whose name means “laughter.” As Augustine relates, “For his father [Abraham] had laughed when he was promised to him, in wondering delight...”<sup>18</sup> From this we see that laughter is the phenomenon that rejoins one to wonder. For Abraham it is the wonder of belief and religious awe. In the domain of philosophy, laughter can release one into wonder itself—philosophy’s first principle from which it never leaves.

Near the conclusion to *The City of God* in the section titled, “Of the Temporary Punishments of this Life to Which the Human Condition is Subject,” Augustine makes a provocative statement about laughter and life. Its relevance not only has to do with laughter as a subject matter but also its reference to Zoroaster who is, of course, a key figure in Nietzsche’s thought. Augustine maintains what is certainly contrary to Nietzsche’s thinking about life asserting, “The very life we mortals lead is itself all punishment, for it is all temptation....Our infancy, indeed, introducing us to this life not with laughter but with tears, seems unconsciously to predict the ills we are to encounter.”<sup>19</sup> But then Augustine cites a lone exception, maintaining that “Zoroaster alone is said to have laughed when he was born, and that unnatural omen portended no good to him.” Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, as we will come to see, will reverse this. Zarathustra’s laughter is a key gesture that marks a turn towards the earth and the *Übermensch*. This new conception of Zarathustra, then, will act as a palimpsest on the

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<sup>17</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God, Vol. I-II*, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1884), II/141. We will come to see that scornful laughter plays a role in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, II/146.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, II/440.

old historical Zoroaster bringing back to the fore provocative laughter that affirms even the most arduous life.

St. Thomas Aquinas also addresses laughter and folly in his writings. As far as defining comedy, Aquinas reiterates Aristotle's claim about the nature of comedy. In his commentary on Aristotle's *De generatione et corruptione* Aquinas says that comedy concerns itself with, "speech about urbane things (*sermo de rebus urbanis*)."<sup>20</sup> This distinction extends to the nature of the chorus as well, a key element in both tragedy and comedy. Commenting on Aristotle's *Politics*, Aquinas states that the chorus commented on the action of the play through song coupled with dancing.<sup>21</sup> But the chorus of comedy is not identical to the chorus of tragedy, however similar their empirical make-up. Aquinas rests his distinction once again on "kinds." The kind of low commentary the chorus of comedy chants makes it qualitatively different than the kind of serious chanting done by a tragic chorus.<sup>22</sup>

In the Second Part of the Second Part (Secunda Secundae Partis) of the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas addresses ridicule or derision (*de derisione*), a species of laughter. Ridicule for Aquinas falls under the purview of sin, and Question 75 with its two articles inquires into what kind of sin it is, namely, is it a sin distinct from others? And, is it a mortal sin? Aquinas answers in the affirmative to both questions.

In terms of the second question says Aquinas, ridicule arises when it is directed at the evil of another and depending on whether the evil is large or small determines the

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<sup>20</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, "In libros de generatione" in the *Supplementum* to the *Index thomisticus* of the *Opera omnia*, ed. Roberto Busa (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980) 4:50.

<sup>21</sup> According to Liddell and Scott's *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, the word "chorus" from the Greek *Choros* means "band of dancers and/or dancing ground."

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas, "Sententia libri Politicorum" in the *Supplementum* to the *Index thomisticus* of the *Opera omnia*, 4:270-71.

gravity of the sin. Directing ridicule at God, “is the most serious thing of all”<sup>23</sup> while ridicule aimed at the just is also grave because, “it prevents men from acting well”<sup>24</sup> because the unjust desire what the just possess, namely honor. Aquinas also maintains that when the aim of ridicule moves from a small, venial sin to target the actual person then it becomes grave because the humanity of the person is held in “contempt and dishonor.”<sup>25</sup> According to Aquinas it is a mortal sin because, “ridiculing or making fun of somebody is to belittle him to the point of dismissing his misfortunes and treating them as a joke. This later sort of derision is a mortal sin.”<sup>26</sup>

In the first article Aquinas delves into the nature of ridicule itself. Contrary to the objections raised in this article, ridicule is a special sin and, “is therefore something distinct.”<sup>27</sup> Aquinas differentiates sins according to the harm the perpetrator intends to inflict on the other. Insults, detractions and whispers (I take “whispers” to mean gossip) all aim at different effects. Ridicule’s aim is to “make the other blush,”<sup>28</sup> which makes it distinct from the other sins.

What is interesting is Aquinas’ focus on the physiological aspects of ridicule. In answer to the first objection, that asserts that there is no difference between ridicule, mockery, and defamation, Aquinas stresses that although mockery and ridicule have the same aims, unlike mockery, that is done by wrinkling the nose, “*ridicule is registered by the mouth*, that is to say through words and laughter.”<sup>29</sup> This difference based in their respective physiological delivery does not represent different species of sin. However,

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<sup>23</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. XXXVIII (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), 199.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 193-95.

both mockery and ridicule differ from defamation the way blushing differs depending on the circumstance. As Aquinas states, “Blushing in confusion differs from losing face, since blushing in confusion is *the fear of losing face*.”<sup>30</sup> As we will come to see, these notions of ridicule, scornful laughter, and blushing will have special significance as they occur in the history of philosophy including Nietzsche’s, especially concerning Zarathustra.

At Question 46 Aquinas broaches the nature of wisdom (*sapientiae*) and folly (*stultitia*). Once again the issue is folly’s status, that is, if it is opposed to wisdom or not, whether or not it is a sin, and if it is a species of lust. Aquinas answers in the affirmative to all three. For our purposes the article, “Whether folly is contrary to wisdom?” is most relevant.

Quoting Pope Saint Gregory I, Aquinas states that “the gift of wisdom [*donum sapientiae*] is given to ward off folly [*contra stultitiam*].”<sup>31</sup> Here wisdom is described in terms of a gift, that is, as something that when it arrives, *if it arrives*, acts as a bulwark against the sin of folly. Thus Aquinas keeps faithful the notion that wisdom is not a mundane occurrence that happens for all but must be pursued and, if achieved, held in high esteem.

In addition, the attunement of the senses is also at play. One who suffers from folly appears to be dull, unmoved, pathetic and have diminished senses. As Aquinas states, “*The fool is one who is not moved* [non movetur] *through dullness* [stuporem].”<sup>32</sup> What is striking about Aquinas’ notion of folly is perhaps how his understanding has less to do with our more modern understanding of folly, which is something that is done

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Vol. XXXV, 180-81.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

actively, that is, as something that we do or fail to do properly. For Aquinas, the human being that is endowed with sentience and thinking appears to be engaging in folly when they *do nothing*. In other words, to have these faculties that if used with a modicum of care predispose one to at least a certain measure of wisdom, whereas if not used relegates one to folly. “Folly implies a dull heart and blunted senses,”<sup>33</sup> writes Aquinas.

Folly’s opposite, wisdom, savors (*sapere*) its status as that which can discern a multitude of things in terms of their nuance. For an Aristotelian, such as Aquinas, what is most savored by the wise is “*discriminating taste about things and causes* [rerum atque causarum].”<sup>34</sup> Aquinas is focused on things and causes because by doing so we can generate knowledge and first principles. His use of “savor,” however, and the corresponding metaphorical tasting one does, stresses Aquinas’ approach as one fit for a human being. That is, we must use our senses first and through experience “taste” our way to the finer things. And this is only accomplished by the wise human being whose senses are “acute and penetrating.” Indeed, unlike the fool who remains dull and unmoved, the wise person’s attuned senses and spirit is moved by knowledge and principles to the unmoved mover or God. Nietzsche will think differently of folly. What we will find is that folly is something unavoidable for the human being and as such is connected *to* wisdom. In other words, many of the greatest achievements of human beings have their roots in error and not perfection. His Zarathustra states, “For the sake of folly, wisdom is mixed into all things!”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 132/“Before Sunrise.”

For Hegel, comedy was to be elevated to a respected status at least coequal with tragedy and philosophy. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel, who focuses mainly on Aristophanean comedy although he was intimately familiar with Shakespearean comedy as well, places comedy in the section on religion, that is, the section that just precedes Spirit's pinnacle of Absolute Knowing. Here, Hegel tries to show how religion through language attempts to shore up the various elements of a people into a common whole, or a nation. Achieved through representation, language unites "self-consciousness and external existence" in the form of the epic, tragedy and comedy.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover Hegel believes that comedy differs from tragedy and exceeds it. Tragedy deals with individuals caught in a dualism, which is that of the hero who at one time knows but does not know, that is, between that which appears and reality itself. Thus the tension revolves around two equally justifiable positions—that of Fate (or the gods) and the tragic hero. Tragic heroes are not able to take full measure of this knowledge and thus are condemned to the tragic fate that awaits them.<sup>37</sup>

Comedy, on the other hand, synthesizes this duality into a higher form because it "has, therefore, above all, the aspect that actual self-consciousness exhibits itself as the fate of the gods."<sup>38</sup> Comedy allows for the actor to play a universal role and yet remain an individual person.<sup>39</sup> How so? Hegel's insight revolves around the notion of subjectivity and universality. Unlike tragedy, where the tragic subject (hero) perishes against fate, the comic hero is aware, at some level, of a universal moral code or good as it relates to an

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<sup>36</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), especially §727, §729.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. §737. Hegel cites many examples such as Oedipus who, "...was able to unlock the riddle of the Sphinx,...[and is] sent to destruction through what the god revealed to [him]."

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., §744.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Rockmore, *Cognition: An Introduction to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 170-71.

injustice of his own personal circumstance. The comic actor, however, as always focused on its own narrow quandaries, is inept in his *seeking* of justice. The comic hero perpetually fails, giving rise to comic resolutions and laughter provoking images. In this sense, comedy provides a counterweight to fate, or the gods, by depicting the human being *in concreto*, or in other words, “entangled in an actual existence.”<sup>40</sup> If one were to couch this phenomenon in the abstract language that Hegel utilizes in *Phenomenology of Spirit* one would say that in inspired comedy the subject, although aware of some ethical wrong, is nonetheless fully engrossed in its own particularity thus he or she fails to account for the wider objective world including the intersubjective in which he or she is situated thus giving rise to comedic tension. Hegel asserts that when the mask of comedy is removed we see the Self “in its own nakedness and ordinariness.”<sup>41</sup> Consequently comedy achieves an honor that even tragedy did not achieve for Hegel. Comedy reveals to self-consciousness that, “it is itself the Fate to which the secret is revealed, viz. the truth about the essential independence of Nature.”<sup>42</sup>

Elsewhere Hegel lauds comedy, specifically Aristophanean comedy, for its ability to disclose in its profound way the matters essential to the Athenian *polis* and by extension, I would argue, to any state.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the laughter at the heart of Aristophanean comedy provided a counterweight to, “reality itself in the madness of its ruin.” This “ruin” was what Aristophanes perceived as the dissolution of the naturally evolving state at the hands of such figures as the sophists, Euripides, and Socrates (who,

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<sup>40</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §744.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., §745.

<sup>43</sup> For Hegel, these essential matters (what Hegel refers to as “essential spheres”) are the things that bind a people together as a state such as language, rules of governance, art, science etc. that promote the continuity of *Bildung*.

we will see, Nietzsche also views as a philosophical nemesis), that is, figures whose subjective reason and questioning posed a threat to the development of the objective state. This provokes Hegel to recognize Aristophanes' serenity in the face of such tumult: "Of this kind of art an example is comedy as Aristophanes among the Greeks has handled it without anger, in pure and serene joviality, in relation to the most essential spheres in the world of his time."<sup>44</sup> Thus Hegel appears as the philosopher who, up to his time, conferred the utmost respect upon comedy by recognizing its deep affinity with human subjectivity and the relation to the external world.

Nonetheless for Hegel, comedy, like all other phenomena, falls under the umbrella of Absolute Spirit. What this ultimately entails is that it must be understood *rationally* and, as such, as moments of Spirit's progression towards absolute knowing.<sup>45</sup> To be sure, Nietzsche's view is diametrically opposed to codifying tragedy and comedy under the auspices of spirit and reason. Indeed, tragedy and comedy both exceed reason, marking out its limit. Instead of reason, both tragedy and comedy allow for the showing of what is terrible and absurd. Thus they arise from a place that is both pre-rational and pre-linguistic. One might call it chaos. In Nietzschean language it is *Dionysian*.

In 1900, the year of Nietzsche's death, the French philosopher Henri Bergson attempted to distill the nature of comedy in his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. For Bergson, on the one hand, laughter and comedy are something irreducible to a definition and thus represented "a living thing," that is something "strictly human"

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<sup>44</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, Vol. I-II, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1975), 511.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1202.

possessing “a logic all its own.”<sup>46</sup> Conversely, Bergson asserts that what is comic and laughter provoking is a social phenomenon and as such one “must determine the utility of its function.”<sup>47</sup> Bergson proceeds to examine many comics and comedic devices in this work, most notably Molière’s. The main utility of comedy, says Bergson, is its ability to act as a corrective to the often rigid, normative structures of society. Comedy and laughter then are seen as a sort of societal “remedy” although Bergson does not use this word. But he is clear in stating that “Laughter is, above all, a corrective....By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken within it.”<sup>48</sup>

Then there is postmodernism. I would argue that one proceed with some caution when speaking of Nietzsche and postmodern thought because this nexus is more complex than often presupposed. Nietzsche is reacting in large part to Kant, Hegel, and the tradition of German Idealism that came before him. He does so by often going back to the ancients in order for us not to copy, but to behold and use as a springboard towards the will to new knowledge. This locates Nietzsche on a historical fulcrum, one whose thought looks back while also blazing new perspectives. Thus I would be reticent to call Nietzsche, strictly speaking, a “postmodern philosopher” or even the “first postmodern philosopher”<sup>49</sup> as if postmodern philosophy demanded this kind of strict hierarchy and historical positioning in the first place.

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<sup>46</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay On The Meaning Of The Comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1911), 2-3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>49</sup> It is true that many postmodern philosophers owe a great deal of debt to Nietzsche (Irigaray, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze easily come to mind). And although one might discern many similarities between them there are, however, striking differences. One major example: whereas postmodernism understands the subject as something without a fixed nature (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari’s “haecceities/fuzzy aggregates” or the “discursive formations of subjects” for Foucault) Nietzsche, although calling into questioning traditional interpretations of the subject, nonetheless does not subscribe to a vacuous or “thin” notion of the subject. Instead Nietzsche interprets it in terms of intuition, instinct, drives (*Trieb*) that need “composed”

Still, even though there are differences, there are many striking parallels between postmodern philosophy and Nietzsche's thought. Moreover the role that laughter and comedy play in Nietzsche's thought appears in many postmodern themes, especially multiplicity. Although multiplicity will be dealt with in more detail below, especially the chapter that deals with Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for now we can say that multiplicity is that which manifests itself as heterogeneity over homogeneity. To be sure, Michel Foucault dramatically links laughter to the motivation for writing *The Order of Things*, one of his earlier works of the "archeology" period. The first line reads:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and Other.<sup>50</sup>

Occurring in the *first line* in *The Order of Things* we see that laughter, as response to a Chinese taxonomy listing in the literature of Jorge Luis Borges, provides the impetus for Foucault's own project of thinking language at the limit. Although we shall examine Nietzsche and laughter through the lens of postmodernism in much more depth below, for now we can say a few words about this relationship.

The postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze, in *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, offers his evaluation of Nietzsche and comedy. Although comedy appears only once and

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and the will as that which constitutes a perspective on the world. For a good discussion of Nietzsche's relationship to postmodernism see Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche On Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins, *What Nietzsche Really Said* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000).

<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xv.

laughter three times in the body of the text, nonetheless Deleuze's pronouncements on these are sweeping and encompass the most overarching themes in Nietzsche's philosophy. For example, laughter is connected to affirmation in the face of tragedy as well as the rejection of *ressentiment*. Deleuze states, "In relation to Zarathustra laughter, play and dance are affirmative powers of transmutation:...laughter transmutes suffering into joy,...laughter, roars of laughter, affirm multiplicity and the unity of multiplicity...."<sup>51</sup> Deleuze's insights, along with Félix Guattari's, will come to shape the last chapter on Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where we will see that laughter is a key phenomenon if not *the* key phenomenon by which Zarathustra splinters previous monolithic moral structures. He shows that they are only a perspective among many while at the same time affirming his ties to the earth in the very presentation of the *Übermensch* type. Zarathustra's laugh, we can say at least initially, makes manifest the non-delimitable fact of multiplicity.

The concern in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* is best characterized as a nontraditional, non-hierarchical metaphysics. In traditional metaphysics different elements are subordinated to one another in a relationship to an ultimate (usually transcendent) principle such as "God" or "pure reason." But Deleuze and Guattari's metaphysics is one that escapes those totalizing determinations that lie outside nature (*phusis*) that would otherwise determine it. It is as if their metaphysics were a house in which all changes and repairs that took place were done by using material from another part of the same house. In this sense Deleuze and Guattari's project constitutes a radical materialism in which everything is subjected to the folds and contours of this dynamic

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<sup>51</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 193-94.

system that determine all knowledge, relationships, and power structures. To achieve this, Deleuze and Guattari describe reality in terms of assemblages that are formed through the dynamic interplay of the plane of consistency and the plane of organization, and their respective deterritorialization and reterritorialization. An assemblage is a natural event or happening and as such reality is seen in terms of becoming. There is no eternal Being that is separate from becoming. Like Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari think being *as* becoming, that is, as the perpetual production of heterogeneity. One might simply say that the only thing that remains the same is change or that there is only becoming within pure immanence so that no unitary transcendent stands outside of this process dictating the process.

The engine of the interplay between the plane of consistency and the plane of organization consists in Deleuze and Guattari's notion of absolute deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Here any assemblage in the form of an abstract machine that has become a concrete some-thing exists on the plane of organization with its own expression (the play of semiotics) and content (actual things). However, the existence on the plane of organization is never permanent in the way permanence was supposed in traditional metaphysics as that which stood outside nature, unchanged. To exist on the plane of organization is always to already undergo deterritorialization to the plane of consistency through, for example, lines of flight. This dynamic describes reality in terms of becoming in which the production of difference is the result.<sup>52</sup>

With this said, the kinship to Nietzsche is quite obvious. Deleuze and Guattari indeed owe a great deal of homage to him. The emphasis on becoming, difference, and

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<sup>52</sup> For a thorough elucidation of Deleuze and Guattari's nontraditional metaphysics see Fred Evans, *The Multivoiced Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), especially 33-52.

multiplicity have their roots in much of Nietzsche's thought. To be sure there are many differences between Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari's thought, just as there are between Nietzsche and postmodernism in general. Nonetheless, in terms of comedy and provocative laughter, we will see how Nietzsche's quest to either dismantle "the old idols" (recall Nietzsche's hammer) or at least call into radical questioning philosophy is very similar to the project of Deleuze and Guattari's dismantling of traditional metaphysics. To laugh and parody, to mimic comically as Nietzsche's Zarathustra does, is to begin this de(con)struction. And this laughter of deconstruction must not be misinterpreted to mean that Zarathustra is ridiculing simply that which is different leading to more conformity. It is a laughter of deconstruction that ridicules the kind of philosophical stance that disavows difference and heterogeneity.

Today, many thinkers in contemporary Continental philosophy have disclosed how comedy and laughter play a pivotal role in philosophical thought and vice versa. Looking to retrieve and bring to light comic, laughter provoking moments in ancient thought that have been ignored or so sedimented by this same history with worn philosophical approaches, a few philosophers have begun to reverse this trend and mine this thought with a comedic eye. For example, Sallis in his *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue*, reads Plato's *Cratylus* as essentially a comedy.<sup>53</sup> The comedy concerns the very nature of *logos* in terms of its relation to its parts. *Logos* always harbors within it the potential to be false. In terms of the *Cratylus*, this potential is played out comically as both Hermogenes and Cratylus vie over whether names are natural or conventional, that is, whether there is a kinship between things and the names that name

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<sup>53</sup> John Sallis, *Being and Logos: The Way of Platonic Dialogue* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1975), 185.

them (Cratylus) or that names are merely arbitrary (Hermogenes). In Sallis's words, "[T]his relation as it is brought to light through the unfolding of the comedy proves to be such that names both serve to make things manifest and, on the other hand, are in need of being limited by what they themselves first make manifest."<sup>54</sup> Socrates, who is the mediator between Cratylus and Hermogenes, leads both these characters to affirm the opposite of their originally stated position. In turn, the comedy that ensues revolves around the effort to derive names from original forms, that is, the interplay, the playfulness between these two elements.

Freydberg examines the role of comedy, laughter and philosophy in two influential works—*The Play of the Platonic Dialogues* and *Aristophanes & Comedy: Aristophanes, Eros and Logos*.<sup>55</sup> In terms of Plato, Freydberg asserts that what beats at the heart of the serious issues within the Platonic dialogues is a playfulness that does not undermine or take away from the somber issues, but enhances them. Thus he says, "Playfulness in Plato is never frivolous or merely decorative, but always has philosophical content. Playfulness is aligned with measure; seriousness loosed from play also loses its genuine philosophical bearing."<sup>56</sup>

Freydberg examines many dialogues to demonstrate the element of playfulness that is almost always at work in the dialogues. To cite one example, he notes that Socrates' *daimon* has traditionally been understood to signify either his conscience or a sort of non-rational instinctive insight that serves reason and therefore is subservient to it. However Freydberg's hermeneutical exegesis of the texts shows that *daimonion*, as

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>55</sup> Bernard Freydberg, *The Play of the Platonic Dialogues* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997) and *Philosophy and Comedy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>56</sup> Freydberg, *The Play of the Platonic Dialogues*, 2.

Socrates uses it, denotes one, a mythical mediator between human affairs and divine affairs such as Diotima's use of it in her speech to Socrates in the *Symposium*. It is also used as an exclamation that signifies an excess or movement beyond what is appropriate in the human realm such as Socrates' exclamation, "*Ō daimonie*" when he addresses the intense and irascible Thrasymachus at *Republic* 344d 6.<sup>57</sup> Freydberg's insight is that the *daimonion*, as used by Socrates, is a phenomenon that allows Socrates to realize the necessity of limit and self-questioning that opens up:

...a space within which proper measure may be sought. In the act of entering this space, the *daimonion* of Socrates discloses it in its playful character. The comedy of an instinct which restrains and of a dark flash giving birth to the light of *logos* is reflected in the counterimage of tragedy, the danger of *hubris* against which the *daimonion* at play guards by provoking mindfulness of proper measure.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, as Freydberg shows, the *daimonion* constitutes that space where the tragic activity of philosophical thinking is always coupled with a necessary play.

And as we shall see in much more depth, Nietzsche himself is aware of Plato's *need* for comedy as that which helped make his Greek existence something worth enduring amidst the tragic turmoil of that age. Nietzsche claims that it was the works of Aristophanes that Plato secretly found consolation in and not some other literature that espoused transcendent or other-worldly views.

What is important for this discussion is that, for Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and others in the philosophical tradition, we do not find comedy and laughter used in the sense that Nietzsche will use it in his philosophy. For Nietzsche, comedy is not just another

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 141-43.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 154.

phenomenon to be analyzed, codified, and subsumed under some category *within* philosophy. Indeed, the philosophical enterprise itself for Nietzsche is and must be intertwined with humor. Moreover, philosophy (and surely philosophers!) can be the cause of great laughter as Nietzsche shows when he has his sights set on their often hermit-like behavior that betrays less than noble instincts. I will argue that this is what sets Nietzsche's view of comedy apart from other thinkers. Comedy or that which is laughter provoking is one of the elements Nietzsche utilizes as part of his philosophy so as to call into question and even dissolve the totalizing edifices that have dominated the philosophic tradition. Even more to the point, *the philosophical exercise itself, not withstanding its seriousness, is a source of provocative laughter* so that for Nietzsche, philosophy, tragedy and comedy are kindred souls always at play.

### III. Taking the Stage: Nietzsche's Set-Up

We have seen how philosophy and comedy play into one another, how comedy and laughter can be deeply philosophical in their own way, and how the serious affair of philosophy can at times be comic and laughter provoking. Furthermore, we overviewed the way comedy has appeared in the history of philosophy. Of course this is only a sketch and one could say much more. However, it was only recently that philosophy concerned itself with the play of the deeper layer mentioned above where both philosophy and comedy see one in the other. The restricted image of philosophy that has all but driven comedy and laughter from its space is exactly the image that I would like to challenge,

and do so through the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. It is Nietzsche who exploits this deep alliance allowing for laughter and the whole “comedy of existence” to be displayed within, and as part, of his philosophy. How then does Nietzsche appropriate the phenomena of laughter and comedy? What role does it play in his thought and why?

Nietzsche is the philosopher who attempted to articulate the importance of many phenomena that had become marginalized in the history of philosophy. For example: the role of music is featured prominently in his thought, especially the early works; madness is allowed a voice that had been, until Nietzsche, almost silenced by reason; and physiology, (and not just the mind) was given prominence. To the discerning reader, comedy and laughter come to play a significant role in his thought. Until now the role of comedy and laughter had no doubt been relegated to a secondary status compared to the more well known tragic dimensions of his thinking, and it is true that in terms of volume Nietzsche speaks much more about tragedy. Nonetheless, comedy is neither superficial for Nietzsche nor does it represent the impoverished flip side to tragedy. Instead, I argue, it plays just as an important role and ought to have the same measure accorded tragedy. Thus, although it may appear more latent in comparison to tragedy, comedy and laughter constitute, along with tragedy, the same *archē* that form the basis for Nietzsche’s thought.

To begin to appreciate comedy and laughter it is a necessary first step to articulate, at least in an initial way, three main concerns that will provide a thread throughout this dissertation. The first has to do with the nature of comedy and laughter itself. By this I simply mean that Nietzsche’s use of these phenomena are never limited to a single understanding. To put it another way, Nietzsche’s employment of comedy and laughter means different things at different times and almost always requires the reader to

engage in a nuanced hermeneutical rendering of the text. So we will see that not all laughter, for example, can simply be said to be the reaction to something amusing. In his writings laughter takes on various textures that are themselves part of the larger matrix of his thought. Like one who has become accustomed to enjoying the different courses of well prepared cuisine, the recognition of these comedic textures allows for a disclosing of what is essential in human existence.

Furthermore, comedy and laughter are not the same phenomenon hence they are not reciprocal. Comedies must contain laughter, which is to say they should be laughter provoking. However not all laughter is comedic. Thus one could say that where there is comedy there will be laughter, but where there is laughter there is not necessarily comedy. The provocative laughter Nietzsche often employs overflows any consignment to a single concept. Laughter then (if one were relegated to Aristotelian language) would be the genus and comedy would be a species of it. So for example, laughter can be scornful and indeed Nietzsche is scornful on many occasions and is himself the target of scornful laughter. Laughter can also manifest itself through discomfort, such as when one is embarrassed or nervous. It may occur at times as part of self-deprecating humor or to signify contempt, disinterestedness or ignorance, such as when Zarathustra first attempts to “go down” and speak to the townspeople in the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. There are then myriad examples that arise within his texts. Thus it remains to be seen in Nietzsche’s writings the many different varieties of laughter as well as how they serve his larger philosophical goals. To offer an initial remark on comedy that will be elaborated in the first chapter, comedy represents for Nietzsche an important philosophical function much the same way tragedy does, although its mode is different.

Because Nietzsche's use of laughter is varied careful attention will be focused on its role. Thus at times it may signal the rejection of some standard as in the laughing lion who indeed roars, but roars *with laughter*. Although this also will be examined in much more detail, we can provisionally state that the lion's laughter is the rejection of the old morality founded on "thou shall" commandments. At other times Nietzsche's employment of laughter is one of deep scorn as mentioned above. Many times Zarathustra is not understood, that is, his ideas are rejected because "there are not yet ears" ready for such ideas, because his arrival on the scene of history is premature. Other times laughter occurs as the initiation of a deep provocation. In this sense Nietzsche is attempting to provoke us out of what might be our own dogmatic slumber. On the surface it may appear at times as if Nietzsche's use of laughter is there just to denigrate or mock. To many readers Nietzsche is abrasive (I always recall the looks on the faces of my undergraduate students who have read Nietzsche for the first time). However, the very occurrence of any tension in Nietzsche with another philosopher or philosophy almost always occurs under the guise of the utmost respect. Socrates, Jesus, even Richard Wagner are his nemeses but they are noble enemies always possessing some elements that Nietzsche admires, such as Socrates redemption through the art of music-making, Christ's courage, and in the case of Wagner an example of genius and a close, albeit short, friendship.<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche may target them for laughter but he does so in order to

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<sup>59</sup> For example, in the case of Christ, Nietzsche makes a clear distinction in *The Anti-Christ* between Christ and Christianity. He admires Christ's courage. He finds noble qualities in the very *praxis* of Jesus' life and at the time of his crucifixion. Christianity on the other hand represents a fateful turn, most notably at the hands of Paul, toward the kind of values that decay life. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). As regards Wagner, Nietzsche refers to him as a rare genius. He even says of Wagner's written works: "I know of no writings on aesthetics so illuminating as Wagner's." "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth" in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 248/10. Even after the dissolution of their friendship Nietzsche said on being told the news of

engage them in the *agōn* of ideas and values. To be engaged with Nietzsche, to have Nietzsche laughing at you, is a sure sign of an abiding respect even though at the same time it is one that provokes us into hopefully rethinking a particular viewpoint from a different perspective from the one whom he is engaging. And this same respect is at play in the very heart of a noble ethics and the rejection of *ressentiment*. Simply put, Nietzsche will attempt to embrace even the scorners. And of course there are the times when laughter occurs in certain aphorisms simply because something appears to Nietzsche as being humorous. For example he finds Thomas Hobbes's lack of reverence for laughter, itself, laughter provoking stating, "In spite of that philosopher who, being a true Englishman, tried to give laughter a bad reputation among all thoughtful people,...I would go so far as to allow myself a rank order of philosophers based on the rank of their laughter—right up to those who are capable of *golden* laughter."<sup>60</sup> This does not mean laughter is without depth. Even here there are layers to be peeled back, layers in which we almost always find ourselves staring not only into the abyss but many times a kind of funhouse mirror<sup>61</sup> as well.

A second concern is that the occurrence of laughter and comedy in his writing should remain faithful to Nietzsche's imperative that one ought to affirm life. To affirm life is a double calling. It is, on the one hand a call, not merely to recognize, but to hold in reverence, that is *affirm* life itself over and above any claims to otherworldly hopes. This includes, better yet must include, the affirmation of the harshest suffering such as that

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Wagner's death that, "Wagner was by far the *fullest* human being I have known." (letter to Franz Overbeck, February 1883.)

<sup>60</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 174-75/Aphorism 294.

<sup>61</sup> This wonderful image of comedy and laughter as a funhouse mirror is used extensively by Bernard Freytag in his *Philosophy and Comedy*.

envisaged by the great tragedies. On the other hand it is a call for a reevaluation of all values. To affirm even the harshest suffering on earth as the highest calling is to call into radical questioning all previously ascribed values. In other words, to consent to this affirmation of life one must deify this suffering, and by doing so, it is as if one is always already engaged in the undermining of those values that see life as a problem. Laughter is exactly that phenomena that gathers, like a bridge, the shores of “no saying” valueless values (put succinctly, *nihilism* for Nietzsche) with the “yes saying” to life and the reevaluation of all values so that we may cross that bridge in affirmation of the later. In the *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche says of this affirmation that it is a, “Saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems; the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian, *that* is the bridge...”<sup>62</sup> Thus laughter must be seen as a nexus to Dionysian affirmation.

The third concern has to do with Nietzsche’s notion of *ressentiment*, which he treats most thoroughly in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. To be faithful to this idea, nowhere can laughter occur as an inauthentic reaction to a rival. Nietzschean laughter must always retain an authentic nobility that engages and negates but never externalizes and resents. Nietzsche is clear on the meaning of *ressentiment* as an antithesis to the affirmation of his tragic view of life when he states, “Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying ‘yes’ to itself, slave morality says ‘no’ on principle to everything that is ‘outside’, ‘other’, ‘non-self’: and *this* ‘no’ is its creative deed.”<sup>63</sup> The

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<sup>62</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 228/Section 5 of “What I Owe the Ancients.”

<sup>63</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 20/First essay, 10.

act of laughing, of finding humor where others often times see only seriousness or external threats is, in part, a key to this “noble morality.” In other words, contrary to resentment laughter *is*, to a large extent, a “yes saying.” So Nietzsche’s view of laughter and comedy must be one that finds meaning only in its creative deed of staving off *ressentiment*. Both *ressentiment* and the affirmation of life work together by authentically engaging with existence that at times can be cruel. In turn this engagement centers around a coming to grips with this cruelty that in its very destruction harbors its own Dionysian rebirth. The human being is a bridge, a crossing, and in the very crossing resounds jollity and affirming laughter as the “eternal comedy of existence”<sup>64</sup> perpetually unfolds.

Of course we shall see that there are many more concerns in any evaluation of comedy and laughter in the thought of Nietzsche. Nonetheless, I believe that the three outlined here are crucial because they delimit an overarching framework that his thought always remains faithful to.

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<sup>64</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 29/Aphorism 1.

## Chapter One: Nietzsche on Tragedy and Comedy—Two Masks/One God

“The writer of comedy is of the higher species, and *must* do more good than the other, whether he wants to or not.”

~Nietzsche, Letter to Peter Gast 1883~

### I. Nietzsche’s Tragic View of Life

What is meant by the tragic view of life that Nietzsche very much embraces? How and why is life essentially tragic for Nietzsche? The reason these questions are relevant to the present study is that understanding this is a necessary first step if one is to subsequently focus on Nietzsche’s affirmation of life in light of the tragic outlook. This affirmation often times manifests itself through his view of comedy and laughter. What will begin to emerge is the close proximity that both tragedy and comedy often have to one another even though they are distinct phenomena.

The work that most directly sheds light on the tragic view of life is Nietzsche’s earliest published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, because this dissertation will look thoroughly at this work as it relates to comedy, I propose another aphorism from a later work that encapsulates this view. “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” appears in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) and, because it appears later in the Nietzsche corpus, one can avail oneself of its content in terms of how it relates to earlier works thereby providing a philosophical thread that winds its way through Nietzsche’s thinking. Accordingly, because of its importance to this study I recount it in full:

*The history of an error*

The true world attainable for a man whom is wise, pious, virtuous, - he lives in it, *he is it*. (Oldest form of the idea, relatively coherent, simple, convincing.

Paraphrase of the proposition 'I, Plato, *am* the truth.')

The true world, unattainable for now, but promised to the man who is wise, pious, virtuous ('to the sinner who repents'). (Progress of the idea: it gets trickier, more subtle, less comprehensible, - *it becomes female*, it becomes Christian...)

The true world, unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable, but the very thought of it a consolation, an obligation, an imperative. (Basically the old sun but through fog and scepticism; the idea become elusive, pale, Nordic, Königsbergian.)

The true world – unattainable? At any rate, unattained. And as unattained also *unknown*. Consequently not consoling, redeeming, obligating either: how could we have obligations to something unknown?... (Gray morning. First yawn of reason. Cockcrow of positivism.)

The 'true world' – an idea that is of no further use, not even as an obligation, - now an obsolete, superfluous idea, *consequently* a refuted idea: let's get rid of it! (Bright day; breakfast; return of *bons sens* and cheerfulness; Plato blushes in shame; pandemonium of all free spirits.)

The true world is gone: which world is left? The illusory one, perhaps?... But no! *we got rid of the illusory world along with the true one!* (Noon; moment of shortest shadow; end of longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.)<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 171.

It is clearly evident that Nietzsche is working through the history of philosophy in terms of the *devolving* meaning of truth, that is, of a supersensible “true world” set opposite of the sensible world. It is devolving because truth begins as the unconditioned or the transcendent and as such it is unchanging. However, this world has never really been knowable, only posited. Indeed, to be transcendent means to be beyond experience. In this sense, from the side of experience, it is a regulative fiction. Nietzsche traces this devolving meaning of truth, what he calls the “history of an error,” beginning with Plato’s ideas, then the otherworldly hopes of Christianity, through Kant’s noumenal (and therefore unknowable) thing-in-itself (*Ding-an-sich*) until skepticism of such knowledge begins to hold sway.

This passage from *Twilight of the Idols* encapsulates what is certainly a critique of science. It is a critique not only of science’s aims but also its method and limit, and the possibility of science at all. If there is to be a science then its form is also called into radical questioning. These concerns all intersect with the tragic view of knowledge Nietzsche is emphasizing. In the collection of essays that make up the book *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, Babette Babich also recognizes this inversion stating in her superb essay, “The Culture of Science as Art”:

Nietzsche’s post-Kantian reflection on the *possibility* of knowledge and truth includes an irrecusable emphasis on the ‘tragic’ limit of critique itself. Inverting traditional readings of Kant’s critical program, Nietzsche argues that as an articulation of the metaphysical or transcendental foundations of all science as of

all mathematics, ‘it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests.’<sup>66</sup>

In essence, Nietzsche’s tragic view is a new kind of knowledge that not only recognizes the limits of an otherwise unrestrained optimism but embraces these limits as well. It is a special kind of knowledge because it recognizes our limits as finite, earthbound beings who can never hope to transcend this status. It is the coming to grips with regulative fictions *as* regulative fictions by not forgetting that they are posited as such. This call to honesty (*Redlichkeit*), especially in its intellectual sense, is perhaps best stated by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* and the same aphorism that Babich references above:

In science [*der Wissenschaft*], convictions have no right to citizenship, as one says with good reason: only when they decide to step down [*herabzusteigen*] to the modesty of a hypothesis, a tentative experimental standpoint, a regulative fiction [*regulativen Fiktion*], may they be granted admission and even a certain value in the realm of knowledge—though always with the restriction that they remain under police supervision, under the police of mistrust [*die Polizei des Misstrauens*].<sup>67</sup>

Here Nietzsche agrees with Kant who, in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, states that knowledge claims cannot transcend “the realm of possible experience” even though transcendental ideas as regulative fictions are “nonetheless

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<sup>66</sup> Babette Babich, “The Culture of Science as Art,” in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, ed. B. Babich and R. Cohen (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 1. This quote of Nietzsche is from *The Gay Science*, aphorism 344.

<sup>67</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 200/Aphorism 344.

indispensably necessary.”<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche’s critique of other thinkers often revolves around their unwillingness to recognize that these illusions are just that, illusions, and Nietzsche sees himself as providing the necessary “police supervision” that would keep in check intellectual dishonesty run amok.

In addition, the impetus behind many knowledge claims that move beyond experience reveals on many occasions the self-serving motivation behind such attempts. And this is where Nietzsche’s criticism of Kant comes into sharp focus because although he agrees with Kant that illusions are necessary for life, nonetheless it is Kant’s rigorous adherence, in this case to ethical duty based on the categorical imperative, that betrays the fact that he, as one of the most insightful thinkers, is well aware of the illusions that are at play in philosophical thought. Again in *The Twilight of the Idols* he states that the philosopher’s:

[W]hole craft involves allowing only certain truths [*gewisse Wahrheiten*]: namely the ones that their craft is *publicly* sanctioned [*die öffentliche Sanktion*] to offer, – in Kantian terms, the truths of *practical* reason. They know what they *have to* prove; when it comes to this, they *are* practical, – they recognize each other by their agreement about ‘truths’. – ‘You should not lie’ – this means: *beware* [hüten], my dear philosopher, of telling the truth...<sup>69</sup>

This criticism is stinging, if for no other reason, because it targets the philosopher’s quest for and relationship to truth. Indeed the very nature of knowledge that reveals the tragic, truth and its presentation is called into question. But the criticisms leveled at Kant are also at times laughter provoking such as when he weaves certain kinds of Judeo-Christian

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<sup>68</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996), 617-619B, 670B, 673B.

<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 217/42.

imagery into his account of Kant's call to selfless duty. For example, "Nothing ruins us more profoundly or inwardly than 'impersonal' duty, or any sacrifice in front of the Moloch of abstraction. – To think that people did not sense the *mortal danger* posed by Kant's categorical imperative!"<sup>70</sup> Or when he finds humor in the fact that the very system Kant created that was to be universally applicable to all minds in the practical sphere was to those very same minds incomprehensible; "*Kant's Joke*. – Kant wanted to prove, in a way that would dumbfound the whole world, that the whole world was right: that was the secret joke of this soul. He wrote against the scholars in favour of popular prejudice, but for scholars and not for the people."<sup>71</sup> In other words non-philosophers could not understand the very system that was supposed to articulate the moral law they were to follow! To be sure, the "joke" rests with Nietzsche in that Kant surely did not find his practical philosophy laughter provoking. It is Nietzsche who sees both the serious and humorous factor themselves into the presence of tragic knowledge.

However, what is perhaps more compelling is how one understands the consequences of such a view. One might phrase the question ethically and ask, "What ought one do in the face of such knowledge?" Although the end of the true world was always already underway from its beginning, nonetheless Nietzsche signals its finality when "*bon sens*" (good sense) returns and "Plato blushes in shame" unleashing the "pandemonium of all free spirits." Free spirits then are those who reject outright not only the true world but also the illusory world that is coupled with it as well. In other words, Nietzsche's task is both to break free from what has been traditionally called the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., *The Anti-Christ*, 10/11. Moloch refers to an ancient god of the Near East that parents occasionally sacrificed their children to. Thus a Moloch in literature refers to something that requires a costly sacrifice hence Nietzsche's play on Kant's categorical imperative where lived, embodied life is sacrificed on the altar of abstraction that supposedly provided the systematic framework to protect it.

<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 140/Aphorism 193.

intelligible/sensible distinction and also to exploit the distinction between a “common sense” view of the world and the philosopher’s view of the world. But secondly, understanding the ramifications of such a position allows for the true imperative of affirming instinctual knowledge over against the philosopher’s knowledge. Thus it is not simply a rejection of the true world (the intelligible realm) in favor of the illusory world (the apparent world),<sup>72</sup> nor is it a simple inversion as if one could simply turn the hourglass before the last grain of sand slipped through, but a denial of both as understood in and through each other. For Nietzsche, it is only the sensible world *as* the sensible world that is of most significance. This means that the sensible world exists as the only truth and must be taken up on its own. In light of this inversion Sallis states, “what is now required is a discourse that would double the sensible—interpret it, as it were—without recourse to the intelligible. What is required is a discourse that would endure the loss of the intelligible...”<sup>73</sup> Hence Nietzsche’s poetic claim, “Noon; moment of shortest shadow; end of longest error; high point of humanity.” The long arch of the true world as imaged by the sun has reached its zenith casting on the sun dial “the shortest shadow.”<sup>74</sup> One might say, remaining faithful to Nietzsche’s imagery, that the sun as it moves on its vaulting path through the sky is now at noon, its zenith, and thus is ready to begin sinking into its horizon. The previous expansive shadow cast by the kind of metaphysics that Nietzsche is calling into question—that of God and science—struggles in its twilight.

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<sup>72</sup> Both Sallis (in *Platonic Legacies*, [Albany: SUNY, 2004]) and Babich (in “The Culture of Science as Art,” in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*) underscore this same point.

<sup>73</sup> John Sallis, *Force of Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 33. In terms of Nietzsche’s text I offer a similar interpretation although with Sallis the stress is on the return to “wild nature and the elemental” and the need for a fundamental reorientation to ethics and politics. (25)

<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 171.

However this horizon is one that the sun, with all *its implications*, no longer forms. At this “high point of humanity” the transition occurs, one hardly discernible, because like all transitions things are never perfectly demarcated especially if one is in the midst of the transition itself. Hence for Nietzsche, “INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA” (“Zarathustra begins”) or one might read it as Nietzsche has it at the end of the first edition of *The Gay Science* (1882) and before *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* whose first book appears a year later: “*Incipit Tragoedia*” (“The tragedy begins”).<sup>75</sup> Zarathustra is the key figure that clears and occupies this tragic spacing in history. In this regard, it is humanity’s new undertaking as it must come to grips with and hopefully affirm its new reality absent of the intelligible/sensible distinction that held sway for so long. Sensible phenomena must be taken as they show themselves, that is, as they *scheinen*, hence Nietzsche’s words in *The Birth of Tragedy* that he repeats many times, “only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* [aesthetisches Phänomen] is being there [*Dasein*] and the world eternally *justified* [gerechtfertigt].”<sup>76</sup> What however are the implications of such a view?

First, Nietzsche’s assertion that the true world (the world of reason or the intelligible world) no longer provides the foundation of our thinking, nor the justification of our being there is not an epistemological claim. In other words, Nietzsche is not rejecting this world based on epistemological grounds. He does not provide a lengthy epistemological argument in favor of sense knowledge as opposed to a priori knowledge (his early essay, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” is arguably an exception as he works through the many stages of sense experience and the language that we use to

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<sup>75</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 195/Aphorism 342. See also Kathleen Higgins, *Comic Relief: Nietzsche’s Gay Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 161-62. Higgins also points out the interchangeable nature of these two beginnings.

<sup>76</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 33/Section 5. I translate *Dasein* as “being there” whereas Speirs uses “existence.”

signify it). Indeed Nietzsche states in *Human, All Too Human* that the metaphysical world, understood in its widest sense, is hardly to be disputed, that is, it surely exists.<sup>77</sup> Instead, Nietzsche's interest is in understanding: first, in what motivated certain thinkers such as Plato and Kant to posit supersensible criteria and second, in how it is that the "true world" understood in its multitude of *historical* senses furthered life ascending values. In other words, what benefit does transcendent or noumenal knowledge mean existentially for life?

Nietzsche poignantly illustrates this concern again in *Human, All Too Human* when he states that, "[K]nowledge [of a metaphysical world] would be the most useless knowledge of all knowledge: more useless even than knowledge of the chemical composition of water must be to the sailor in danger of shipwreck"<sup>78</sup> Thus Nietzsche is stressing what I would call the existential invalidity of metaphysical knowledge and of course this invalidity is a far cry from the kind of validity concerned with logic or epistemological correspondence; life many times outstrips the metaphysical knowledge that would otherwise hope to "correct" it. What the positing of God or any transcendent criteria achieved, claims Nietzsche, is the allowance for a certain kind of life in which the purveyors of that particular life were protected and allowed to thrive within that discursive practice. But now this "true world," which has reached its zenith, is about to sink like the sun, descending in terms of its hegemony, leaving only the sensible world and sensible phenomena as that which manifests itself to us as the only meaningful, existential criteria.

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<sup>77</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 15/Section 9.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

What, then, is a world given and justified only as an aesthetic phenomena? It is world in which we are immersed in that which appears to sense. It is a world of images. This is the meaning of an aesthetically justified life. *It is a life in which appearances and images in their manifold semblance hold sway.*<sup>79</sup> For Nietzsche, the most powerful images, images that *scheinen*, come in the form of art. To be sure, art alone justifies even the most tremendous amount of suffering that allows us to surmount pessimism and embrace the tragic view of the world. But this is Nietzsche's goal as Heidegger makes clear from what he says are notes from an initial sketch of *The Birth of Tragedy*, "My philosophy is an *inverted Platonism*: the further removed from true being, the purer, the more beautiful, the better it is. Living in *Schein* as goal."<sup>80</sup>

The implications of such a view are immense and not only because they stress the importance of those things that have been least important in the history of philosophy. Hence, whereas until Nietzsche's time (with some exceptions) "truth" was always stressed in its relationship to permanence and being, his stress is on change, becoming and the inevitable effect of having to take up a *perspective among perspectives*. In other words the "birds eye view" of truth is inverted. This new emphasis compels him to emphatically state, "for all life rests on semblance, art, deception, prismatic effects, the necessity of perspectivism and error."<sup>81</sup> And moreover, this acknowledgement of our finite condition within becoming and the resulting effects it will have on all science (*Wissenschaft*) although to many might be frightful, for Nietzsche it is far from a call to

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<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche claims, "A religion would be created if a man awakened belief in a mystical edifice that he built in a vacuum, i.e. if the belief met an extraordinary need. It is unlikely that this will ever happen again after the *Critique of Pure Reason*. On the other hand I can imagine an entirely new kind of philosopher-artist who would fill the gap with a work of art, with aesthetic value." From *Writings From The Early Notebooks*, trans. Ladislaus Löb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 105-06/19[39].

<sup>80</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. I-IV (Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1961), 1/233. This is John Sallis' translation in *Crossings*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 9/Section 5 of the preface to the second edition.

resignation and despair. Thus his thinking in many ways echoes David Hume's claim that we ought not despair but be happy within the narrow limits of our understanding. Nietzsche's rejection of pessimism and the "true world" and the embracing of the tragic view is one we can celebrate through art, especially comedy, in which we image ourselves before ourselves in "*bons sens* and cheerfulness."<sup>82</sup> In the words of William Shakespeare, who Nietzsche very much appreciates, "All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players."<sup>83</sup>

Keeping all of this in mind as a backdrop is critical and it is precisely why in "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" and "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" that Nietzsche's critique of science is so poignant, not only because he critiques the very (supposed) grounds of science itself but because of what is at stake. As Babich has it, "The notion of 'truth and lie' is not a moral question but concerns the relation between art and knowledge as it is also the relation between ancient, tragic wisdom and modern nihilism."<sup>84</sup> Abandoned to ourselves, comedy as well as all inspired art, plays a crucial role in Nietzsche's thought. They *provide* a relief against the backdrop of a philosophical history in question and they *are* a relief in their very expression by helping fill the void left in the wake of nihilism.

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<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 171.

<sup>83</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II. vii. Nietzsche's appreciation of Shakespeare is evident for example in *The Gay Science* 93/Aphorism 98 and in *Ecce Homo* where he states, "Shakespeare is the most poignant reading I know: how much suffering does it take for somebody to need to play the clown!—Have people *understood* Hamlet? It is not doubt, it is *certainty* that drives people mad...But you need to be deep, an abyss, a philosopher, to feel this way...We are all *afraid* of the truth." 91-92/Section 4 of "Why I Am So Clever."

<sup>84</sup> Babich, "The Culture of Science as Art," in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 2.

## II. Comedy as a Response to the Tragic View

In ancient Greece yearly festivals, in honor of Dionysus, were held in which both tragedies and comedies were performed. The Dionysia consisted of what were surely three soul-taxing tragedies buttressed at the end by a comedy. The plays were performed as part of a competition in which the winners were awarded a prize, usually a goat—hence the etymology of the word “tragedy” which means “goat-song.” The word comedy also betrays its roots in Dionysian revelry and song. In fact, the word comedy from the Greek *komodios* means “singer in the revels.” What is evident from these etymological excavations is that tragedies and comedies, with their roots in Dionysian revelry, have close ties not only to the earth but to *madness* as Dionysus was the god (among other things) of chaos and ecstatic, non-rational experience. In the preface to the second edition to *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886) titled “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” Nietzsche affirms exactly this stating:

[W]here must the origins of tragedy have lain at that time? Perhaps in *desire and delight* [Lust], in strength, in overbrimming health, in an excess of plentitude? In this case what is the meaning (in physiological terms) of that madness [*Wahnsinn*]*—Dionysian madness—from which both the tragic and the comic arts emerged?...it was precisely madness which brought the greatest blessings [die grössten Segnungen] to Hellas...*<sup>85</sup>

In this sense, that is, in the historical sense of ancient Greece, Dionysian madness was the fertile ground from which tragedy and comedy arose. If we equate this madness with darkness, as opposed to what will later be called “the light of reason” by many

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<sup>85</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 7/Section 4 of the preface to the second edition.

Enlightenment thinkers, then madness as cruelty and lust was finally allowed a voice to resound out of this darkness in the form of art. These non-rational beginnings resonate quite well with Nietzsche's view that many of the philosophical, moral, and scientific phenomena that the moderns inherited had "origins" that were much more shadowy and gray than the certainty of black and white transcendental absolutes.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche's view (along with that of his friend and colleague Jacob Burckhardt) of ancient Hellas as one that harbored a great measure of irrationality and madness was a direct challenge to the thinking of his day where Greece was seen as an exalted state due to its rationality and serene temperament.<sup>87</sup> This dark origin of lust, cruelty, and madness played a double role in that it was the source of great suffering and pessimism and yet it was the fertile ground from which humankind could configure their beautiful semblances into art, which allowed them to live in the face of that abysmal knowledge.

What we are concerned with here then are a number of things. First and foremost is the manner in which comedy manifested itself out of these darker origins. To use the phrase, "the manner in which..." is another way of asking the more essential question pertinent to Nietzsche's orientation: *How do comedies "scheiden"?* What is the particular manner in which comedies appear as shining images? And if they are inspired comedies, how is it that we become transfigured when we behold them? Secondly, what does the shining of comedic images accomplish for Nietzsche and us? Why are they important (always keeping in mind that they are as important as the shining of tragic images)? Finally, what does Nietzsche perceive as a threat to such comedic shinings? Is there a

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<sup>86</sup> Michel Foucault makes exactly this claim in, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. D. Bouchard and S. Simon, in *Foucault: Essential Works Vol. II, Aesthetics, Method, Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 369-91.

<sup>87</sup> See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, trans. S. Stern (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), and E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

saving power that can be found in the very threat that would allow the turning out of the threat from within the danger itself? In Nietzsche's view, there is a danger present in the thought of Socrates and Plato's thinking although they also harbor a saving power and Nietzsche is quick to expose this moment in the history of philosophy. But first there is a burst of laughter that erupts early in *The Birth of Tragedy* that heralds a beginning for these very questions. This is the laughter of the Dionysian reveler Silenus.

As we saw above in the first section of this chapter, Nietzsche's overall view can be understood to be a tragic view. This tragic view, with its attendant loss of traditional/historical values, can result in pessimism. This was demonstrated in the section of a later work called "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable." In *The Birth of Tragedy* pessimism is given a different configuration and a different voice. Here the pessimism that is to be overcome through art—preferably through tragedy and comedy—is given through myth, specifically the image of Silenus. This myth is important to Nietzsche because in this earlier work he is concerned with how the ancient Greeks were able to maintain a cheerfulness in the face of their sufferings. This was not so that us moderns could then copy the Greeks. Nietzsche of course does not want us to return to an origin in order to copy what has already manifested itself in time as he makes clear in the *Untimely Meditations* essay, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life." Instead, the eternal return of chaos demands that we compose our own desires and will them into new forms. Thus it is to be used as an example that inspires us and drives on toward future goals under the guise of our own inspired creations. So, what does Nietzsche's inclusion of the Silenus myth tell us not only about the Greeks but ourselves? And how does art, including comedy, help to overcome this unsettling image?

A follower and reveler of Dionysus, Silenus was hunted by King Midas who was finally able to confront him. King Midas demanded that Silenus tell him what is best for human beings, that is, demanded that Silenus divulge his wisdom:

Stiff and unmoving, the daemon remains silent until, forced by the King to speak, he finally breaks out in shrill laughter [*gellem Lachen*] and says: ‘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* [*nicht zu sein*], to be *nothing* [*nichts zu sein*]. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon.’<sup>88</sup>

What is clearly evident is the deep alliance between pessimism and laughter. This particular laughter may not be comic to some. To the ears of modern readers, especially of the Judeo-Christian heritage, Silenus’s laughter may even seem insulting in the sense that to be nothing radically dismisses the possibility of otherworldly hopes. This might lead one to the kind of pessimism Nietzsche hopes to overcome.

But Silenus’s wisdom entails much more than this since it really lies in the space between two equally harsh options (not to mention the fact that the myth is of a time before Christianity). On the one hand, Silenus, as an immortal follower of Dionysus, is condemned to perpetual life. Death is not a possibility for Silenus. And to live forever means to be subject to the terrors and horrors of existence *ad infinitum*. On the other hand, as a worshipper of Dionysus, Silenus can lose himself only temporarily in drunken excess, escaping the pangs of his own existence to which, when the wine has worn off, he

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<sup>88</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 23/Section 3. Nietzsche’s quote of Silenus in this myth comes from the surviving fragment of Aristotle’s *Eudemos* in Plutarch’s *Moralia*, *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, Fr. 44. Nietzsche’s “*gellem Lachen*” translates the Greek, “*anakagchazonta*” from “*anakagchazō*.”

is condemned to always return. Ironically then Silenus envies the “ephemeral race” of human beings who, as beings-toward-death, will at some point not be, and thus escaping the fate that Silenus cannot. However, from the side of finite mortal beings such as ourselves, our concern is also between two equally unappealing options. We can either hope to die soon—wishing to not be born is an absurdity itself since in the very wishing we already find ourselves born—or we must live a life full of pain and suffering, much the same way Shakespeare’s Hamlet weighs the “slings and arrows” of being and non-being in his play of the same name.<sup>89</sup> But living with the wish to die soon is to resign oneself to the very pessimism Nietzsche seeks to overcome.

What is also notable is that the herald to this wisdom, that is, the antecedent moment before anything is *said* by Silenus is a voice but one that sounds forth before language. It is the voice of “shrill laughter.” Why laughter as the initial response to one of the most serious questions that can be posed? Because the laughter here is one that provokes those who hear it, jarring them out of complacency. It also signals in its very provocation a knowledge that is at once both hard to hear yet truthful and wise. So Silenus’s wisdom is surely *provocative* in the deepest sense of the word (L. *provocare* “call forth, challenge,” from *pro-* “forth” + *-vocare* “to call”). It begins, before any explanations, conceptualizations, or any discourse whatsoever with shrill laughter that emerges from silence. To put it succinctly, laughter is what first emerges out of nothing.

If we draw the overarching inference from the wisdom that the myth of Silenus seeks to convey it is that human beings are given over to a certain measure, indeed a great measure, of opacity. We are never in full possession of absolute, transcendent knowledge, on the one hand, but we are not entirely nothing, on the other. This locates us against a

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<sup>89</sup> See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III. i.

backdrop of abysmal nothingness as a dim light that clears the kind of space proper to a voice that resounds from this darkness—a mortal human voice. As beings-toward-death nothingness—one might refer to it as our diminishing finitude—is part of our constitution. Perhaps the voice is one that laughs before it speaks in recognition of its, that is of our, essential condition: a laughter that in its very eruption affirms this condition. We might also say that this very opacity is the measure of us but it is an opacity that the ancient Greeks embraced in their cheerfulness of the tragic view of life and one that Nietzsche also finds joyful, celebratory, and like Silenus's first intimation, laughter provoking.

Similar to Silenus's laughter that is antecedent to his language, Nietzsche also stresses the importance of another phenomenon that occurs before language: music. In section six of *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche, who is speaking of the folk song of Archilochus, states that:

[I]n the poetry of folk song we see language straining to its limit *to imitate music* [die musik nachzuahmen]...With this observation we have defined the only possible relationship between music, word, and sound: the word, the image, the concept seeks expression [*Ausdruck*] in a manner analogous to music and thereby is subjected to the power [*Gewalt*] of music.<sup>90</sup>

Nietzsche's point is that music is something primordial with an origin that arises before concepts and linguistic constructions. Concepts and everyday language are already symbolic in the sense that words always carry along a significance regardless of how much meaning might be deferred. Moreover, in terms of images, they, too, are derivative. Nietzsche claims that the images of the lyric poet strain to imitate the music that is

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<sup>90</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 34/Section 6.

primordial and antecedent to them. This derivative nature of language and images is crucial to Nietzsche's view of art. If language, concepts and images are derivative of music, what then is music an expression *of*? Nietzsche, via Schopenhauer at one point, says that it is the will of the artist, specifically the lyric poet. However, Nietzsche is careful to point out that music "cannot possibly *be* Will" otherwise it would never appear because the will "is inherently un-aesthetic [*der Wille ist das an sich Unästhetische*]." Thus music only "*appears* as Will" and Nietzsche even goes so far as to say that "music itself, in its absolute sovereignty, has no *need* at all of images and concepts but merely *tolerates* them as an accompaniment."<sup>91</sup> This notion of music is important because it seems to be the only phenomenon that Nietzsche equates with the Dionysian itself, or at least its most primal expression, and thus with the tragic sense of life that he wants to affirm.

So, to confront the pessimism of Silenus, or the meaningless of the inverted world, the voice of Dionysus was allowed to speak or better yet, sing. How? On its own the Dionysian is destructive without the imposition of form. Thus it is only with its necessary coupling to another impulse that it can speak the language of tragedy and comedy. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche elucidates these two impulses that give rise to these two art forms, allowing us to affirm his tragic view of life.

For Nietzsche the two elements at play are the Apollinian and Dionysian. The Apollinian represents order and harmony. Apollo, Nietzsche says, as the sun god is the shining one (*der Scheinende*). As the shining one, the Apollinian impulse allows for images to image themselves, that is, allows for images to shine (*scheinen*) forth as they are. Taken on its own, the individual Apollinian images, such as the images found in

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 35-36/Section 6.

dreams that Nietzsche claims we take pleasure in, are part of a purely subjective experience. They are always some individual's dreams and therefore these beautiful images are part of an individual subject or psyche. Hence, Nietzsche refers to this phenomenon as the *principium individuationis*.

It may also mean the kind of images one has while daydreaming. For example, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech in which he brings to light the image of a multi-racial, peaceful coexistence where everyone has a voice that will be heard. In essence then, the Apollinian impulse allows for a parade of beautiful semblance to showcase itself doubly before the individual eye and the "I" as ego. However, in terms of tragedy the Apollinian plays another role, one that allows for other, more monstrous images to "burst forth from nature." What bursts forth and attempts to overflow anything that would hope to contain it is the Dionysian.

Dionysus, unlike Apollo, is the god of intoxication and disorder, of wine and revelry, of sexual energy and rebirth. Nietzsche makes this connection of intoxication as an analogy of the Dionysian impulse in the first section. This impulse can be understood in two ways. First as what it *is* and second by what it *does* or, one might say, *accomplishes*. In terms of the first, one might find it problematic to denote it as an "is" at all. The Dionysian is surely not a thing and, as we shall see in a moment, it is only an image in a very unusual sense. Thus, as ineffable as it might be to try and posit an actual definition of the Dionysian, nonetheless I characterize it as that which is without form or any determinable qualities that signify it as a thing. Indeed it is that very impulse that attempts the transgression of form, whether it be the form that subjectivity takes on due to the particular discursive practices of the time or the illusions that constitute a particular

culture. One might say that the Dionysian, then, is the chaos that dwells behind appearances. That is why Nietzsche (and the ancient Greeks) set the Dionysian impulse over and against the Apollonian, which manifests itself in individuation. To be sure, Dionysian ecstasy requires one to be outside of oneself (ecstasy, from Greek *ekstasis*, *ex-*, “out,” and *histanai*, “to stand”) in what is essentially a loss of all form. Thus in the very experience of inspired art—and this *experience* is crucial because it cannot be taught or arrived at by way of science, dialectical reasoning or logic—when one is cast under the awe and wonder of it, the Dionysian accomplishes a displacement of the self in what Nietzsche calls nothing less than a “contradiction.” It is a contradiction in which, “The artist has already given up his subjectivity in the Dionysian process...Thus the ‘I’ of the lyric poet sounds out [*tönt*] from the deepest abyss of being [*aus dem Abgrunde des Seins*]; his ‘subjectivity’, as this concept is used by modern aestheticians, is imaginary.”<sup>92</sup> In other words what the Dionysian accomplishes is an ecstatic excess. It exceeds all of the qualifiers that would otherwise distinguish it as a “this” within the intuitions of space and time as well as all such applications of pure reason or the thinking ego that exists because it is aware of itself as an individual subject.

The meeting of these two impulses, what Nietzsche characterizes as a “duplicity” (*Duplizität*),<sup>93</sup> allow for the expression of tragic art. The Apollonian impulse, through its yoking of the terrible Dionysian, generates the images that we call tragedy: images that transfigure ourselves by allowing us to confront the deep abysmal truths of existence. It is only by way of this special “yoking” that the Dionysian can be imaged at all and given

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 30/Section 5.

<sup>93</sup> As a duplicity there is no Hegelian dialectic in which the two terms evolve into a distinct third term. Each impulse remains the self-same although engaged in an *agōn* or struggle with the other. However, later in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche does claim that *The Birth of Tragedy* “smells offensively Hegelian.” Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 108/Section 1 on *The Birth of Tragedy*.

creative form. The necessary co-existence of these two impulses is made clear by Nietzsche who states, “And behold! Apollo could not live without Dionysos. The ‘Titanic’ and ‘barbaric’ was ultimately just as much of a necessity as the Apolline!”<sup>94</sup> However, tragedy is Nietzsche’s primary theme thus the question arises, “What is comedy’s role and how does comedy achieve the same ends?”

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, as the crucial section seven nears its close, the image of Silenus resurfaces as an unsettling image of pessimism that has yet to be surmounted. This time it appears in direct relation to the saving power of tragedy and comedy as understood through their correlates the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses. There is always a certain polemic that revolves around both the Apollonian and Dionysian. The tension between barbarity and culture, the individual and his/her destruction, and truth and illusion, is always present. In addition to these types of tension, Nietzsche observes that behind them lies a more fundamental existential imperative for the individual in the space between *resignation* and *action*. Nietzsche’s claim is that the individual in its daily life is immersed in the world of illusion and thus is veiled from the terrible truth of the Dionysian. Every subject is separate from all others and from all other phenomena, such as the state or society that constitute its particular horizon of existence. However, these appearances are illusory and temporary. Our fragility as individuals, even within vast civilizations, is evident with the most cursory glance at history. Perhaps best expressed in poetry, consider Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem, “Ozymandias” where the concluding lines state, “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and

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<sup>94</sup>Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 27/Section 4.

bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away.”<sup>95</sup> It is less a poem about the archaeological statue, the king or his empire. It is poem that discloses time in its fullness in and through the elemental stone that gives testament to it, eternity, and us as the finite beings subject to it.

With this knowledge how does one live, or better, how *can* one live in the face of all that is ephemeral and transient even though things appear as permanent? When one undergoes the experience of Dionysian tragedy, all particular, individual boundaries dissolve. In turn the human being experiences a unity with primordial nature that results in what Nietzsche refers to many times as “metaphysical solace.” It is the knowledge that behind the becoming and passing away of all appearances that constitute the good and bad of daily living is the indestructible, abysmal truth of the continually reborn Dionysian. Even though life is continually unstable it is still indestructible and hence joyful.

Through the dissolution of the conscious subject, the ecstatic experience of the Dionysian allows for a temporary reprieve from the terrors of existence. One is withdrawn out of daily life that can often be harsh and unrewarding. After seeing into the true nature of things, that is, after having glimpsed the Dionysian, one is tempted, Nietzsche claims, to remain *lethargic*:

The reason for this is that the ecstasy [*Verzückung*] of the Dionysian state, in which the usual barriers and limits of existence are destroyed, contains, for as long as it lasts, a *lethargic* element [*lethargisches Element*] in which all personal

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<sup>95</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol. I-II*, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), II/691.

experiences from the past are submerged. This gulf of oblivion [*Kluft der Vergessenheit*] separates the worlds of everyday life and Dionysiac experience.<sup>96</sup>

Nietzsche's concern is that once one has seen into and experienced the ecstasy of the Dionysian state, in which all the particular individual barriers of daily life are dissolved, one is tempted to remain in an inactive state of forgetfulness. Indeed the word lethargic, from *lethe* "forgetfulness" and *argos* "idle," encapsulates just this dynamic. Why? Because on return to conscious daily life one becomes fully aware of the futility of action. How could an individual possibly transform the inequities of daily life, wherever and whatever they may be? How can a singular individual in a single lifetime, a moment, think they can be of any effect in the long arch of history, in which great nations rise and fall and countless multitudes of people although immersed in their historically situated struggles, perish and are forgotten?

A fruitful detour may allow us to shed some more light on this notion of lethargy when we look at it through an existential lens such as that found in one of Jean Paul Sartre's works. In arguably the most famous passage in *Nausea*, Roquentin is sitting on a park bench stooped over. Underneath is a "black, knotty mass" of roots belonging to a chestnut tree. Suddenly this image of the tangled roots facilitates a receding of everything familiar, including the memory and language that would provide meaning. This is not a mere episode of forgetfulness on Roquentin's part, the kind we are all subject to on occasion. Instead, Roquentin undergoes an epiphany about existence itself. This epiphany is ironic in the sense that an epiphany usually means that one has come to knowledge in a positive sense, that is, that one has gained something. But Roquentin's new "knowledge" about the root and existence is of a very different kind:

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<sup>96</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40/Section 7.

And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked in a frightful, obscene nakedness.<sup>97</sup>

Roquentin suddenly realized that everything he believed constituted the existence of something, such as the root of the chestnut tree, is a veneer or a deceptive facade. He believes that essences or attributes that we attribute to a thing through language are not necessary to the constitution of a thing. Indeed they are not real, in other words, they are nothing. For Sartre things *are* only brute existence, are only *there*, always outstripping any formal, abstract essence. This is why Sartre, more than once, uses the word “obscene” to describe this aspect of existence. Things that Roquentin previously comprehended or perceived with the dignity of their attributes—attributes that had always proffered an “understanding” of some-thing—now only stand out in their nakedness as obscene.

As Roquentin continues to meditate about the previous meaning (the qualities, essences and attributes) attributed to the things around him—better yet of *anything*—he further concludes what does exist does so not out of necessity but contingency. What is here, including himself, is here by chance. Generally speaking, this presents a sharp reversal from the Western philosophical tradition. There is no necessary being standing outside of existence guaranteeing one’s existence. Instead, we are given over against a

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<sup>97</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (Norfolk: New Directions, 1959), 171-72.

radical darkness unsupported by an Aristotelian unmoved mover, God of the Scholastics, or the Cartesian idea of God, who is the guarantor of our reason.

The consequence of all this is that the gnarled root of the chestnut tree facilitated a new understanding of existence for Roquentin, which he concludes is the source of his nausea. When nausea overcomes him it really is the understanding that he is thrown into an existence without either the implication of a necessary Being, reason, or any antecedent or subsequent meaning whatsoever. In other words existence is, “the perfect free gift.”<sup>98</sup> When confronted with the reality of the meaningless of existence, that we *are* only against the backdrop of nothingness, Roquentin nonetheless decides to embrace his existence. He can, in a sense, be the canvas in which he freely brings to presence meaning by the creation of his own essence as if to bring relief against vacuous nothingness the way an artist brings an image to shine in stone. This idea of destruction and nothingness is perhaps best expressed in *Being and Nothingness* where Sartre states, “It is necessary then to recognize that destruction is an essentially human thing and that *it is man* who destroys...But at the same time it is necessary to acknowledge that destruction supposes a pre-judicative comprehension of nothingness as such and a conduct *in the face of nothingness*.”<sup>99</sup> Only through an acknowledgement of this play of destruction and nothingness is being-for-itself [*être-pour-soi*]<sup>100</sup> able to authentically capitalize on its creativity and ability to impart meaning and create itself out of nothingness.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>99</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Avenel NJ: Gramercy Books, 1996), 9.

<sup>100</sup> For Sartre, being-for-itself is consciousness as nothingness. As nothingness (or a lack of being) it has a relationship to Being as that which it is not. Consciousness as nothingness is, in a sense, a “relief” or nihilating activity that one, allows beings to manifest themselves yet two, in the nihilating act needs what it can not be in order to reveal itself as nothing.

This meaning takes the form of artistic enjoyment (near *Nausea*'s conclusion Roquentin starts to appreciate jazz) or creation. Although it is somewhat of a stretch to suggest that Sartre and Nietzsche's projects are the same (Nietzsche's *Übermensch* surely does not feel nausea<sup>101</sup> for life), nonetheless Nietzsche views destruction and becoming in much the same way stating:

The desire for *destruction*, for change and becoming [*Das Verlangen nach Zerstörung, Wechsel, Werden*] can be the expression of an overflowing energy pregnant with the future (my term for this is as used above and elsewhere is 'Dionysian'); but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, deprived, and underprivileged one who destroys, and *must* destroy because what exists, indeed all existence, all being [*alles Sein*], outrages and provokes him.<sup>102</sup>

This difference ultimately lies in the fact that whereas Sartre's focus is on consciousness, Nietzsche appropriates the image of Dionysus to illustrate this essentially destructive/creative impulse in terms of the need for art as the supreme aesthetic phenomena that justifies the world.

We can take Sartre's account of Roquentin and his existential angst in *Nausea* and draw similar parallels to Nietzsche's Silenus and King Midas in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Recall that Nietzsche is concerned about how one can avoid pessimism and remain cheerful—as the Greeks did—in the face of what is often times a painful, sometimes meaningless existence. Silenus is the very image of that pessimism. Recall that his wisdom to Midas was to, “not...have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the

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<sup>101</sup> Given that Nietzsche is keenly attuned to physiological states one must remember that nausea is first and foremost a physiological reaction to some phenomenon (in Sartre's case, existence). Nietzsche would indeed find it reprehensible that one's nausea is caused by life itself. Nietzsche's goal would be a transfiguration of this physiological state into a life affirming stance.

<sup>102</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 235/Aphorism 370.

second best thing for you is: to die soon.”<sup>103</sup> Of course one who has been thrown into existence and finds oneself here cannot opt to not be born or opt, existentially speaking, to have stayed as nothing or as nothingness. The very asking of the question presupposes one is already here, otherwise who is doing the asking? And Sartre acknowledges this point when Roquentin thinks to himself, “to imagine nothingness you had to be there already.”<sup>104</sup> Much in the manner of Midas and Roquentin, we are thus confronted with freely being here in all its angst with the overarching dilemma either of owning up to our existence and living authentically through our own creative deeds or of succumbing to pessimism, lethargy, or unfortunately, on some occasions, suicide. And the voice of this angst is nothing less than the shrill laughter of the wood god, Silenus.

However there does appear to be a notable and important difference between Sartre and Nietzsche concerning laughter and comedy. Nietzsche’s position is clear on his appreciation of comedy, for example those of Aristophanes, the tendency even for philosophers to appear comic at times, as well as his appreciation and use of laughter within philosophy itself. However, Sartre appears to see little value in comedy and laughter. Yet, if both Nietzsche and Sartre want us to live authentically and own up to our freedom and existence, especially through creative deeds, where then lies the difference?

For Nietzsche, the appearances that make up existence, even the same ones that Sartre details in his stories and plays, are often times humorous. For example Socrates, who is to a large extent a serious philosophic rival to Nietzsche, also appears comedic. Nietzsche uses these illustrations not merely to ridicule for the sake of ridicule. For Nietzsche, the comic elements that Aristophanes exposes (discussed in detail below) are

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<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 23/Section 3.

<sup>104</sup> Sartre, *Nausea*, 181.

intertwined with the serious elements that help form the constellation and force of history. And what Nietzsche sees as “the problem of Socrates” is, to put it succinctly, the problem of dialectic run amok.

Additionally, Nietzsche on many occasions has Zarathustra laugh at the existential circumstances in which he often finds himself. Of course this laughter has many dimensions (also discussed in the section below on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) but the point is that, for Nietzsche, something such as Sartre’s “obscene nakedness” of existence at times demands laughter and comedy as a legitimate and even necessary response.

For Sartre, though, the knowledge of existence in all its absurdity harbors only the possibility of continued nausea as a counterpoint to taking up one’s freedom. In one instance when Roquentin is meditating on the park bench about all of the appearances around him that form the “paste” of existence he says:

Trees, night-blue pillars, the happy bubbling of a fountain, vital smells, little heat-mists floating in the cold air, a red-haired man digesting on a bench: all this somnolence, all these meals digested together, had its comic side [*un aspect vaguement comique*]....Comic...no: it didn’t go as far as that, nothing that exists can be comic [*rien de ce qui existe ne peut être comique*].<sup>105</sup>

This is why existence is often referred to by Sartre as a “bending” or “yielding.”<sup>106</sup> To laugh and see humor in existence is to relinquish or “yield” one’s freedom by permeating the appearances that constitute existence with a comic essence. A concise illustration of this occurs near the novel’s conclusion when Roquentin is musing about what he is going

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>106</sup> Sartre writes, “l’existence est un fléchissement.” *La Nausée* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1938), 182. Lloyd Alexander translates “fléchissement” as “deflection” although deflection is “déviation.”

to do with the remainder of his existence. These include the mundane affairs of his finances and his daily agenda such as whether to see a movie or take a walk. Then he states:

I'd better think about something else, because I'm playing a comedy now [*je suis en train de me jouer la comédie*]. I know very well that I don't want to do anything: to do something is to create existence—and there's quite enough existence as it is [*et il y a bien assez d'existence comme ça*].<sup>107</sup>

For Sartre then, comedy does not appear able to break the surface of existence and expose any deeper profound meaning whereas for Nietzsche, existence is riddled with appearances that constitute comedic, laughter provoking moments that allow for deep Dionysian truths to shine forth.

Even though both philosophers, in their own respective ways, ask the subject to create meaning in his or her existence especially through art, for Sartre comedy and laughter play a diminished role. They succeed only in furthering nausea and lethargy when it comes to owning up to one's freedom. When we look at Sartre's body of work, especially his artistic endeavors such as novels and plays, one is hard pressed to identify any of them as strictly comedic. And although it is uncertain whether Sartre himself finds any of his plays to harbor comedic elements, sometimes they do elicit laughter. For example, *No Exit* is understood almost exclusively as a serious existential play. Nonetheless, the circle of sexual tension between Joseph, Inès, and Estelle appears laughter provoking as each character's desire of the other is thwarted. Still, one can safely conclude that for Sartre existence is no laughing matter!

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 231.

Nietzsche prefers to use Shakespeare to elucidate the notion of lethargy and the Dionysian state of ecstasy. He asserts, “In this sense Dionysiac man is similar to Hamlet: both have gazed into the true essence of things, they have *acquired knowledge* [*sie haben erkannt*] and they find action repulsive, for their actions can do nothing to change the eternal essence of things.”<sup>108</sup> “Knowledge,” in this sense, is not positive knowledge. It is not the kind of grounding knowledge one acquires and subsequently acts or builds on. It works, at least at this point, in the opposite direction. It is the knowledge of what is abysmal and without ground.

But something more emerges in what Nietzsche sees as the danger of being submerged in the lethargic, purely Dionysian experience. After experiencing the abysmal truth of the Dionysian and seeing the futility of all action, Nietzsche claims that the Dionysian man, much like his example of Hamlet, does at this point will one crucial act: he *laughs*: “[T]hey regard it as laughable [*lächerlich*] or shameful that they should be expected to set to rights a world so out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion.”<sup>109</sup> This laughter—one that is hardly comic—is the response of the individual who returns to the everyday now having seen and acquired the knowledge of Dionysian truth. In these terms laughter is symbolic of a deep futility, one that stultifies the action of a finite individual in the vast expanse of time. Thus we see that the Dionysian is not only dangerous, in itself, as something experienced. Indeed, to experience the Dionysian would be to undergo one’s own destruction either literally or in spirit.<sup>110</sup> This kind of laughter, then, signals a certain danger in the sense that knowledge

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<sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40/Section 7.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> In the concluding paragraph of Thomas Mann’s novel *The Magic Mountain* (*Der Zauberberg*) Mann describes the fate of Hans Castorp, “life’s delicate child,” who has left the sanatorium in Davos Switzerland

of this kind presents a direct threat to action, to the very affirmation of life Nietzsche seeks.

Once again Nietzsche returns to the image of Silenus to illustrate the danger of the Dionysiac man's newly acquired knowledge and the resulting wisdom claiming that, "...now he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion."<sup>111</sup> Like Silenus, who erupts in shrill laughter when forced to respond to King Midas about what was best for human beings (namely to be nothing or to have never been born), the Dionysiac man through his primordial experience grasps this wisdom in an immediate epiphany and he too laughs. It is at this moment, Nietzsche claims, that the will of the human being is in most danger; danger in the sense of resigning oneself to inaction and pessimism. However, this danger, this abysmal truth also harbors a saving power as well, in which comedy is to play an important role. In what I argue is the ultimate pronouncement in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche states:

Here, at this moment of supreme danger [*höchsten Gefahr*] 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 [*Absurde des Daseins*] into representations [*Vorstellungen*] with which man can live; these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical* [*Komische*], whereby disgust at absurdity [*des Absurden*] is discharged by artistic means.<sup>112</sup>

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to fight in WW I this way: "Farewell—and if thou livest or diest! Thy prospects are poor." *The Magic Mountain*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 714.

<sup>111</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40/Section 7.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* Nietzsche also says something very similar in "The Dionysiac World View," Section 3.

There are many striking things about this passage. Most notably is Nietzsche's inclusion of comedy along with tragedy as means by which human beings can affirm life and avert the succumbing of the will to the "supreme danger" of pessimism. Until this point comedy is mentioned mostly in passing. Indeed a certain genre of comedy, the historically later development of New Attic Comedy, is even held responsible for the disintegration of tragedy. And this had its roots in the plays of Euripides (and Socrates as his mentor) characterized by its pedestrian take on the affairs of the Greeks.<sup>113</sup>

Nonetheless, one is also struck by this passage because of its inclusion of comedy along with tragedy as an artistic means to such an end even though, as mentioned above, comedy receives much less scrutiny. For Nietzsche, one must conclude that if comedy is the other art that achieves the same end as tragedy, then it can not be seen as the disadvantaged flip side of tragedy. This is not to say that Nietzsche does not prize tragedy above comedy (and the other arts) due to its serious subject matter and its deep ties with music. Tragedy's origin lies in the pre-cultural realm (of nature) in which the impulses had yet to be yoked. The deepest expression of this state lied in the music of the Satyr chorus, which is for Nietzsche the key element in any tragedy. The Satyr chorus is the unique expression of the Dionysian. It is only when cultural structures have manifested themselves and civilization is well established that comedy can subsequently ridicule the excessiveness that quite often marks it. Thus tragedy is the antecedent groundlessness in which human beings are situated, and because of its ontological priority, is privileged. Whereas comedy, through its ridicule and laughter, is the later phenomenon that rebukes

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<sup>113</sup> Nietzsche contrasts New Attic Comedy with the Old Attic Comedy of Aristophanes. New Attic Comedy lacked mythical depth, and the Satyr chorus so crucial to tragedy and music, all but vanished. Instead, it became ordinary, "Bourgeois mediocrity" identified mostly with Euripides who, Nietzsche believes, the poets of New Attic Comedy revered. If one had to single out the most crucial aspect that New Attic Comedy was missing it would be the Dionysian element.

those who attempt to transcend this tragic status. What is clear though, for Nietzsche, is that great comedy stakes out its own rights in the transformative possibility of art and vie for that that space that pessimism would otherwise haunt.. The question becomes: How does comedy achieve this?

If we delve into this most profound passage even further, Nietzsche explains that whereas tragic art discloses the terrible through representations of the sublime, comic art on the other hand discloses disgust at the absurd through its artistic means. The Apollonian and Dionysian are both in operation for each art. The Apollonian, like a buffer between us and the Dionysian, allows for these respective arts to shine. But what are the artistic means that comedy utilizes and what exactly does Nietzsche mean by the absurd? At this point he does not say and his writing turns back to tragedy.

Nonetheless, what is evident is the connection Nietzsche makes between comedy and the absurd. The German and English words for absurd are almost equivalent (German, *adj.* “*absurd*,” *n.* “*Absurdes*”). In its modern usage absurd means “dissonant, out of tune, foolish.” In ancient Greek there are two words used for absurd. The retrieval of the Greek significance is relevant because it is the great comic playwright Aristophanes that Nietzsche has foremost in mind in terms of the genius of comedy, just as he has the ancient Greek tragedians, most notably Aeschylus, foremost in mind in terms of tragedy.

The first word for absurd is *atopos* that, in its Greek sense, discloses a far more profound meaning than its derivative, modern counterpart which usually identifies silly behavior or bad manners incongruous within a given setting. Here *atopos*, especially in its adverbial form (*atopōs*, “absurdly”), means “out of place.” Not simply out of place in

the sense that “the vase seems out of place on the table,” but more significantly that the usual, expected flow of phenomena in nature has been disturbed, even usurped to the point that things and appearances are convoluted and confused. It is as if the illusions one is unconsciously immersed in, although thought of as permanent, begin to fracture and strain under the weight of something alien. In other words when familiarity withdraws one is left dwelling in the absurd.

To help illustrate this we can locate two examples, one in Plato’s *Republic* and the second in Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human*. In Plato’s *Republic*, in the critical section seven on the “cave-like dwelling”<sup>114</sup> (*katageiō oikēsei spēlaiōdei*), that in essence is an *image* that Socrates and his interlocutors have created in the likeness of their education, this education takes on, at least initially, an absurd hue. After Socrates has brought forth the image of the cave-like dwelling with all of its features, Glaucon says, “It’s a strange (*atopon*) image, and strange (*atopous*) prisoners you’re telling of.” Then, in what Freydberg asserts are the most profound words uttered in the philosophical tradition (and I agree), Socrates says, “They’re like us”<sup>115</sup> (*Homoious hēmin*). *Atopon* literally means “no place” and most commentators translate *atopon* as “strange” in that Glaucon’s initial reaction to the image of education *that he is in the midst of undergoing* is something he does not or can not yet recognize. In this sense, for Glaucon (and Socrates to the extent that he recognizes his own ignorance and does not claim to know) the image is absurd, not only for the reason just mentioned but also because education brings us up out of the cave and onto the level where we always assume we are. Glaucon and all the prisoners already believe themselves to be on the outside of the cave because they do not recognize

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<sup>114</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 514a 3-4.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 515a 4-5.

their own ignorance. Hence for Glaucon, Socrates' image appears, at least initially, as absurd because everything familiar has withdrawn. Education and absurdity then are not mutually exclusive but appear as close kin.

In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche writes that the origin of the comic lies in the disruption of the expected flow of phenomena, that is, in what is normally expected:

If one considers that man was for many hundreds of thousands of years an animal in the highest degree (*im höchsten Grade*) accessible to fear and that everything sudden and unexpected bade him prepare to fight and perhaps die; that even later on, indeed, in social relationships all security depended on the expected and traditional in opinion and action (*Erwarteten auf dem Herkommen in Meinung und Thätigkeit beruhte*); then one cannot be surprised if whenever something sudden and unexpected in word and deed happens without occasioning danger or injury man becomes wanton, passes over into the opposite of fear: the anxious crouching creature springs up, greatly expands—man laughs (*der Mensch lacht*). This transition from momentary anxiety to short-lived exuberance is called the *comic* (Komische).<sup>116</sup>

Here, Nietzsche not only connects the comic to the “unexpected in word and deed” but also to our social development over time. The comic has its roots in this disruption of the expected flow of phenomena coupled with the temporary loss of fear, which is why he is careful to point out that comic exuberance is “short-lived.”

The second Greek word for absurd is *paralogos*. Here we can derive even more insight. Literally *paralogos* means that which is set apart from the *logos*; the *logos* being the account of something that discloses what that something is. Thus *paralogos* means

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<sup>116</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 89/Section 169.

“beyond calculation, an unexpected event contrary to calculation.” *Paralogos* is what outstrips reason or what occurs beyond the perceived occurrence of natural events. Exceeding them both, what is absurd is not amenable to calculation, quantification, or a purely rational understanding of something. As mentioned it is something akin to madness. And since madness is related to darkness just as reason is said to relate to light, inspired comedies arise out of this darkness clearing their own space as semblances of the absurd and excess that we subsequently take joy in.

Depending on one’s perspective, “clearing their own space” might mean viewing inspired comedies in Deleuzian terms as an “assemblage” that deterritorializes itself within a culture, on a stage with the actors (literally their bodies) and production providing the content and the dialogue and gestures providing the expression. Or, if one were to remain strictly within the Nietzschean purview of *The Birth of Tragedy*, then one might say that it is the “Titanic struggle” of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses that clears its own space; the Apollonian on the one hand yoking the Dionysian yet allowing it to discharge itself in absurd, comic semblances. Regardless of one’s perspective, what is important is that these comic representations that people take pleasure in show them a world—*their world*—in absurd inverted splendor.

Nietzsche hints at this very understanding when he says of comedy in an early lecture (1874-75) titled, “History of Greek Literature” that, “It is grandiose caricature, an inverted world [*eine verkehrte Welt*], that the poet shows, sense and nonsense, reality and impossibility in absurd confusion.”<sup>117</sup> Thus the ancient sense of absurd is a hodgepodge, a whirlwind of opposites in crazy confusion, a world in which the standard order of

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<sup>117</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), II/5, 161. My translation.

things has been turned upside down, that is, inverted so that nature and life appear as if turned inside out.

Still, what begins to emerge at this point is something that exceeds a comedy *simpliciter*. A deep connection between the inverted world of ancient comedy and the inverted world as understood in “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” examined above in the first section of the present chapter, becomes clearly evident. An inspired comedy’s power to affect us does not lie solely within its own parameters, that is, within the production and execution of the play itself. Its images of excess, always faithful to its Dionysian origins, overflow, interfacing with the world and people they are attempting to ridicule. A comedy’s nonsense would make no sense if it did not reference in its absurd way the wider world in which it is situated. One might agree on the level of this as trivially true: we and our world are reflected in the amplified, ridiculous images of comedy. However, philosophically speaking for Nietzsche, the world in which human beings are situated (at least we moderns) is the world in which traditionally understood truths have become (or is becoming) “a fable.” This is not trivial. It is, however, laughingly awesome.

How? What is the connection between the laughter of inspired comedy and the ongoing event in which the true world becomes a fable? What is it like? How ought one characterize it, if that is even possible? It certainly is a serious matter, perhaps the most serious of matters in that all the old points of reference that formerly grounded understanding and the very meaning of things no longer hold sway. What is left in the wake of such an event except an astonishing mixture of nihilism and freedom? And yet I assert as I believe Nietzsche does, that this serious matter has at its heart, *or ought to*

*have at its heart*, a comic playfulness. Just like Schmidt's convincing account, in *On Germans and Other Greeks*, that ancient tragedy ought to play a role in our ethical life today, inspired comedy too ought to have its place in the pantheon of human ethical endeavors as well because, although it celebrates our absurdity it nonetheless in a ironic way, allows us to live *nobly*. Similar to the Socratic ignorance at the heart of every human breast, comedy never leaves us unfettered from our folly.

So, if Nietzsche is correct that the essence of comedy lies in the artistic representations by which one lives with disgust at the absurd, then what could be more absurd than to be in the historical midst of an inversion of meaning (or what is sometimes referred to in the grandiose sense as the end of metaphysics)? What would be more absurd than not only to be witness to such an event, but to *be here* as part of the event? Indeed this inverted world, which is perhaps the most serious philosophical matter of our time, is the world of "sense and nonsense, reality and impossibility in absurd confusion."<sup>118</sup> One need look no farther than the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its events as a perfect example.

The Italian film *La vita è bella (Life is Beautiful)*,<sup>119</sup> directed by Roberto Benigni provides us with just such an example. The film is largely autobiographical based on Benigni's own experiences and, in addition to directing, he plays the lead protagonist Guido. The film, which possesses both tragic and comic elements, explores the way in which the lead character undergoes the ordeal of fascism and National Socialism in Italy during the Second World War. Guido, a Jew, his spouse Dora, a non-Jew, and their small child Giosué are rounded up and sent to a concentration camp (Dora demands to go in

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> All references are to *Life is Beautiful*, directed by Roberto Benigni (1997; Cecchi Gori Group).

order to remain with her family). After being separated by gender, Guido makes it his daily task to protect his son as best he can from the obvious physical dangers but also from the *knowledge* of the terror being perpetrated. In essence, Guido is the guardian of his son's own consciousness. He does so by giving the appearance that the horrific circumstance they are in the midst of is a game. In a sense, this makes him an Apollonian figure appearing to his son in comedic ways in order to shield him from the terror and absurdity that surround them. Giosué, a personification of innocence, is not merely protected by his father from physical harm but from mental or spiritual harm as well. What becomes evident is that this protection often manifests itself through the play of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, as well as a powerful mixture of tragedy and comedy.

The film opens with the following monologue delivered by Guido's friend, a poet. It is an echo of Nietzsche's philosophy discussed thus far:

This is a simple story...

but not an easy one to tell.

Like a fable, there is sorrow...

and, like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness.

I sing what I see. Nothing gets by me.

"Here I am," said I to chaos.

"I am your slave!" And he: "Good."

"For what?" said I.

Free in the end, I am! What good is a caress when bliss...

this man came to possess?

Here I am, ready.

The trains are gone, the brakes are gone.

And I can resist no more. Go, sweet Bacchus, take me.

Striking is that Benigni refers to the story he is about to relate concerning the Holocaust as a fable. The qualities and images this fable shares with Nietzsche's philosophical aphorism, "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable," resonate deeply. In the manner of the inversion of meaning in Nietzsche's piece examined above, Benigni's film showcases this inversion in terms of the Holocaust. Guido has a simple but fulfilling life in pre-war Italy. And like the Apollonian *principium individuationis*, Guido daydreams about love, family, and friendship. The horizon of his world in a small town in Italy appears settled, stable, even eternal. But the arrival of Fascism and National Socialism succeed in dissolving this world's tranquility much the same way a film fades to black. As a result, Guido and his family's whole horizon of meaning is not just replaced or succeeded with a different form—their world is *inverted*. The horizon of Apollonian semblances that constituted Guido and his family's peaceful world has been effaced, and what emerges is a world in which certain human beings were considered to no longer possess the intrinsic dignities that were ascribed to them. Instead, certain peoples were seen as objects to be dehumanized, reified and unfortunately, murdered. This inversion that Guido and his family find themselves immersed in, an inversion envisaged by certain 20<sup>th</sup> century political, social and philosophical forces, can be described only as nihilistic. Thus Guido and his family are swept along in a movement from meaning to nothingness. There is no form. "The trains are gone, the brakes are gone." Not even their suffering has meaning. There is only madness.

The poet continues; “I sing what I see.” Giving himself over to chaos and Bacchus, the poet does not present a logical account or narrative. He *sings* what he sees, that is, like the flowing notes of music, the succession of beautiful appearances that dissolve into the abysmal truth of the Dionysian are most profoundly experienced as music. Specifically, it is musical dissonance. Widely used by Richard Wagner, dissonance in music is music that appears to dissolve time (literally to, “differ in sound,” from *dis-* “apart” + *sonare* “to sound”). What the poet sings is the dissolution of the beautiful, successive appearances in time, of his time before the chaos of war, into the timeless truth of the Dionysian primal unity (*das Ur-eine*). In other words, the poet’s images sound apart from the type of subjective, conscious time in which daily life is constituted.

The importance of music for both tragedy and comedy cannot be overstated. Both utilized the chorus, that phenomenon that Nietzsche says was indicative of that primordial state of nature. However, Nietzsche is clear that the “origin” of tragedy is not in time, in the sense that it is neither a historical period for example, “the tragedies of Sophocles in 468 BCE” nor a production itself for example, “a performance of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by the Pittsburgh Public Theater.” Although Nietzsche does not overtly utilize the genealogical method in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which will become so prominent in later writings, premonitions of this method begin to appear such as attested to above concerning the beginnings of tragedy that lie in desire, delight, and madness. Tragedy along with its correlate comedy were, Nietzsche argues, at least to a large part, what allowed the Greeks to live in the face of their cruel existence. This is why Nietzsche refers to both music and birth in his title. The origin—and this use of origin is only done

in a very qualified sense in that inspired tragedy and comedy does not refer to anything like a Platonic original—is a birth out of musical dissonance that allowed the individual to experience the very Dionysian force that would otherwise annihilate him or her. This is precisely why Schmidt characterizes musical dissonance as “music of passage”:

True music for Nietzsche—music which, like the tragic work of art to which it gives birth, opens up the experience of suffering—is the music of passage. And true music, which does not give comfort to such suffering, does not plaster over the irreconcilability at work in time, is the music of dissonance.<sup>120</sup>

And much like the poet who sings, Nietzsche declares in section three of the preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* published years later that, “It ought to have *sung*, this ‘new soul,’ and not talked! What a pity it is that I did not dare to say what I had to say at that time as a poet.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, Nietzsche is asserting that he should have let the Dionysian, which is essentially musical, present itself more in line with its essential nature:<sup>122</sup> a dissonant nature possessing the *Stimmung* of incompleteness or the *Unheimlich* feeling of not being at home. To be sure, Nietzsche treats the phenomenon of the Dionysian in terms of musical dissonance as well stating:

[T]his difficult, primal phenomenon of Dionysiac art can be grasped in a uniquely intelligible and direct way in the wonderful significance of *musical dissonance* [musikalischen Dissonanz]; as indeed music generally is the only thing which,

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<sup>120</sup> Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks*, 214.

<sup>121</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 6/Section 3 of the preface to the second edition.

<sup>122</sup> Nietzsche will come to shape his work post *The Birth of Tragedy* much in the manner of the poetic-musical feel he desires. This will become evident with *The Gay Science* in which poetry features prominently but most indicative of this will be *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a work that is unlike any of his other efforts.

when set alongside the world, can illustrate [*geben kann*] what is meant by the justification of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon.<sup>123</sup>

Here we see a close kinship with the more modern understanding of the absurd as “dissonant” and “out of tune,” just as the Holocaust itself was dissonant and out of tune, especially taking into account the inherited European continent’s philosophical, scientific, and cultural legacy.<sup>124</sup> But how are we to understand the Holocaust in terms of “an aesthetic phenomenon” let alone posing the question of whether or not it is “justifiable”?

If one were to take “aesthetic phenomenon” in a very narrow sense, a sense much more restricted than Nietzsche’s understanding, then “aesthetic” would be limited to something that appears to sense, that is, that the subject is able to experience. In this case “aesthetic” would be understood to meet the conditions set forth in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of Immanuel Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic (space as the form of outer intuition and time as the form of inner intuition). The Holocaust certainly *was* a phenomenon that appeared to the sense experience of those who endured it. As an historical event, it had its own time and space from which it unfolded. Those who had the direct experience of it, if they survived, have first and foremost their memory that keeps the event near. In posterity, we too are able to experience it even if our experience is removed and more distant. Many of us have seen the films and photos of the atrocities, visited museums or even concentration camps where the *images* are what hold us out into this event, which is to say, into this nihilistic nightmare so that we are surrounded by its

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<sup>123</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 113-14/Section 24.

<sup>124</sup> I am also reminded of the accounts of some of the Holocaust prisoners who cultivated music (other art as well) and played their instruments, most notably the violin, as their family and fellow prisoners were sent to their deaths.

impact and possess its memory in this way. But is this the kind of aesthetic phenomenon and justification Nietzsche is referring to?

Nietzsche's understanding of "aesthetic phenomenon" is qualitatively different. By stating that the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon, Nietzsche is asking, "How are we as human, all too human, to justify a world with a tremendous amount of suffering"? Nietzsche was not alive when the Holocaust unfolded. Nonetheless it would surely qualify as a supreme example of the kind of suffering human beings have endured. Nietzsche's question is how do we come to terms with this kind of suffering? How do we own up to it authentically? Does this happen through rationality and science? Does one understand the full impact of the holocaust by quantifying it? For example, X amount of Jews perished. Is the full gravity of this event felt by undertaking a comprehensive list of the "science" that accounted for the many ways of suffering and death? A listing of all the kinds of *technē* used to commit these atrocities? Undoubtedly, seeing the Holocaust through a rational, scientific lens does play a role but it is a role that has a limited measure and thus only extends so far as that measure allows. A full coming to grips, *if that is even possible*, must be through an experience of art because it is precisely the Dionysian that can not be measured. It *is* the measure—an *abysmal* measure. Hence the Apollonian, Dionysian and our dissonant nature leads Schmidt to assert their connection to Nietzsche's pronouncement on an aesthetically justified existence:

The dissonant nature that each of us is is too shattering to bear unadorned. But, we find this same dissonance to be the source of our capacity to make art, to create that which widens the realm of the bearable by means of a splendid

illusion. The plasticity of such a dissonant nature, its capacity to see itself in a transfiguring mirror, is owing to the same lively dissonance which makes art necessary if life is to be justified: 'It is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world appears as justified.' But this abysmal truth—this truth without stable foundation, without a secure ground—would destroy us if it were not for the Apollonian power of transfiguration which enables this elemental Dionysian ground of the world to enter consciousness in measures that can, almost, be grasped.<sup>125</sup>

Returning to the event of the Holocaust we see that it presents us with grotesque, macabre images. Nietzsche's understanding of aesthetic phenomenon justifying the world, however, is done through the transfiguration of these terrible events through art, especially music, tragedy and comedy. Thus it is not the Holocaust itself *in concreto* that one would say is an aesthetic phenomenon in Nietzsche's sense. It is the transfiguration of this event through an artistic representation of it that, in turn, transforms the spectator. This is why Nietzsche refers to an experience of tragedy as a primal contradiction—it transfigures our suffering into joy, our individualized ego into the primal unity of all things, and in terms of comedy, the absurd into provocative laughter.

Returning to Benigni's film, what is perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Benigni's film is the comic aspect of it that is situated at the heart of this horrific event. Guido, of course, becomes well aware of what is taking place. To help maintain his son's innocence, Guido presents him with purely Apollonian images meant to veil the terrors at hand. Through mimetic representation of the guards, Guido mocks their movements and language. When the guards charge into the prisoner's barracks and demand a translator,

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<sup>125</sup> Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks*, 222.

Guido volunteers and proceeds to comically (mis)represent their words to his son and the other captives much to their quiet amusement. At one point Guido hides his son. Looking out at the camp courtyard from a sweatbox, Giosué watches his father mock the guards specifically and National Socialism generally; as he is being marched away he winks at his son and then engages in an exaggerated goosetstep much to the subdued laughter of his child. Perhaps the most astonishing example of the comic workings of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses occurs when Guido is carrying his son in his arms around the camp on a foggy night. Invoking Apollonian images, some even comic, Guido soothes his tired son:

Where are we here?

I might have taken the wrong way.

Good boy, sleep. Dream sweet dreams.

Maybe it's only a dream!

We're dreaming, Giosué.

Tomorrow morning Mommy will come wake us up...

and bring us two nice cups of milk and cookies.

First, we'll eat.

Then I'll make love to her two or three times...

if I can.

These words provide the soothing veil of Apollonian images protecting his son from what is most terrible. Even Guido appears to calm himself as he speaks these words, “daydreaming” about better days to come as if he were enacting his own *principium individuationis*. It is at this point in the film, with his sleeping child in his arms, Guido

rounds a corner in the midst of the fog and sees an enormous pile of emaciated dead bodies, the gravity of what is taking place imaged grotesquely before him. The Apollonian semblances that Guido invokes dissolve, just as life has dissolved from the shrunken dark faces of these once unique voices, so that he comes face to face with the Dionysian. Only the innocence and survival of his child allows Guido to take comfort in the knowledge that joyful existence will always be reborn and come back from destruction. Shortly thereafter Guido is killed but Giosué and Dora survive having been shielded temporarily from the evil around him.

What will allow the young Giosué to bear what he will surely come to know as he matures? *How* could one bear this? Maybe silence is what is called for,...or that calls. But perhaps as Giosué looks back he will be able to live with the terror and knowledge of the absurd by recollecting his father's *comic appreciation of the event*. In other words, there is hope that his spirit will not be destroyed, or to put it in the language of Dionysian danger discussed above, he will not remain lethargic. He will be able to act because of the comic representations of his father who showed that we are all an audience for one another. Just as Roberto Benigni's real father had done years earlier, this is what Giosué's father has hopefully accomplished for his son in the film. Indeed the closing lines of the film more than hint at this comic appreciation:

This is my story.

This is the sacrifice my father made.

This was his gift to me.

—We won! —Yes, We won!

A thousand points to laugh like crazy about!

We came in first! We're taking the tank home!

We won!

For us, this art in the form of a tragic-comic film can purvey its provocative representations in order that we live in joy and be capable at times of *laughing in the face of what is monstrous*. The Holocaust is certainly not humorous, but through the eyes of comedy there reverberates moments of laughter that defy this human catastrophe. Far from being the permanently opposite sides of the same pole, tragedy and comedy can maintain close proximity to one another. Indeed the pole seems to bend and their boundaries can on occasion blur, just as the two masks of Dionysus play in their respective ways at the concealment/unconcealment of what is abysmal.

Returning to the notion of absurdity in its Greek sense, we can begin to see in the midst of this inversion the very movement and setting apart that which exceeds *logos*. *Logos* in its ancient sense was that which allowed something to be made manifest through speech. This meaning of *logos*<sup>126</sup> that has now been layered and sedimented by succeeding philosophical epochs—an account in speech, something divine, ratio, ground, reason—has now begun to lose its hold and no longer possesses the authority at this late stage to make manifest what it would otherwise attempt to elucidate. What is left in this wake, *what would this wake be* at least initially if not *atopos* or *paralogos*? It is an event beyond calculation and reason, and even contrary to both. To be in the midst of this inverted world is to be in a whirlwind without ground; it is being in a world that can not be made manifest by appeal to the old hierarchy *via more metaphysico*. As such, things surely would appear strange, dissonant, and “out of place.” It would be a world of

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<sup>126</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), Section 7 for a thorough account of *logos*.

absurdity and even madness but also, I strongly suggest, fertile ground for humor and comedy as well as an ethical sensibility that nurtures these elements.

Recalling what Nietzsche says is the role of art, that it “can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the...absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live,”<sup>127</sup> comedies are what allow for just this type of discharge. Great comic representations, like their tragic counterparts, allow human beings to comically behold themselves amidst the absurdity they are often immersed in. The representations in great and inspired comedies allow for a movement that distances us, perhaps only temporarily, from the very situations that give rise to the art forms and their representations in the first place even though we always find ourselves here, being with others as if shadows in a cave, and always entangled in some degree in our own absurdities.

If we return once again to the passage above from the critical section seven of *The Birth of Tragedy*, we see that Nietzsche is making one of his most profound points, namely that art is that phenomenon that allows human beings not merely to *endure* life, to “get through it,” but to *affirm* even the harshest suffering by saying “yes to life.” Art in its deepest sense, especially in the form of music, tragedy, and comedy, allows us to forego *ressentiment*: a *ressentiment* that aims not only at an individual or a collection of individuals but, as Nietzsche details in the first book of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, at life itself. “I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse the accusers. Let *looking away* be my only negation!”<sup>128</sup> he says in *The Gay Science*. The sublime and absurd mimetic representations of art rescue the subject from resignation. Instead of a defeated will, a resigned will, art showcases the will transfigured. It is the will “saved” and thus

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<sup>127</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 40/Section 7.

<sup>128</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 157/Aphorism 276.

able to behold itself transformed. As Nietzsche states, the human being “is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art [*Kunstwerk geworden*].”<sup>129</sup>

But this raises an interesting question, then, about the seeming contradictory nature of tragedy and comedy and their relationship to Dionysian truth. If both, through their respective approaches, allow for a glimpse into the terrible Dionysian abyss, then in what way can the Dionysian be both comical and terrible at the same time? In other words, if we are to accept *prima facie* that tragedy is terrible and its experience allows a glimpse of the Dionysian, in what way is this same terribleness often laughter provoking? Does not the logical principle of non-contradiction invalidate this claim?<sup>130</sup> What does Nietzsche see as comedic about what is also obviously terrible such as the Holocaust example above? Keeping in mind the fact that Dionysus is the patron of *both* tragedy and comedy, does this mean that the Dionysian suffers a rupture or, more to the point, suffers a schism? Does the original *Duplizität* of the Apollonian and Dionysian undergo a further split within the Dionysian itself? A tragi-comic split where the representations of tragedy and the representations of comedy seem to hover between the deep primordial truth of the Dionysian and their respective appearances as *Schein*?

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche does not elaborate on this possible bifurcation. However in an unpublished work titled “The Dionysiac World View,”<sup>131</sup> he does recognize and attempts to adjudicate this issue when he states:

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<sup>129</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 18/Section 1.

<sup>130</sup> In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction states that, “the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject in the same respect” (1005b 19-20), and “that contradictory statements are not at the same time true.” (1011b 13-14)

<sup>131</sup> Nietzsche “The Dionysiac World View” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. “The Dionysiac World View” (1870) was a precursor to *The Birth of Tragedy*. Both contain much of the same text with some differences such as what is being elaborated here.

The sublime and the comical [*das Lächerliche*] are a step beyond the world of beautiful semblance, for a contradiction is felt [*Widerspruch empfunden*] in both concepts. On the other hand, they are in no sense identical with truth; they cast a veil [*Umschleierung*] over truth, which, although it is more transparent than beauty, nevertheless remains a veil.<sup>132</sup>

What actual tragic and comic presentations accomplish then is a play that occurs in what Nietzsche refers to as a “middle world” (*Mittelwelt*) between the beautiful Apollonian semblances and the monstrous truth of the Dionysian.<sup>133</sup> It is the effect of intoxication by which one hovers between these realms. Nietzsche stresses that as a spectator to inspired tragic and comic art, we are witness, in the deepest sense of that word, to “Dionysiac man as he is *played*. He seeks to emulate his model in the emotional upheaval of the sublime or of laughter.”<sup>134</sup> This play with intoxication and semblance that constitute the art form, “saved the Greeks from clear-sighted, prophetic ecstasy and revulsion at existence—through the work of art which embodied tragic-comical thought.”<sup>135</sup>

In philosophy especially one is quite often tempted to focus solely on the logical validity of an argument, position or explanation, such as the one Nietzsche provides that considers the nature of the Dionysian as it relates to the two seemingly contradictory semblances of tragedy and comedy. Yet, in Nietzsche’s view, for something such as the Dionysian to be thought of as both sublime and comic, that is, as both tragic and laughter

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 130/Section 3.

<sup>133</sup> As difficult as it is to characterize something like “the Dionysian” nonetheless it is often described as monstrous (*ungeheure*—Nietzsche’s term in *The Birth of Tragedy*). John Sallis in *Crossings: Nietzsche and the Space of Tragedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) as well as Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice* use the term “monstrous” to describe this phenomenon and Dennis Schmidt in the “Nietzsche” section of his *On Germans and Other Greeks* rightly insists on the term monstrous over Walter Kaufmann’s translation of “powerful.”

<sup>134</sup> Nietzsche “The Dionysiac World View” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 130/Section 3.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 130-31/Section 3.

provoking is not a failing of logic, that is, of failing in this case to apply the principle of non-contradiction. Nor is it a failure of rationality or a short-sightedness on Nietzsche's part. It is the vagaries of life outstripping rational and logical approaches that would otherwise attempt to understand and correct it.<sup>136</sup> As Nietzsche will come to say in the roundelay section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "The world is deep, / And deeper than the grasp of day. / Deep is its pain –, / Joy – deeper still than misery."<sup>137</sup> The "grasp of day," that is, daylight, the sun, the light of reason that would potentially disclose what something is no longer provides the measure. Indeed these things are measured by that which is both deeply painful and joyful yet beyond measure. In a word—Dionysian.

So we see that this supposed bifurcation at the heart of the Dionysian is really the expression of the human being's essential condition. The condition is one's desire to come to grips with suffering and a harsh existence by being called back to the primal unity of the Dionysian through the sublime or comic arts that justify life. Yet in the very undergoing of this event, one's very individuation, like the god himself, is torn asunder. So, it is as if this pole of the Dionysian is not constituted by opposites, that is, two extremes occupying separate ends of the same pole, but instead the pole itself is not fixed. It is flexible in the sense that tragedy and comedy in their autonomous ways allow this Dionysian pole to bend so that its ends touch or at least come into close proximity with each other within the nature of the Dionysian itself. The Apollonian impulse in the form of tragedy and comedy allow for a play within the middle world between the

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<sup>136</sup> In terms of the principle of non-contradiction Babich asserts that "Nietzsche's reflection on art and truth or science shows that Nietzsche's reflections on truth and lie return again and again to the problem not of art but logic, particularly the problem of the principle of non-contradiction, as Aristotle underscores this first principle beyond assumption and demonstration (*Meta.* 1005b 15-25). It is the same principle that sets the terms for what Nietzsche calls the conflict or struggle between art and knowledge." Babich, "The Culture of Science as Art," in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 2-3.

<sup>137</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 184/"The Other Dance Song."

terrible truth of the Dionysian and the veil that allows us to affirm this truth and thus live in the face of it.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* the transformed will, through the saving power of art, is saved from pessimism. As we saw above Nietzsche's overall view is characterized as a tragic view, that is, a view in which we have only a narrow perspective on the world and all absolutes or meta positions are called into radical questioning. And one of Nietzsche's goals is to affirm life through the sublimity of tragedy or the comic discharge of the absurd in the face of this tragic view which facilitated Nietzsche's break from the pessimism of Schopenhauer. But Nietzsche also saw the danger to this affirmation in another, opposite extreme. This is characterized by the overly optimistic outlook of the Apollonian impulse that leaves the realm of art and locates itself in the satisfied, blinding optimism of science and that which can be made intelligible. In *The Birth of Tragedy* this impulse is exemplified by a singular figure named Socrates.

### III. The Threat to Dionysian Affirmation: A New Daimon

Philosophers seek the truth. How "truth" is defined is surely a contentious issue among these seekers. Nonetheless it is widely held that Socrates was one of truth's greatest devotees. Socrates always sought the best *logos* that accounted for what something was. For example the question, "What is piety?" is examined in the *Euthyphro*. Socrates implores Euthyphro to tell him, not an instance or act of piety, but what piety *is* in itself. Likewise the question at the heart of the *Symposium*, in which the

interlocutors partake in excessive wine drinking (although Socrates is the only one that maintains his sobriety), is “What is love (*eros*)?” The question turns within the room as it is addressed by each interlocutor and then turns “upward” with Socrates’ account of disembodied love as it was told to him by Diotima. The great comic playwright Aristophanes is also an interlocutor in this dialogue. His participation is humorous for a number of reasons, including his first attempt at an account in *logos*, which he postpones due to having the hiccups! It is only near the end of this dialogue when “beautiful bodied Alcibiades” raucously enters that a descent from disembodied love to images and the earth is restored.

For Nietzsche, Socrates is emblematic of something *fateful* in the history of the West. This fate essentially revolves around the notion of instinct and its discharge. Nietzsche argues that, prior to Socrates, most notably in the works of the great tragedians such as Aeschylus, the instincts were given an outlet. These instincts included both those of the individual and culture as a whole. Because the word “instinct” has been appropriated by many academic disciplines, perhaps it is best if we always keep in mind Nietzsche’s characterization and use the term “Dionysian.” For Nietzsche, Socrates represents the turn away from the primordial experience of the Dionysian, especially as experienced through tragic-comic art, towards only that which can be made intelligible. To be sure, Nietzsche is clear about the peril the Dionysian faced in terms of this new *agōn* stating, “This is the new opposition: the Dionysiac versus the Socratic, and the work of art that once was Greek tragedy was destroyed by it.”<sup>138</sup> To once again appropriate Nietzsche’s characterization, we ought to say that the Dionysian impulse was all but vanquished from the tragic-comic stage and Greek life in overwhelming favor of the

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<sup>138</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 60/Section 12.

Apollonian impulse, an impulse that, in its disproportion, furthered a certain naiveté about life in general and science in particular. Hence forth Dionysian monstrosity was no longer merely veiled by Apollonian illusion but dominated by it. There are multiple consequences of this turn by Socrates to the intelligible and the reverberations are still felt today. But for Nietzsche, as much as tragedy's apparent downfall is itself tragic, it also presents us with those laughter provoking elements that, for instance, Aristophanes magnified with his unsurpassed comedic genius.

But caution is in order here. Nietzsche is often characterized as a Dionysian philosopher, that is, as a philosopher who “demolishes” older worn systems in favor of the “rebirth” or the will to new knowledge. This characterization certainly rings true and is even carried on by certain postmodernist philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Both emphasize the destruction and rebirth through the process of their absolute deterritorialization model, and Michel Foucault's notion of discursive practices which are the genesis of new knowledge and power relationships. However, to say that Nietzsche is “anti” Apollonian is false. Nietzsche's appreciation of the Apollonian is rooted in its very necessity. Such is Nietzsche's pronouncement, “And behold! Apollo could not live without Dionysos. The ‘Titanic’ and ‘barbaric’ was ultimately just as much of a necessity as the Apolline!”<sup>139</sup>

We must always keep in mind two important things concerning Nietzsche's view of the Apollonian. First, as it was explained above, the Apollonian is what allows us to live in the face of Dionysian terror. The Apollonian veil that shrouds the Dionysian is a necessary shroud lest we resign ourselves to inaction and lethargy. In essence, we can characterize the Apollonian as the very illusions that give rise to motion and hence

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 27/Section 4.

action. Second, Nietzsche himself is very clear about the necessity of the Apollonian and its yoking to the Dionysian. The Apollonian illusion, in the form of tragedy and comedy, is the veil that human beings cast over the Dionysian in the form of beautiful semblance (all inspired art in general), allowing for the very discharge of the terrible truths of that deity. To use Nietzsche's words, "the power of the epic-Apolline is so extraordinary that, thanks to the delight in semblance and release through semblance which it imparts, it casts a spell over even the most terrifying things before our very eyes."<sup>140</sup> All in all, it is too simplistic to say that Nietzsche is exclusively Dionysian and Socrates is exclusively Apollonian.

But what then of Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates? This criticism that levels the charge that the Socratic pursuit of truth is Apollonian in nature and thus dangerous to the instincts. In what way is the Apollonian in its Socratic form a danger for Nietzsche, always keeping in mind though, Nietzsche's assertion that the Apollonian is a necessity for life as well?

Socrates, too, revels in his own Apollonian illusions. These illusions revolve around the idea that beauty and the purely intelligible share a kindred relationship. Nietzsche's reading of Socrates and Plato, a reading that surely can be challenged, is one in which images, the mimetic or those things that appear on the lower part of the divided line, as it appears at the end of Book Six of the *Republic*, are held in a sort of contempt. For Nietzsche, Socrates represents a new aesthetics that replaces the kind of aesthetics that the world (more specifically the Greek world) up until this time justified it. Instead of an aesthetics in which the Apollonian and Dionysian were engaged in a fruitful and perpetual *agōn*, each needing the other, the overbearing dialectical frenzy of Socrates

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 61/Section 12.

banished the Dionysian from the Greek stage and wider culture. For Nietzsche, the result was a new monstrousness, one that replaced the abysmal monstrousness of the Dionysian. Nietzsche refers to this new phenomenon as “aesthetic Socratism” that he characterizes in the following way:

We can therefore now get closer to the nature of *aesthetic Socratism* [aesthetischen Sokratismus], whose supreme law runs roughly like this: ‘In order to be beautiful [*schön*], everything must be reasonable [*verständlich*]’—a sentence formed in parallel to Socrates’ dictum that ‘Only he who knows [*Wissende*] is virtuous.’<sup>141</sup>

For Nietzsche, aesthetic Socratism signifies a paradigm shift away from the beauty and freedom of shining images as they appear, to Socratic beauty that is only beautiful when it comes under the teleological pull of dialectic and reason. In essence, for something to be beautiful it must first be given form and structure by its participation in the intelligible *eidē*. Individual instances of beauty as that which appears to us, that which shines, plays second fiddle to the form (*eidos*) they participate in. A conventional reading of Plato and Socrates even asserts that tragedies and comedies are a copy of a copy (the *mimēsis* of others and nature) and thus even more removed from not only the forms, but from images as they are themselves.

What does this mean in terms of Nietzsche’s focus on instinct and, moreover, as something fateful for all of Western thinking? What could it have to do with anything comic? Until Socrates, great tragedies allowed the Dionysian impulse an outlet. The barbaric was indeed allowed to expel itself. What was monstrous shined forth in and through the Apollonian. With the advent of Socrates and his “tools,” such as dialectic and

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 62/Section 12.

elenchus, the Dionysian all but disappeared into its own abyss. What dialectic, for example, does in and through its very practice is distance oneself from the original manifestation of shining images. When one thinks dialectically one traverses the divided line away from an image that is manifest in space and time to the non-temporal form. Thus both the Apollonian and Dionysian achieve their own respective respite from time but in two wholly different ways. Whereas the Dionysian is allowed a voice in and through music, dissonance, and tragic-comic art that dissolves individualism and reconciles the spectator back to primal unity (*das Ur-eine*), the Apollonian moves in a wholly different direction. How? To reiterate, dialectic and elenchus are deliberative and as such they function as a movement of thought. As a consequence, thought, through its movement, tends to withdraw us from our existential condition. This requirement of something so strongly reflective undermines instinct that, by definition, seeks no reason to act but simply acts on a quick, intuitive insight. In essence, this perversion of instinct allows for one, a devaluing of sensory perception and two, an exiling and forgetting of the Dionysian oblivion that lies at the heart of all human beings. In *Daybreak* Nietzsche speaks to this devaluing when he says in aphorism 43, “*The many forces that now have to come together in the thinker*”:

To abstract oneself from sensory perception (*Sich dem sinnlichen Anschauen zu entfremden*), to exalt oneself to contemplation of abstraction—that was at one time actually felt as *exaltation* (*Erhebung gefühlt worden*): we can no longer quite enter into this feeling. To revel in pallid images of words and things, to sport with such invisible, inaudible, impalpable beings, was, out of contempt for the sensorily tangible (*Verachtung der sinnlich tastbaren*), seductive and evil world,

felt as a life in another *higher* world. ‘These *abstracta* are certainly not seductive, but they can offer us guidance!’—with that one lifted oneself upwards. It is not the content of these sportings of spirituality, it is they themselves which constituted ‘the higher life’ in the prehistoric ages of science. Hence Plato’s admiration for dialectics (*Bewunderung der Dialektik*) and his enthusiastic belief that dialectics necessarily pertained to the good, unsensory man (*guten entsinnlichten Menschen*).<sup>142</sup>

Moreover, the movement to purely Apollonian images constitutes for Nietzsche a surely pleasurable experience but one that dwells in untruth (what Nietzsche refers to in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the “naive in art”<sup>143</sup>). This impulse devoid of its Dionysian counterpart, distances us and removes us from what is otherwise terrible. For Nietzsche this harbors its own danger to the extent that we today, with our overwhelming allegiance to science and technology, have forgotten that the Apollonian is pure illusion. In other words, we believe the illusions to be real. And when we forget that illusion *is* illusion we dwell in naive optimism.

Nietzsche is clear about this movement to purely Apollonian form, begun with Socrates, when he states early in *The Birth of Tragedy* that, “the image of Apollo must also contain that delicate line [*zarte Linie*] which the dream-image may not overstep if its effect is not to become pathological, so that, in the worst case, the semblance [*der Schein*] would deceive us as if it were crude reality.”<sup>144</sup> For Nietzsche this effect has become pathological to the point that the play of imagination and the freedom of the image in the

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<sup>142</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30/43.

<sup>143</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 24/Section 3.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 16/Section 1.

form of art to shine has been coerced into another kind of monstrosity so that “art becomes overgrown [*überwächst*] with *philosophical thought* which forces it to cling tightly to the trunk of dialectics. The *Apolline* tendency has disguised itself as logical schematism [*logischen Schematismus*].”<sup>145</sup> Dialectic is akin to a powerful opiate that not only removes us from the pain of existence but crowns us with the good feeling that we have arrived at all that truly counts—disembodied intelligible knowledge absent of any sensible shining.

Nietzsche’s mention of dialectics surely means that he has Plato and Socrates in mind and even Hegel. And although he does not explicitly refer to Kant in this passage, nonetheless the reference to “logical schematism” indicates this crucial function as found in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. The emphasis on the logical schematism is what allows meaning or sense to be given to the pure concepts of the understanding. Indeed, the schematism is the nexus that bridges both sense and understanding. However, the logical schematism is a function of the imagination that is antecedent to any meaning in that it is the very fertile operation that is generative of any significance whatsoever and is itself without ground.<sup>146</sup> Kant says of the imagination that it, “is a blind but indispensable function of the soul without which we would have no cognition whatsoever, but of which we are conscious only very rarely.”<sup>147</sup> Likewise, the schematism which itself is driven by the imagination is accorded the same profound depth. Kant says of it that, “This schematism of our understanding, i.e., its schematism regarding appearances and their mere form, is a secret art residing in the depths of the human soul, an art whose true

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 69/Section 14.

<sup>146</sup> See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A78/B103 and A140/B179.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., A78/B103.

stratagems we shall hardly ever divine from nature and lay bare before ourselves.”<sup>148</sup> Kant, who is at pains to put metaphysics on a secure footing, to lay bare the mechanisms and functions by which the human being can say with certainty that true knowledge has been attained betrays the fact that there lies within the “depths of the human soul” something that is unaccountable, something abysmal and without ground from which all being arises. This, what I would call a *dark poetic source*, is what led Heidegger to declare that Kant “recoiled [*zurück*] in the face of this unknown root.”<sup>149</sup> Far from a secure foundation, the linchpin of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (indeed his other two *Critiques* as well!) is something we are conscious of “only rarely” and that we “hardly ever divine from nature.”

Nietzsche’s assertion above, recast in terms of the Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, highlights the fact that, since the excision of the Dionysian, the overwhelming tendency has been the emphasis on the purely uninstinctual Apollonian which has cast a veil of naive illusion over life. The illusion that science, dialectic, reason or the intelligible are symptoms of a certain type of life denies pessimism and the truth as Nietzsche says in the preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*. These things however, in the end, answer to something much more fundamental. Hence Nietzsche is clear that, “all those things which we now call culture, education, civilization must some day appear before the judge Dionysos whom no man can deceive.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., A141/B180.

<sup>149</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), 167.

<sup>150</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 94/Section 19.

For Nietzsche the consequence of such an Apollonian drive exemplified by Socrates has not only inverted “the wisdom of instinct” and turned it against itself but he does so under the assumption that existence can and needs to be corrected:

‘Only by instinct’: the phrase goes to the heart and centre of the Socratic tendency. With these words Socratism condemns existing [*bestehende*] art and existing ethics in equal measure; wherever it directs its probing gaze, it sees a lack of insight and the power of delusion [*Macht des Wahns*], and it concludes from this lack that what exists is inwardly wrong and objectionable. Socrates believed that he was obliged to correct [*corrigieren*] existence...”<sup>151</sup>

At the heart of this “correction” was the belief that existence is ultimately understandable and comprehensible. Unlike the Dionysian counterpart, which is truly without ground and thus abysmal, Nietzsche’s claim is that Socrates and Plato work in *the opposite direction* and revel in the Apollonian serenity that results from tracing “the thread of causality...into the deepest abysses of being.”<sup>152</sup> This tracing to first cause or that which is in-itself (the *eidē*) represented the highest participation in truth for Socrates and Plato. Indeed, dialectical thinking that strives for understanding the form of something was not merely a whimsical mental exercise for Socrates. Nietzsche is quite clear that it was meant to correct and even justify existence; an existence that for Nietzsche, needed no correcting and the very assumption that one sees a problem with life is “in-itself” a sign of delusion and decay. This leads Nietzsche to state in a public lecture given in 1870 at Basel University about Socratism, “For the infinitely more profound Germanic consciousness, Socratism appears [*erscheint*] as an altogether inverted world [*verkehrte*

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 66/Section 13.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 73/Section 15.

*Welt*].”<sup>153</sup> Much like the inverted world of comedy that exploits the absurdity on display within it, Socratism too is an accurate manifestation of the inverted world exhibited in “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” but with the ominous consequence of arriving at its own limit.

Consider how many times in the Platonic dialogues that dialectic led to the successful correction of existence. Half the time? A quarter of the time? Quite the contrary, in almost every case the *eidē* themselves were unattainable. Was a new and just republic *founded* by Glaucon and Adeimantus after the dialogue of the same name was written by Plato? Better still, did Plato help found a new republic when he went to Syracuse? Was the form of piety *found* by Socrates and Euthyphro so that Euthyphro may have *acted* wisely proffering a correction to existence? Or might we say that dialectic, although useful, has limits and its usefulness could be in the *recognition* of limits. Might not the “music-making” Socrates, which is to say the redeemed Socrates that Nietzsche appreciates, have been “redeeming” himself all along in the *Phaedo* (perhaps in all of the dialogues?) when he says what is in my view the crucial passage after all of the arguments for the immortality of the soul are explored and after telling the myth of the earth:

No sensible man would insist (*diischurisasthai*) that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one (*kalos gar ho kindunos*)—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation, which is why I

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<sup>153</sup> Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, III/2, 33. John Sallis’ translation in *Crossings*, p.135, fn 25.

have been prolonging my tale (*mēkunō ton muthon*). That is the reason why a man should be of good cheer (*tharreïn chrē*) about his own soul,...<sup>154</sup>

Keeping in mind Nietzsche's penchant for risk taking it would appear here that Socrates' very nobility lies not with his actual arguments about whether the soul is immortal or not, which is to say their logical construct, but instead with the *logos* and the myth itself. The telling of stories at the limit of logic "as if they were an incantation" is the noble act and one whose result is cheerfulness.

The same goes for the Socratic-Apolline legacy of science. Nietzsche argues that although science (*Wissenschaft*) appears to move us closer to truth, in essence science ends up delimiting its own function. The accounts of science are no doubt impressive and scientific advances have alleviated many human ills (and one must also keep in mind that Nietzsche is not "anti-science"), but this impressiveness stems in part from the more and more refined explanations of things, and hair-splitting distinctions. In the end, science reaches its limit and the secrets to existence remain concealed from our type of being—a human, all too human being. In Nietzsche's words:

At present, however, science, spurred on by its powerful delusion [*kräftigen Wahne*], is hurrying unstopably to its limits, where the optimism hidden in the essence of logic will founder and break up....logic curls up around itself at these limits and finally bites its own tail, then a new form of knowledge breaks through, *tragic knowledge* [die tragische Erkenntniss], which, simply to be endured, needs art for shelter and as a cure [*als Schutz und Heilmittel die Kunst braucht*].<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 114d.

<sup>155</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 75/Section 15. I slightly modified the last line of this translation using "shelter" instead of "protection" for *Schutz* and "cure" instead of "medicine" for *Heilmittel*.

As the optimism of science flounders, as our belief in science begins to flounder, we come to realize in the deepest sense that *we need images of a different kind, we need images of art as well as thinkers who think not merely analytically but poetically.* In “The Culture of Science as Art” Babich writes accordingly:

What Nietzsche, speaking of ‘*Kant’s tragic problem,*’ names ‘the tragic conflict’ is the insight that human society and culture cannot exist without art, i.e., without the untruth or illusion of art,...It is as an artist that Nietzsche proposes a creative recollection of the ‘poetic’ foundational task of the philosopher as ‘physician of culture.’<sup>156</sup>

The physician of culture’s “poetic foundational task” is to think science and art together so that science’s unrestrained optimism can be kept in check and so that both science and art serve life. At its best science merely stares at the abyss, unable to account for it according to its own measure. Unable to account for its own ground it is not able to grasp the illusions, that is, the errors that arise from it even though it assumes it does. Nietzsche recognizes this prejudice of science when he states:

We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we are able to live—by positing (*der Annahme*) bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith (*diese Glaubensartikel*) no one could endure living! But that does not prove them. Life is not an argument (*Das Leben ist kein Argument*); the conditions of life might include error.<sup>157</sup>

Indeed the images that science gives us are images of “measure,” that is, some kind of metric that quantifies and *explains* the world in increasing detail, whereas art revels in

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<sup>156</sup> Babich, “The Culture of Science as Art,” in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 7.

<sup>157</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 117/Aphorism 121.

beauty and being-here within the transitory nature of time.<sup>158</sup> Thus science at the limit needs a relief or medicine in the form of art to be able to endure tragic knowledge. Art allows the abyss, the Dionysian, to show itself in its unfathomable depths. This may be why many human beings, rather than remain idle, gather themselves in theatres and music halls to experience the actual shining and play of images that tragedy and comedy present. For unlike science and logic, whose domain is ultimately of the intelligible, the enjoyment of comedy lies in the demand of sense, that is, the aesthetic ability to see and hear the spectacle “in a manifest accord”<sup>159</sup> as Sallis says in the last chapter of his book *Stone*.

The Dionysian affirmation of life through the shining of beautiful Apollonian images impels us as Beings in the world *to move, to gather and to live and laugh with the knowledge of the tragic*. Indeed the demand of sense and the need of images overflows the poetic text, even a great poetic text. Thus lies the difference between what is said to us in the form of a text and what shines for us—for our sense—in the space of a theater or even in the life of intersubjectivity. This distinction is drawn by Sallis in the context of the Shakespearean comedy *A Winter’s Tale*<sup>160</sup> and he concludes by interrupting his own reading so as to gather *at* the place of shining: “But now time has come to interrupt the poetry, to release the shining from the play, turning it out and putting the text aside, going off to the theatre.”<sup>161</sup> This notion of going off to the theatre where images both tragic and

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<sup>158</sup> Babich, quoting Nietzsche from his early notebooks (*Kritische Studienausgabe* 7, 558) states, “The man of science *calculates* the numbers of the laws of nature; the man of art *gazes* at them. In the one case, conformity to law; in the other, beauty.” “The Culture of Science as Art,” in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 13.

<sup>159</sup> John Sallis, *Stone* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 118.

<sup>160</sup> There is some debate amongst scholars of Shakespeare as to the classification of *A Winter’s Tale*. I have seen it most often listed as a comedy; however it is sometimes categorized as tragi-comedy and even a romance.

<sup>161</sup> Sallis, *Stone*, 147.

comic shine is not lost on Freyberg who, in *The Thought of John Sallis*, notes something very similar to Nietzsche's conclusion in *The Birth of Tragedy* where Nietzsche implores us to act on the sounding call of both gods at the limit of science and logic: "But now follow me to the tragedy and sacrifice along with me in the temple of both deities!"<sup>162</sup>

At this point one may conclude that Nietzsche's thought itself must fall into its own sort of pessimism as it sees itself left behind in the wake of this Socratic-Apolline impulse as it gains momentum in the West. However, as we shall see, Nietzsche not only refuses pessimism and its attendant *ressentiment* because of the role art such as tragedy and comedy come to play, he also comes to appreciate a comic image of Socrates as well. This comic image that revolves around the contradiction of instinct turned against itself, that is, instinct in a struggle with itself, surely is ripe for laughter. Nietzsche is clear about his appreciation of Aristophanes who brings this laughter to fruition in the form of comic images.

Moreover Nietzsche sees a Socrates who, at the end of his life, redeems himself in the image of the "music-making Socrates." Nietzsche's claim is that science at its limit needs art, especially in the form of music, "for shelter [*Schutz*] and as cure [*Heilmittel*]." <sup>163</sup> This epiphany occurs to the condemned Socrates as he awaits the return of the ship from Delos. This shining image is of a Socrates redeemed; a Socrates who welcomes back the Dionysian through his composition of Aesopian fables into a hymn to Apollo. Here, Nietzsche facilitates his own inversion. He inverts the classic image of the theoretical Socrates on his death-bed that the new Greek youth esteemed—an image of

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<sup>162</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 116/Section 25 and Bernard Freyberg, *The Thought of John Sallis: Phenomenology, Plato, Imagination* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 205.

<sup>163</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 75/Section 15, my translation.

Socrates “liberated from fear of death by reasons and knowledge”<sup>164</sup>—into an image of a cheerful Socrates who makes music, refuses *ressentiment*, and demands that others be cheerful as well. Although one of the abiding characteristics about Socrates has always been his cheerfulness, the cheerfulness here is no longer simply conditioned by Apollonian dialectic. It is a cheerfulness that harmonizes both impulses. Freydberg reminds us of this Socratic cheerfulness and its ties to Nietzsche’s thought when he states:

[O]ne must quickly call to mind the most pronounced of Socratic traits: his *cheerfulness*. Being given over to darkness and ignorance is the furthest thing from being the cause of gloom and helplessness. Rather, it produces a playfulness, even comedy in the dialogues....Nietzsche will say some two millennia later: ‘The certain prospect of death should fill every life with a precious and fragrant drop of cheerfulness.’<sup>165</sup>

We might say that in the very waning hours of his life a cheerful Socrates made his acquaintance with that chaotic, dark force that he originally sought to vanquish...and to which the hemlock returned him.

#### IV. Socrates, Aristophanes, and Plato’s Pillow

For Nietzsche, there was one person who was able to recognize the internal contradiction of Socrates in its full significance indeed its abundant comedic significance.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 73/Section 15.

<sup>165</sup> Freydberg, *The Thought of John Sallis*, 67.

This person was the comic playwright Aristophanes. Remarkable is the fact that Nietzsche does not identify him among the myriad of philosophers and philosophical schools that evolved after Socrates that countered Socratic/Platonic thought. To be sure, Nietzsche is (generally speaking) cautious of *philosophical thought* post-Socrates. Instead, Nietzsche argues in Section Thirteen of *The Birth of Tragedy* that it was only Aristophanes who was acutely aware of the negative influence Socrates, along with Euripides, was exerting on Athenian society. This Socratic influence is described as a “dubious enlightenment [*zweifelhaften Aufklärung*]” where “physical and spiritual energies were atrophying progressively.”<sup>166</sup> Whereas Socrates inverted instinct and turned it against itself, Aristophanes acts on instinct and inverts the image of Socrates into a comic laughter-provoking opposite. Socrates is no longer the truth seeker. Instead he becomes the very essence of those he opposed. He becomes a Sophist:

It is in this tone, half outraged, half scornful, that Aristophanic comedy [*die aristophanische Komödie*] usually spoke of these men [Euripides and Socrates], to the consternation of those moderns who would gladly have abandoned Euripides, but who could not get over their surprise that Socrates should figure in Aristophanes’ plays as the first and leading *Sophist*, as the mirror and quintessence [*der Spiegel und Inbegriff*] of everything the Sophists were trying to do; the only comfort they could find was in pillorying Aristophanes himself as a dissolute, mendacious Alcibiades of poetry.<sup>167</sup>

For Nietzsche, Aristophanes is a sort of last hero in that he is able to diagnose a declining Athens, parodying it by way of comic representations. This of course extends to Socrates

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<sup>166</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 64-65/Section 13.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 65/Section 13.

who, in *Clouds*, is comically portrayed as he was not. In other words, keeping faithful to the notion of inversion, the image of the historical Socrates is inverted and portrayed as its opposite. Of course the result is a comic romp that ridicules Socrates in particular and philosophy in general. This ridicule however is far from scorn and disparagement. As Freyberg states, “In Aristophanes, the most severe ridicule and laughter is united with the greatest respect and honor.”<sup>168</sup> There are many examples from this text that illustrate this, but the following two present the most compelling instances.

First, the conventional reading of Plato (and for the most part, Nietzsche’s reading of Plato is conventional) is that he, through the figure of Socrates, always sought the truth and what constituted the truth was the strongest *logos*. Socrates demanded from his interlocutors, as well as himself, that the strongest *logos* was one that accounted for the form (*eidos*) of whatever phenomena was being examined—piety in the *Euthyphro*, love in the *Symposium*, justice in the *Republic* and so forth. The focus was on a movement away from the temporal, changing world of becoming to the unchanging realm of being and the forms. Socrates’ dialectical lens was usually focused almost exclusively on the intelligible section of the divided line as well as the visible section only as it related and is informed by the intelligible. Far from his interest was knowledge of the natural world (although he had nothing against such knowledge or those who pursued it).<sup>169</sup> However, the entrance of Socrates in *Clouds* has him treading the air in a basket high up in the clouds examining just those types of natural phenomena that the historical Socrates took no interest in, namely “meteorological things (*meteōra pragmata*).”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Freyberg, *Philosophy and Comedy*, 44.

<sup>169</sup> See Plato, *Apology* 19c.

<sup>170</sup> Aristophanes, *Clouds* lines, 223-234.

But Aristophanes' comic portrayal of Socrates moves even deeper than the inversion of the subject matter of Socrates' interest. To effect proper knowledge of meteorological things, Socrates says to Strepsiades, "I had to suspend my mind, to commingle my rarefied thought with its kindred air. If I had been on the ground and from down there contemplated what's up here, I would have made no discoveries at all."<sup>171</sup> In terms of the divided line recall that Plato and Socrates strove to understand the highest participation in truth of something. This occurred in the top division of the line, the intelligible, at the level of thinking and mathematics (*dianoia* and *ta mathēmatica*) and ultimately intellection and the forms (*noēsis* and *eidē*). This, of course, was farthest removed from the actual phenomena of sense and opinion. When one moved in thought from empirically real things to intelligible things, one focused all the powers of thought on the forms. In a sense, the historical Socrates suspended interest in actual things so as to "commingle" with the intelligible forms. In other words, the historical Socrates sought to dwell near the form of a thing, which entailed a deferral of interest in the visible world.<sup>172</sup>

The comic genius of Aristophanes inverts this dynamic. Instead we have a Socrates in *Clouds* who has physically suspended himself in the air to be nearer the natural phenomena he wants to study. Moreover Aristophanes' comic finesse of the word "suspend" nudges the inversion and the comedy farther. To suspend, in Greek, is

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., lines 229-234.

<sup>172</sup> It must be noted that the thinking of John Sallis and Bernard Freyberg challenge this conventional view of Plato/Socrates that deemphasizes the supposed supremacy of the "eternal forms" and in turn emphasizes (in a way that perhaps would cause Nietzsche to reevaluate?) the role of sight: "[T]his word [*eidōs*] is derived from a verb (*eidō*) the most straightforward meaning of which is 'see.' Thus, the root meaning of 'eidōs' is: that which is seen, the seen, that which presents itself to a seeing, that which shows itself so as to be manifest to a seeing," (Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 152, also 383), and "[T]he Greek *eidōs* (plural *eidē*) preserves the sense of *seeing* (*horaō*). *Eidenai*, the perfect tense of *horaō*, is a word with no intrinsic connection to any 'essence' from any world." (Freyberg, *The Play of the Platonic Dialogues*, 41).

*kremannumi*, which means “to be hung up” as in “to hang up one’s shield.” Hence it refers to the hanging up of a physical object. Aristophanes, however, plays on the absurd yet comic notion of Socrates suspending his mind as if it is even possible to suspend a non-physical entity such as a mind. To be sure, this is more than just a problematic analogy. Aristophanes is at play with language that is to say giving his own comic account in *logos* to showcase an inverted Socrates, a figure engaging in the kinds of things that the historical Socrates did not.

The second example concerns the very nature of Socrates’ work at the Thinkery (*phrontistērion*) versus the “work” of the historical Socrates. This comic polemic revolves around the seeking of truth. Again, Socrates sought the best *logos*. The best *logos* constituted the strongest *logos* that accounted for the essence or form of something. However, in the *Clouds* we have again another comic inversion perpetrated by Aristophanes.

When Strepsiades enters the Thinkery, Socrates asks him why he has come. Strepsiades’ response is that he is “anxious to learn public speaking” so that he can evade his creditors and their lawful collections. What Aristophanes has Socrates do in this comic jaunt is precisely what the historical Socrates never did, that is, teaching Strepsiades (or anybody else for that matter) how to make the weaker argument *appear* stronger in this case so as to foil his creditors. Moreover as we know, Socrates never accepted any monetary compensation for his philosophical endeavors. Instead he freely engaged in philosophy in the *agora*. In the Thinkery, though, Socrates, like the Sophists he distinguished himself from, received payment for instruction in how to speak well and

be persuasive even if it meant disregard for truth.<sup>173</sup> In essence, Aristophanes presents us with an inverted image of Socrates that was counter-instinctual to the contemporaries of Socrates in Athens as well as to us today as heirs of his teaching. Perhaps this is why, as Nietzsche argues in the quote above, the moderns of that time found “comfort...in pillorying Aristophanes.” As Athens began to embrace the dialectical reasoning of Socrates and the supposed optimism it brought, Aristophanes was challenging them through the shining images of his comic representations. The images were so perverse in their portrayal as compared to the historical Socrates that one’s instinct was surely alerted to the fact that something was *unheimlich* about Athens in the time of Socrates compared to its recent past and the kind of tragedies performed at its Dionysia.

Indeed this perversion of instinct is extended directly to Plato the author of the dialogues in which Socrates featured so prominently. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche asserts the following:

[N]othing I know has given me a better vision [*mehr hat träumen lassen*] of Plato’s secrecy and Sphinx nature than that happily preserved *petit fait*: under the pillow of his deathbed they did not find a “Bible” or anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic—but instead, Aristophanes. How would even a Plato have endured life [*Leben ausgehalten*]—a Greek life that he said No to—without an Aristophanes!<sup>174</sup>

What Nietzsche discerns here is the *necessity* of Aristophanes and his comedies for Plato. A necessity that takes the form of a fundamental need for the kind of Dionysian comic

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<sup>173</sup> See Freyberg, *Philosophy and Comedy*, 19.

<sup>174</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 30/Aphorism 28.

celebration that revels in our earthbound human condition. This deep tie between comedy and philosophy is best rendered by Freyberg in *Philosophy and Comedy*:

[T]he comedies of Aristophanes serve to remind human beings of those matters that are most fundamental to the quality of their humanity. However, unlike the Platonic dialogues, which address these concerns through question and answer, the comedies of Aristophanes—like the works of his colleagues in the tragic art—bring these concerns to their audience through the vicarious experiences they provide.<sup>175</sup>

Thus laughter provoking comedies provide for the kind of measure that reminds us that, for as far reaching as philosophical *logos* may take us, Platonic *logos* no exception, we are one and all bound to the earth and its shining images.

However, I argue that there is another interesting and revealing detail about this particular passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* that constitutes much more than mere semantics. Some translations, such as Judith Norman's above, translate "*mehr hat träumen lassen*" as "has given me a better vision." Others, such as Walter Kaufmann and the internet based, *The Nietzsche Channel*, translate the same as, "has caused me to meditate." But the word *träumen* denotes very strong ties to "dreaming," or "day-dream." Thus although translations that utilize "vision" or "meditate" are in no way inappropriate, Nietzsche's use of *träumen*, given all the implications with the Apollonian impulse so crucial to his thought, might best be rendered along the lines of "day-dream" such as Marianne Cowan's translation "has made me day-dream more..."<sup>176</sup> With this in mind we realize that Nietzsche is appropriating his very own Apollonian image: the soothing

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<sup>175</sup> Freyberg, *Philosophy and Comedy*, 18.

<sup>176</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1955), 35.

illusion of a Plato in need of *earthly comedy*. Perhaps this illusion temporarily veils Nietzsche from what he views as the destructive threat that Platonism and dialectical thinking has perpetrated on philosophical thinking.

In the last analysis, Aristophanes trained his comic eye on Socrates to present us with his comic images of a Socrates in excess. For it was only “Aristophanes’ sure instinct,” claims Nietzsche, that “certainly grasped things correctly.”<sup>177</sup> And so does Nietzsche train his eye on Socrates who he sees taking the theoretical standpoint in the form of dialectical reasoning to an unhealthy excess but then redeems himself in the image of the music-making Socrates by letting the Dionysian impulse presence itself in the form of poetry and music. When we take Nietzsche’s full characterization of Socrates, it appears as an image of *eros*, abundance, and fullness of life. Indeed, just as Nietzsche hoped for a rebirth of tragic art including its comic aspects for contemporary and future life, he locates this very possibility in the image of Socrates *who undergoes his very own Dionysian rebirth*.

## V. Conclusion: From *The Birth of Tragedy* to *The Gay Science*

This first section in Nietzsche’s early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, provided a stage from which his view of comedy and laughter was projected. Foremost of these was the way in which comedy related to tragedy as well as how both are expressions of Dionysian groundlessness (*Abgrund*). This was a necessary first step because Nietzsche

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<sup>177</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 83/Section 17.

seemed to be concerned almost entirely with tragedy and its role whereas comedy and laughter appear less significant.

But we have seen that Nietzsche's view of tragedy encompasses much more than a play. The tragic view of the world that claims we cannot transcend our human, all too human, status that structures Nietzsche's philosophy. It lays bare the choice that human beings must make in the face of tragic knowledge: we can either succumb to pessimism and resignation or we can choose to affirm life. If we choose the latter, then comedy as well as tragedy becomes part of that ethical disposition. Comedy, though, is not only a response or a reaction to tragic knowledge, it is also a reflection—in what can only be a reflection—of the Dionysian abyss into which we all stare at some point.

We have also seen that comedy's indispensability to the affirmation of life is constituted by the manner in which comic images *scheinen*. To put it another way, it is the way comic images shine forth as contrasted with images of tragedy. Comic images, as Nietzsche says, save the will from destruction. They allow a transformation of the will by the way in which disgust at absurdity is discharged through their particular artistic means. Effective comedy shines forth as a vicarious image of our own experiences. It mirrors life and the absurdities and struggles within it, although the mirror is more of a "funhouse mirror."<sup>178</sup> Often times in the face of absurdity, comedy, like tragedy, lets us live and even flourish despite the Dionysian abyss that every human being at one time or another must confront.

Moreover comedy, in both a literal and figurative sense, allows for *movement*. Just like the tragic hero who has glimpsed the abyss and gained the kind of proprietary knowledge inherent to it, one is tempted to remain lethargic and idle. This is why both

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<sup>178</sup> Bernard Freytag makes this point many times in *Philosophy and Comedy*.

Hamlet and Silenus laugh. They recognize the futility of action. Their laughter is not laughter directed outward and aimed at something such as the kind of trivial laughter that happens when one sees another slip on a banana peel. This laughter signifies the knowledge of futility and the “supreme danger of the will” as one teeters on the precipice of resignation and despair. It is a laughter that at one time bursts outward yet its source lies inward in that it comes from a soul that has gained the kind of monstrous knowledge belonging to the god Dionysus.

But we also saw what Nietzsche perceived as a threat to the Dionysian impulse and its two creative domains of tragedy and comedy. The Apollonian impulse that has become estranged from its Dionysian adversary presents its own danger to the will in the form of excessive optimism. Here the Apollonian no longer works in tandem with the Dionysian so as to allow the Dionysian impulse to be given an outlet through beautiful Apollonian images. Instead, as an isolated impulse, the Apollonian proclaims that all can be known through science and logic. Science and logic, especially in the form of dialectical reasoning, leads one to the serenity of intelligible knowledge as if one could remove oneself from the confines of space, time and history. For Nietzsche, this drive to theoretical reasoning is manifest in the person of Socrates. Embracing the purely Apollonian illusion, Socrates accepted the illusion as real. As a consequence, ancient Athens and Western culture have inherited this framework best seen today as the unchallenged ascendancy of science and technological thinking. It excludes instinct and the kind of creativity that allows us to own up to tragic knowledge and live cheerfully in the face of that knowledge.

Nietzsche, however, refuses to react to Socrates by way of *ressentiment* just as Socrates refused the model of *ressentiment* against those who condemned him to death. Instead, within Socrates' exclusively theoretical image, Nietzsche locates a saving power. This is the music-making Socrates that emerges in the final days before his death. Socrates needed to make music, which is another way of saying needed to let the boundless Dionysian manifest itself. Socrates' music making consisted in setting to verse the Aesopian fables that he knew. But what is also clear is that Socrates' impulse to make music arose from his dreams and his wanting to understand the meaning of them. Socrates states, "The dreams were something like this: the same dream (*enupnion*) often came to me in the past, now in one shape now in another, but saying the same thing: 'Socrates' it said, 'make music (*mousikēn poiei*) and cultivate (*ergazou*) it.'"<sup>179</sup> Notable is the relationship between the Apollonian dream images and their call to make music—a Dionysian phenomena. The very boundaries between the two appear to blur.<sup>180</sup> What is clear though, is that Socrates does not analyze or explain music. Nor does he interpret or categorize music. He does not seek its form through dialectic. *He brings his music out of nothing...he creates it and cultivates it.* Nietzsche's insight of Socrates' redemption is similar to the insight he provides concerning Plato. Plato needed comedy, Aristophanic comedy in particular, to affirm his "Greek life" if not to merely make it bearable.

Moreover, we also saw how instinct and intuition were truly served by Aristophanes, the great comic playwright. Nietzsche claims Aristophanes was most

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<sup>179</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 60d-61b.

<sup>180</sup> In addition to this distinction, Nietzsche locates another distinction in *The Gay Science* between our modern view of life and the ancients' view: "We no longer fully understand how the ancients experienced what was most familiar and frequent—for example the day and waking. Because the ancients believed in dreams, waking life had a different light. The same goes for the whole of life, illuminated by a light radiated back on it from death and its significance: our 'death' is a completely different death.... 'Truth' was formerly experienced differently because the lunatic could be considered its mouthpiece—which makes us shudder and laugh." 131-32/Aphorism 152.

attuned to this radical shift in the life of Athens at the time, away from instinct to the domineering methods of science and logic, which was personified in the person of Socrates. Aristophanes' *Clouds* presented us with a comic image of Socrates that presented him as a Sophist, which is to say, presented us with Socrates as he was *not* challenging the audiences and our own instinct. The laughter provoking moments that ensue are deeply connected to the most serious philosophical issues. And these issues, for Nietzsche, are nothing short of what he sees as the very rebirth of the Dionysian spirit through art, including comedy.

Let it be said, then, that Nietzsche avows comedy as much as tragedy and music as a creative Dionysian means by which we can affirm life and forego pessimism and *ressentiment*. At the conclusion of the preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the opposition between those pessimists who seek metaphysical comfort, especially in Christian dogma, and those who would affirm life is startlingly clear. Moreover, the distinction turns on the very notion of one's ability to laugh:

But it is very probable that it will *end* like this, that *you* will end like this, namely, 'comforted' [*getröstet*], as it is written, despite all your training of yourselves for what is grave and terrifying, 'metaphysically comforted', ending, in short, as Romantics end, namely as *Christians*...No, you should first learn the art of comfort *in this world*, you should learn to *laugh* [*lachen*], my young friends, if you are really determined to remain pessimists. Perhaps then, as men who laugh [*als Lachende*], you will some day send all attempts at metaphysical solace to Hell—with metaphysics the first to go!<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 12/Section 7 of the preface to the second edition.

Nietzsche follows this pronouncement and ends the preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886) with an extended quote from his recently written *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which has Zarathustra extolling the virtue of laughter. The insights that Nietzsche provided in *The Birth of Tragedy* also allow us to broach his further use and appreciation of comedy and laughter in later works especially *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Thus we take our departure and move to *The Gay Science* where we will see that, far from abhorring science, Nietzsche harbors a deep, albeit cautious, appreciation of it. But it is a science that is far from the serene, detached eye of a rational observer: the kind of hermit-like observer that is shut off from life: “What? Do we really want to demote existence in this way to an exercise in arithmetic and an indoor diversion for mathematicians? Above all, one shouldn’t want to strip it of its *ambiguous* character.”<sup>182</sup> For Nietzsche, science (*Wissenschaft*) must be a praxis where all aspects of the human being—social, political, ethical, natural science—are brought together in a grand arena of knowledge that seeks to enhance life, both in meaning and value. As we shall see, these endeavors can be laughter provoking and, if intellectual honesty (*Redlichkeit*) is lacking, then even ripe for that other kind of laughter: a derisive laughter that seeks to humble and challenge. Thus Nietzsche seeks a “*fröhliche Wissenschaft*”—a joyful science that never forgets the chaos that it is always attempting to order and more importantly never forgets that our attempts to constitute order out of this chaos are often wonder provoking...and laughter provoking.

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<sup>182</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 238/Aphorism 373.

## Chapter Two: *The Gay Science* or The Humorous Knowledge of Free Spirits

“And let each day be a loss to us on which we did not dance once! And let each truth be false to us which was not greeted by one laugh!”

~Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*~

### I. Beginning, Inscription, Laughter

How does Nietzsche begin what was the second and final edition of *The Gay Science*?<sup>183</sup> There is a new preface that appears before the first edition’s introductory poems, “Joke, Cunning, and Revenge—Prelude in German Rhymes.” In short order the new preface will announce a specific kind of comedic device that animates much of *The Gay Science* as well as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—parody. But even before this proper beginning, we have a call to cheerfulness and laughter in the form of a short epigram:

The Gay Science

(‘La gaya scienza’)

This house [*Haus*] is my own and here I dwell [*wohne*],

I’ve never aped nothing from no one

and—laugh [*lachte*] at each master, mark me well,

who at himself has not poked fun [*ausgelacht*].

Over my front door [*Hausthür*].

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<sup>183</sup> The first edition of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* was published in 1882. A later, final edition was published in 1887 that included a preface, fifth book (“We Fearless Ones”), and an appendix of poems (“Songs of Prince Vogelfrei”).

An epigram of course is a short introductory statement located at the beginning of a text. The word epigram, from the Greek *epigraphēin*, means to “write on, inscribe.” It is a writing into in the sense of a bringing forth or a disclosing of what is to follow in the main body of the text. What does Nietzsche’s epigram attempt to bring forth? Laughter and cheerfulness. These two elements are the centerpiece of the kind of knowledge or science that Nietzsche envisions for the future, but also for those free spirits in the present who have the ears and the stomach—quite literally the physiology—for it.

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche writes that the “concept of a *gaya scienza*, [is] that unity of *singer*, *knight*, and *free spirit* that is distinctive of the wonderful early culture of Provence...”<sup>184</sup> He also signals in section one of the preface to the second edition that, “‘Gay Science’: this signifies the saturnalia of a mind that has patiently resisted a terrible, long pressure—patiently, severely, coldly, without yielding, but also without hope—and is now all of a sudden attacked by hope, by hope for health, by the *intoxication* of recovery.”<sup>185</sup> With this we see that gay science will in one sense embrace the characteristics and values of troubadours. These characteristics include music and a nobility arising from the fact that as troubadours they were semi-nomadic and thus wandered, as Nietzsche did most of his life, from place to place. They created their own free verse that often celebrated the unrestrained, uncloistered life of a free spirit that had recourse ultimately to themselves. In short, they were their own masters. This is reflected in the line that states, “I’ve never aped nothing from no one” or one could read, “I am not an image of anyone. I am a free spirit.”

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<sup>184</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, 123/*The Gay Science*.

<sup>185</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 3/Aphorism 1 of the preface to the 2nd ed. A translator’s note in this edition states that saturnalia refers to a “Roman winter festival at which usual bonds of social order were thrown off, social roles were reversed, etc.” For Nietzsche, this reversal of custom that happened once a year is now to become an inspiration and experiment in how to live for the future.

This recourse to “homelessness” both literally and figuratively is also echoed years later. Book five “We Fearless Ones,” which was added when the second edition of *The Gay Science* was published in 1887, echoes the free wandering nomadism of the preface. Here Nietzsche reiterates his admiration for the *Unheimlich* and the homeless who experience it most fully:

[I]t is to them in particular that I commend my secret wisdom [*geheime Weisheit*] and *gaya scienza*...We children of the future—how *could* we be at home in this today! We are unfavorably disposed towards all ideals that might make one feel at home in this fragile, broken time of transition [*zerbrochnen Uebergangszeit*];...we homeless ones, are something that breaks up the ice and other all too thin ‘realities’ [*Realitäten*].<sup>186</sup>

To be homeless then in its greatest significance is to dwell in that time of history where all previous values are being called into question thus elevating existence itself *to a question*. If we can imagine someone, such as Nietzsche, who had no permanent address, no permanent home then it might be possible to experience the angst and foreboding that might accompany such an impermanence. However, this existential angst at the loss of all previous values, of not being at home in a familiar world, also harbors its own creativity that arises out of freedom and the will to transgression, “[W]e are delighted by all who love, as we do, danger, war, and adventure; who refuse to compromise, to be captured, to reconcile, to be castrated; we consider ourselves conquerors; we contemplate the necessity for new orders as well as for a new slavery.”<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 241/Aphorism 377.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

So the use of homelessness and *gaya scienza* by Nietzsche is reflected in much the same way as the free-spirited troubadours. His philosophy will not mimic any others, including Schopenhauer whose philosophy of pessimism Nietzsche departed from in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It will not appeal to transcendent originals such as Platonic forms and, in the realm of ethics and morality it will not appeal to rigid “Thou shalt...” type of commandments or binding imperatives. Nietzsche, in aphorism 324 in *The Gay Science* titled, “In media vita,” which translates as “In mid-life,” says that for him life was not something that was lived in order to fulfill any antecedent criteria, moral or otherwise. He characterizes it instead as an “experiment for the knowledge-seeker,” which is a way of saying that lived experience, especially lived bodily experience is to be oriented towards new, future goals. Furthermore, it is characterized by a peculiar mixture, almost an alchemy even of gaiety, laughter, war and transgression; “‘*Life as a means to knowledge*’—with this principle in one’s heart, one can not only live bravely but also *live gaily and laugh gaily!* And who would know how to laugh and live well who did not first have a good understanding of war and victory?”<sup>188</sup> This notion of war and victory has less to do with the kind of war between states but is more a metaphor of the kind of war that one wages with oneself, better yet, within oneself. “Gay science” will seek to reverse old prejudices that came to dominate serious thinking until Nietzsche’s time. Well aware of his own agenda of transgression Nietzsche states of those who hold this prejudice that:

The lovely human beast seems to lose its good mood [*die gute Laune*] when it thinks well; it becomes ‘serious’! And ‘where laughter and gaiety [*Lachen und Fröhlichkeit*] are found, thinking is good for nothing’—that is the prejudice of

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 181/Aphorism 324.

this serious beast against all ‘gay science’. Well then, let us prove it a prejudice!<sup>189</sup>

Indeed, Nietzsche’s philosophy will not only refuse to imitate others, it will essentially deconstruct—*deconstruct*—all previous values and as we shall see, laughter, comedy and humor will play a significant role in this effort to turn homogeneity inside out so that heterogeneity can flourish.

In terms of “saturnalia of mind,” we see once again a kind of inversion whose locus is reflected both in actual history as well as physiology. Nietzsche seems to want to equate gay science with a newly reborn physiology and health and a rebirth of values that reject the “terrible, long pressure” of previous millennia and their dominant systems of morality. Thus what becomes readily apparent in the preface to the second edition (and even in the “Prelude in Rhymes” of the first edition) is largely constituted by Nietzsche’s views of the body, health and sickness, indeed his own health and sickness, and its relationship to cheerfulness, joy, lightheartedness, laughter, and humor. He even goes so far as to extend this need for cheerfulness and good physical health and those able to diagnose such health to all of humanity to a, “philosophical *physician* in the exceptional sense of the term—someone who has set himself the task of pursuing the problem of the total health of a people, time, race or of humanity.”<sup>190</sup>

Because Nietzsche rejects the Cartesian distinction between the soul and the body (for Nietzsche the body and soul are not separate and the body is always privileged<sup>191</sup>)

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 182-83/Aphorism 327.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 6/Aphorism 2 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

<sup>191</sup> When Nietzsche speaks of the soul he regularly speaks of it in close connection with the body. For example he states, “We philosophers are not free to separate soul from body as the common people do; we are even less free to separate soul from spirit,” and “Deciding what is health even for your *body* depends on your goal, your horizon, your powers, your impulses, your mistakes and above all on the ideals and phantasms of your soul.” Ibid., 6/Aphorism 3 of the preface to the 2nd ed., and 116/Aphorism 120.

the philosopher can not help but to translate his physical state, especially that of ill-health, into either a healthy life affirming philosophy in which pain is transfigured into strength, or the opposite in which the philosopher's weakness is translated into what he understands as dismal thought. Nietzsche carries the distinction farther by examining what motivates philosophers of ill health:

The former [philosopher's of weakness] *need* their philosophy [*hat seine Philosophie* nöthig], be it as prop, a sedative, medicine, redemption, elevation, or self-alienation; for the latter [philosopher's of strength], it is only a beautiful luxury [*ein schöner Luxus*], in the best case the voluptuousness of a triumphant gratitude that eventually has to inscribe itself [*schreiben*] in cosmic capital letters on the heaven of concepts.<sup>192</sup>

The conclusion drawn by Nietzsche is that philosophers of ill-health (and for Nietzsche this has been the majority in history) seek to find reasons for their illness or physical incapacity. Consequently they end up inscribing this weakness *into* their philosophies, or in Nietzsche's words, it is their "distress that philosophizes." The reason ultimately stems from some type of guilt that leads them to think, "I am of ill-health therefore I must be guilty of some sort of transcendent infraction in the form of sin." Hence they need their philosophy to consequently find a reason for what they perceive as a painful existence. Whereas, for Nietzsche, existence needs no justification. One of the results of the connection between ill health and philosophy is a stifling seriousness that squashes humor.

On the other hand the philosopher of strength, indeed the philosopher who draws strength from their most severe pain, is the one who philosophizes, Nietzsche claims,

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 4/Aphorism 2 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

with a gratitude and pride. “Only great pain is the liberator of the spirit,”<sup>193</sup> says Nietzsche. Thus the lived body, in a sense, becomes a beautiful experiment in which inchoate physical states as well as pain are not given a *raison d’être* in “religious cravings” or any other transcendent referent. The body and its attendant states become the very substance of a creative, life affirming philosophy. Nietzsche even goes so far as to assert, “this art of transfiguration just *is* philosophy.”<sup>194</sup> Indeed the hermeneutical lens that Nietzsche’s philosophy demands could show “great pain” to mean the type of spiritual pain one undergoes because of the effacement of all the older values that gave meaning and purpose to European culture for centuries.

Nonetheless, Nietzsche’s understanding of physiological states and the role they play in our philosophizing allow him to maintain that:

The unconscious disguise [*unbewusste Verkleidung*] of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes frighteningly far—and I have asked myself often enough whether, on a grand scale, philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body [*Auslegung des Leibes*] and a *misunderstanding of the body* [*Missverständniss des Leibes*].<sup>195</sup>

One at this point might ask, “In what way then does laughter, humor, comedy or their lack play a role in terms of Nietzsche’s take on our physiological states, most notably pain and ill-health?” I believe there are two perspectives from which Nietzsche broaches this issue.

First, in a negative sense, those who suffer from sickness both in terms of life and physical health most often are less, if at all, humorous, at least in Nietzsche’s view. They

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 6/Aphorism 3 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 5/Aphorism 2 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

do not see humor in an existence that is painful especially when the reason for that pain often lies in what they see as their own sin and guilt. Simply put, life is no laughing matter to them. As a consequence, the philosophies of these types of thinkers tend to see life as a problem or as something that conceals the truth behind it and therefore something they must strive to understand. But echoing Heraclitus, Nietzsche states that, “One should have more respect for the *bashfulness* with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties.”<sup>196</sup> For Nietzsche, the resulting “wisdom” of these philosophies that seek truth behind appearance is sullen and hardly joyful. Alas, these philosophers come on the scene much too late in history when the instincts have already atrophied and thus life itself becomes an object of *reflection* and analysis instead of a life in which instinct provides its own vital kinesis. The supposed wisdom of these philosophers—and Nietzsche sees this lineage stretching at least from Socrates to Hegel—is a philosophy of life descending values.

Second, in a positive sense, when we are in an *agōn* with our own physiology and we triumph over pain can we then find the source for a rebirth; one that ought to be characterized by cheerfulness! The resulting philosophies of such a stance—and for Nietzsche these are rare types—engender life ascending values. Philosophy is not used as a crutch or a vehicle of explanation that seeks to justify life or find reasons as to why one exists, that is, as to the meaning of existence. Philosophy becomes something contingent, airy, always playing second fiddle to creative life itself that Nietzsche says, “means constantly transforming all that we are into light and flame, and also all that wounds us; we simply *can do* no other.”<sup>197</sup> This idea of the transfiguration of pain into philosophy

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 8/Aphorism 4 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 6/Aphorism 3 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

and the transforming of ourselves into light and flame is the creation of ourselves into works of art. And what lies at the heart of this art as an essential property? Humor and laughter:

[I]f we convalescents still need art, it is *another kind* of art [*eine andere kunst*]*—*a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a bright flame, blazes into an unclouded sky! Above all: an art for artists, only for artists! In addition we will know better what is first and foremost needed *for that*: cheerfulness [*die Heiterkeit*]*—*any cheerfulness [*jede Heiterkeit*], my friends!<sup>198</sup>

We may say that this art that Nietzsche has in mind is a cheerful play with appearance from which he gives many examples, a few of which are examined below. This notion of transfiguring “ourselves into light and flame,” that is, into “works of art” involves a play of memory and forgetting of being, “good at *not* knowing!,” as well as a call to let the ascendancy of appearance *scheinen* forth without the *need* to seek truth behind the appearance. Unlike the world of being, beautiful appearances disclose themselves to us in time. As such, they are impermanent. Yet this impermanence of becoming is exactly what Nietzsche would have us affirm, we finite beings of “light and flame” saying “yes” to indestructible life.

Nietzsche extends his deep appreciation of appearance as it relates to truth farther by stating that, “Perhaps truth is a woman who has grounds for not showing her grounds? Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—*Baubo*?”<sup>199</sup> The most notable thing about the witch Baubo was her ability to make the goddess Demeter laugh by raising her skirt and exposing herself. This laughter was not a response to some mundane occurrence but was

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 7-8/Aphorism 4 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 8/Aphorism 4 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

set amidst Demeter's own tragedy; the tragedy of the abduction of her daughter Persephone into the underworld by Hades. Nietzsche's appropriation of this myth once again highlights that it is radiant appearance as truth especially in its playful sense that can in part help constitute a joyful, humorous life. With echoes from *The Birth of Tragedy*, he proceeds to specify that what is needed to live well, to overcome pessimism as the Greeks did. One must remember, "to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in shapes, tones, words—in the whole Olympus of appearance!"<sup>200</sup>

Hence we see that what is inscribed at the outset of this text is the need for laughter if we are going to be artists and masters. But we must always remember that by "master," Nietzsche has in mind more than its denotative meaning. It is a term that has many layers and folds. At times master can refer to a singular person, and Nietzsche's criticisms often take the form of humor that find their target in specific individuals. It can also signify the totality of a historical figure's thought, what Nietzsche refers to as "master moralities." But I believe Nietzsche is ultimately asking us to be able to laugh at ourselves. Master moralities are nothing without the multitude of believers who make them up. Therefore, Nietzsche is asking that, at times, we find humor in our investment in these *historical* movements, even when we may believe them to be universal for all time (this in itself is ripe for laughter!). In a sense Nietzsche is calling on us to master ourselves, often through humorous examination, by interpreting our own prejudices. For

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. Moreover, Thomas Mann finds the same stress on appearance in Oscar Wilde who he quotes as saying, "For, try as we may, we cannot get behind the appearance of things to reality. And the terrible reason may be that there is no reality in things apart from their experiences," and "To me beauty is the wonder of wonders. It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mastery of the world is the visible, not the invisible." Mann states that, "we cannot help seeing that all these quotations might have come from Nietzsche." Thomas Mann, *Last Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), 157.

who is not the ultimate master of oneself if not *our self*? Who is ultimately responsible for one's own mastery if not *one's self*?

So laughter is Nietzsche's first salvo that signals a danger to the old philosophical order. However, he is quite aware that the danger works in another direction and in another way. This is the danger that results from the collapse of previously held values. One might say that it is the danger of nihilism or the "straying as though through an infinite nothing?"<sup>201</sup> What Nietzsche is attempting to inscribe in this epigram that will come to shape the tone and texture of *The Gay Science*, then, is the *necessity* of cheerfulness that is not only outwardly directed but at times inwardly directed. From Nietzsche's perspective, if one finds oneself in the midst of a tragic age, as we have come to understand it, one need not only initiate a reevaluation of all values to compensate for such a loss. One also needs cheerfulness in the form of laughter and the ability to frame existential situations in a comic light that are otherwise of the utmost seriousness: a comic light that helps detoxify this toxic, transitional time of history. Thus the inscription of laughter and humor that is characteristic of *The Gay Science* is more than literal, that is, more than words written on a page; the very *inscription* of cheerfulness in the text works at the same time in and through its very lightheartedness to move the text outward into the world of lived experience. Like a hot-air balloon that inflates, rises, and lifts, Nietzsche's humor all but abandons the text and gives us a new purview on our own existential circumstances.

Such laughter, however, perches Nietzsche on a very precarious tightrope. This tightrope stretched over the abyss of nihilism and the loss of all previously held values appears to be hardly an occasion for laughter. Nonetheless, laughter, humor and

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 120/Aphorism 125.

cheerfulness are what Nietzsche prescribes if we are to overcome the abyss and move from “man to overman.” In what is very metaphorical language, Nietzsche states in the preface to the second edition that in *The Gay Science*, “one is constantly reminded of winter’s nearness as well as of the *triumph* over winter that is coming, must come, perhaps has already come...”<sup>202</sup> Here I take winter to be a symbol of tragic, Dionysian wisdom dawning on humankind. This is why the laughter that Nietzsche recommends is *provocative* because it calls out to us.

Returning once again to the epigram that inaugurates cheerfulness and laughter into, as well as outside, the text, we see that there is a final play at work in this inscription. This revolves around the notion of home. The epigram reads, “This house is my own and here I dwell” and concludes with, “Over my front door.” How does Nietzsche understand “house” here? Is it Nietzsche’s literal house and literal front door? This is unlikely since Nietzsche was nomadic in the sense that he wandered according to the changing climate and its affect on his health. For me, home has the possibility of two things. First, home can refer to existence itself. It is one who is thrown into the world, in a word, into one’s home and so finds oneself *here*. The dwelling is a dwelling here on earth where one is tasked with becoming what one is by taking up one’s own authentic possibilities in the midst of, and in full recognition of, tragic knowledge.

The second possibility is that home refers to the body. The body is the phenomenon through, and in which all our perceptions occur and Nietzsche is preeminently aware of the need for a healthy body and therefore a healthy spirit. To be sure, these two are hardly distinct, antithetical terms and Nietzsche is constantly striving to show that pain and health can not help but work together in a strange alchemy of

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 3/Aphorism 1 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

significance. The body and the suffering that often times accompany it, as it did in Nietzsche's case for most of his life, require a translation into philosophy, indeed, a cheerful philosophy of affirmation. Both of these possibilities are not mutually exclusive. To be sure, finding oneself here in the world means also to realize oneself as an embodied being.

There is one last important element that appears at the beginning as well as the end of both editions of *The Gay Science*. These anchoring points will come to further characterize this book as a work that is well aware of the danger it presents, but is also as a harbinger of comedic and laughter provoking moments that erupt from this danger that keeps one in good health. At the end of the first section of the preface Nietzsche states, "*Incipit tragoedia*," or "the tragedy begins." The same is true of the conclusion of the first edition where Nietzsche writes "*Incipit tragoedia*" and then proceeds to announce the first appearance of Zarathustra in his corpus and the need for "going under" (*Untergang*). This notion of *incipit tragoedia* is echoed once again in aphorism 382 (the last section before the epilogue) in the second edition where it is stated, "it is perhaps only with it [a spirit that plays naively] that *the great seriousness* really emerges; that the real question mark is posed for the first time; that the destiny of the soul changes; the hand of the clock moves forward; the tragedy begins."<sup>203</sup> Nietzsche is clear that attempts to grasp and even shape what he sees as the most transformative philosophical issues of his time—the problem of nihilism—is necessarily linked to a playfulness and innocence. Indeed, it is only with a playful spirit that one can begin to grasp the tragic view of life.

Kathleen Higgins interprets Nietzsche's use of *incipit tragoedia* in a number of ways. The first is to reflect on the historical dimensions of Nietzsche's thought as it

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 247/Aphorism 382.

relates to actual Greek tragedy. She skillfully relates Nietzsche's insights about tragedy and its beginnings in the chorus to the subsequent development of the actual tragic hero who arrives on the Greek stage later, and who propagates only the already achieved mystical, transformed state of the spectator. For Higgins, the notion of *incipit tragoedia*, coupled with Nietzsche's introduction of Zarathustra, functions very similar to the tragic hero of ancient Greek theater who arrives on the stage as a later historical development well after the tragic chorus. Thus, whereas the tragic hero continues the transformational process of tragedy that allowed the Greeks to live cheerfully in the midst of their tragic age, Zarathustra arrives on the scene of later history (Nietzsche's own time) to continue the same type of insights. As Higgins states:

When the hero Zarathustra appears at the end of *The Gay Science*, I think that Nietzsche expects that the rest of the book has served the function of the chorus. ....By the book's end, Nietzsche hopes, we are capable of entering Zarathustra's perspective and seeing his achievement in a transfigured light.<sup>204</sup>

*The Gay Science* and its attempts at lightheartedness in the midst of what Nietzsche believes is the imminent, if not already collapsed, order of all older values functions as a tragic chorus that prepares the way for his tragic hero, Zarathustra.

Higgins also considers another historical perspective in terms of religious development. Zoroastrianism not only predates Christianity, but many of the most fundamental concepts found in Zoroastrianism, such as monotheism and the moral ideals of good and evil from this ancient Persian religion, were later appropriated by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nietzsche by turn cleverly appropriates the historical Zarathustra to

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<sup>204</sup> Higgins, *Comic Relief: Nietzsche's Gay Science*, 162.

his own Zarathustra, a later literary creation, to be the free spirit who brings into radical questioning religious historical development. In Higgins's words:

Zoroastrianism's influence on Judaism and Christianity allow Nietzsche to address his own tradition by means of his retelling of the Zarathustra story. "The tragedy" that "begins" with the historical Zarathustra includes the Judeo-Christian developments that follow him....What Zarathustra accomplished with his primal distinction, Nietzsche's comments suggest, is the initial move toward perspectivism.<sup>205</sup>

It is a humorous yet serious account of the historical Zarathustra with Nietzsche's later, literary creation. The cleft between them is nothing less than the move to perspectivism that he desires. Higgins's insights continue as she skillfully lays bare much of the comic twists and turns of the German language found in *The Gay Science*. Moreover, she continues her analysis on what she identifies as the main issue at hand—perspectivism and "the enterprise of *reconsideration*, of *identifying* errors."<sup>206</sup> What Higgins concludes is that *The Gay Science*, as well as the entrance of Zarathustra onto the "stage" of Nietzsche's thought, initiates a new type of thinking—light, free-spirited, unencumbered by the past—that careful readers will see as a comic relief to the previous tradition, while also maintaining the requisite seriousness.

While I agree with Higgins and consider her study a major contribution (as well as a joy to read), *my perspective* diverges on one critical point. Whereas Higgins sees *The Gay Science* as playing the role of the tragic chorus and Nietzsche's introduction of Zarathustra at its conclusion as a metaphor for the tragic hero who appears later and thus

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 163.

all is contained in the text, my interpretation takes a more comprehensive turn and expands outward. Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* and his Zarathustra initiate an often times playful, humorous perspective that operate as an eruption, one that bursts forth in an age of moralities that are winding down. Similar to the play of inscription seen above, the writing in *The Gay Science* and the figure of Zarathustra *overflow* the text; they are eruptions out of the text *into* philosophical history. In other words, these texts are not just to be read and subsequently left behind but enacted. Nietzsche's *fröhliche Wissenschaft* not only brings to the stage Zarathustra, perspectivism, and constant revision, but the work itself is a playful account of the kind of humorous, lightheartedness, and free-spiritedness—the comedy performed at the end of the tragedies<sup>207</sup>—needed to overcome tragic knowledge. The kind of cheerful science Nietzsche advocates pulls away the veil of comfort provided by metaphysical illusions *so that life reasserts its own free, instinctive, kinetic force in the wake of tragic knowledge.*

To conclude, consider Nietzsche's last line of the first aphorism of the preface to the second edition after his announcement of "*Incipit tragoedia.*" It reads, "Beware! Something utterly wicked and mischievous is being announced here: *incipit parodia*, no doubt."<sup>208</sup> "*Incipit parodia*" means "the parody begins." To parody something means to mock and imitate it in order to trivialize, hence its use as a comedic device. Parody from the Greek *paroidia*, from *para-* "beside or parallel to as in mocking" and *oide-* "song, ode," stays faithful in much the same way to the meaning of both tragedy and comedy that also harbor "*oide-*" as part of their etymology. Hence we see Nietzsche's

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<sup>207</sup> Although Nietzsche does not state this, nonetheless, like the three tragedies performed during the Dionysia, the "three tragedies" of history might well be ancient Greek thought, medieval thought and modern thinking with Nietzsche poised at the end of the modern era as the writer of comedy that at one time is an end but also a new beginning.

<sup>208</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 4/Aphorism 1 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

appreciation of framing these important issues of philosophy in terms of art, music, and song as evidenced by the root meanings of all three terms. This recalls his reflection in “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” that *The Birth of Tragedy* “ought to have *sung*” and not spoken.<sup>209</sup> Thus it is reasonable to conclude that with *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we will see these later works “singing” in the way that he had wished *The Birth of Tragedy* to have sung. And by use of imitation, Nietzsche will bring to an image or an appearance in a mocking manner those philosophical targets he wants to “sound out” in terms of their hollowness. There will be no recourse to some original form or logical formulation. There will be only an aesthetic will-towards-truth as appearances play out into the freely open. This strategy of parody will help begin to relieve the pressure of millennia so that subsequent thinking can return, “with merrier senses, joyful with a more dangerous second innocence, more childlike, and at the same time a hundred times subtler than one had ever been before.”<sup>210</sup>

## II. Becoming Interesting to Ourselves—Laughter and Perspective

Nietzsche’s release from the pressure of ill health in 1882, however temporary, reinvigorated his spirit and consequently his thinking. The “*gaya scienza*” also relieves the kind of heaviness that he believes has kept its pressure on philosophical thinking for millennia, keeping it from being the type of thinking that ought to be joyful and lighthearted; a thinking worthy of philosophy in that it sings and dances on the precipice

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<sup>209</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 6/Section 3 of the preface to the second edition, “An Attempt at Self-Criticism.”

<sup>210</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 7/Aphorism 4 of the preface to the 2nd ed.

of multiple perspectives. In the first aphorism titled, “The teachers of the purpose of existence” laughter comes to prominence in its relationship to truth and perspective, and reason and unreason, or one might say in its relationship to appearance.

The preservation of the human race, Nietzsche says in this laughter filled aphorism, “constitutes *the essence* of our species and herd.”<sup>211</sup> This instinct to preserve the human race creates, in a sense, a vacuum. The vacuum is the need for a reason or purpose as to *why* we exist, otherwise existence would operate on an essentially base level of mere survival. Hence Nietzsche refers to man and this need to know why he exists as someone who “became *interesting* to ourselves,” and who has over time become “a fantastic animal.”<sup>212</sup> This vacuum opens the door to various individuals who have come along and filled this void with reasons as to why we exist, that is, to the purpose of our being here. Nietzsche observes that in the long run, even those who appear most harmful, may be just as beneficial or useful to “the amazing economy of the preservation of the species” as those who appear as good. It is all a matter of perspective and the way in which one views history and life. Or one might say that it is the perspective one has, knowingly or not, within the time of which one lives providing the horizon of meaning for that period.

This gives rise to a tension between the individual and the species. Is it possible for an individual to genuinely harm the species anymore? Nietzsche claims that at this time in history, what we might call modernity, an individual may pursue what they think is their own good or bad desires. They may be rewarded or blamed according to the prevailing normative moral codes but nonetheless they are still a “promoter and

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 27/Aphorism 1.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 29/Aphorism 1.

benefactor of humanity.” One of Nietzsche’s insights in this aphorism is that the individual, regardless of its “good or bad” desires, is always subsumed beneath the species whether the individual is conscious of it or not. One individual relegated to its own perspective, its own “fly—and frog-like wretchedness,” cannot possibly have a birds-eye view of history and existence let alone discern its purpose. Even the most brilliant individuals have failed at recognizing this supposed perspective Nietzsche himself claims to have recognized. And this is just what he believes is worthy of a great deal of laughter:

To laugh [*lachen*] at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *from the whole truth* [*aus der ganzen Wahrheit heraus zu lachen*]*—*for that, not even the best have had enough sense of truth, and the most gifted have had far too little genius! Perhaps even laughter [*das Lachen*] still has a future—when the proposition ‘The species is everything, an individual is always nothing’ has become part of humanity and this ultimate liberation and irresponsibility is accessible to everyone at all times. Perhaps laughter [*das Lachen*] will then have formed an alliance with wisdom [*Weisheit verbündet*]; perhaps only ‘gay science’ will remain. At present, things are still quite different; at present, the comedy of existence [*Komödie des Daseins*] has not yet ‘become conscious’ of itself; at present we still live in an age of tragedy, in the age of moralities and religions.<sup>213</sup>

So, one of the things Nietzsche finds so laughter provoking is that we do not often *see* ourselves *as* laughter provoking. We are not yet capable of laughing at ourselves because he does not believe we possess the perspective needed—from that of “the whole truth”—to see ourselves as worthy of laughter (even this apparent contradiction of a “perspective”

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 27-28/Aphorism 1.

on the “whole truth” is humorous, but then again Nietzsche revels in laughter, contradiction and the play of appearances). We are always acting within the confines of our given historical reality and its attendant moral and ethical systems. We believe the appearance of these systems due to their various advocates to be universal and applicable to all times. It seems as if there will always be, Nietzsche believes, the kind of teachers who promote a meaning that lies behind appearance and who “from time to time decree: ‘There is something one is absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh at.’”<sup>214</sup>

Yet Nietzsche is saying that, as necessary as these systems including their errors may be, if one were to take up the perspective he supposedly has we would find that all of these systems and the meta-positions they engender are really only appearances on the stage of history and so within time. Rarely has anyone achieved the perspective (once again Nietzsche believes himself to be an exception) that the individual is always in service to the species and acting under the guise of good and bad or good and evil as he will have it in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. This lack of conscious awareness on the part of the subject—let alone whole peoples—is what Nietzsche finds so laughter provoking. It may *appear* to individual subjects, especially in Nietzsche’s and our contemporary era of self-assertion, that we are promoting our own destiny independent of any forces and that we are ends in ourselves, yet the *reality* is we and all of our systems both good and bad are one and all in service to the species. It is exactly these moral and ethical systems that are promoted by the teachers of the purpose of existence and beheld by their followers so that it appears as though existence has behind it some eternal truth to which people and whole cultures can take comfort in that Nietzsche finds additionally amusing: “All ethical systems hitherto have been so foolish and contrary to nature that

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 29/Aphorism 1.

humanity would have perished from every one had it gained power over humanity—all the same!”<sup>215</sup>

Recall that measure and self-forgetting are defining characteristics of comedy and provocative laughter. The notion of self-forgetting exhibited by the teachers of the purpose of existence above was called “lack of conscious awareness.” What accounts for the most serious transgression of measure and hence becomes open season for Nietzsche’s laughter is the failure—whether intentional or not—to recognize limit and to take into account the measureless. Just as great comic characters, to some degree or another, engage in self-forgetting so to do the people of various professions who surround us. A brief detour to *On the Genealogy of Morality* has Nietzsche offering us a similar account to that of the teachers of the purpose of existence in *The Gay Science*.

Just as he finds the teachers of the purpose of existence laughter provoking so too does he find comedic value in ascetic ideals and those who seek them. In the third essay in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, “What do ascetic ideals mean?” an example of this self-forgetting is given in terms of different people in different spheres of life. These include artists, historians, philosophers, and most of all priests. All of these require that some kind of meaning be given to life, that is, that they always display an impulse to find an ultimate truth that comforts them (and in the case of the priest comforts their believers). This always entails in some way the withdrawing from real life, the rejection of the world of becoming, and the failure to affirm our suffering. But for Nietzsche life needs no explaining, it needs no grand meaning, and the impulse to do so, to ask, “Why are we here?” especially under the pretext of suffering is nihilism. The important correlate to this though is Nietzsche’s beseeching us to love our fate or in his words, “*amor fati*.” What is

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 28-29/Aphorism 1.

valorized here is the affirmation of the very chaos that sends others searching for meaning elsewhere. This is precisely why Nietzsche says in *Ecce Homo*, “My formula for greatness is *amor fati*: that you do not want anything to be different.”<sup>216</sup> Perhaps Babich has it most succinctly when she says, “*amor fati* is the benediction of the Dionysian.”<sup>217</sup> In other words, what is to be loved, what is necessary, is the chaos that eternally returns.

Nietzsche provides only one way to counter the ascetic ideal and the impulse behind it—*comedy*, “[T]he ascetic ideal has, for the present, even in the most spiritual sphere, only one type of real enemy and *injurer*: these are the comedians of this ideal—because they arouse mistrust.”<sup>218</sup> Nietzsche is not exactly clear whether by comedians he means someone such as himself or a playwright (perhaps in the vein of Aristophanes) who ridicule the ascetic ideal through their respective works *or* that the actual comedians of the ascetic ideal are the very perpetrators of the ideal themselves because their very appearance arouses laughter thus providing the spectacle of a comedy. Either way, to “combat” the ascetic ideal is to hold it up for mockery and ridicule due to its self-forgetting and transgression of limit. Indeed, part of the ascetic ideal’s self-forgetting is that it is a closed system because the assertion that there is only one overarching meaning to all life makes life referential only to that positing.<sup>219</sup> In the desire to provide itself with some ultimate meaning, usually transcendent, the purveyors of the ascetic ideal have only looked inward and forgotten the joy one can take in eternal becoming which for

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<sup>216</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 99/Section 10 of “Why I Am So Clever.”

<sup>217</sup> Babich, “The Culture of Science as Art,” in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 11.

<sup>218</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 118/Third essay, 27.

<sup>219</sup> “In a certain sense, the whole of asceticism belongs here: a few ideas have to be made ineradicable, ubiquitous, unforgettable, ‘fixed’, in order to hypnotize the whole nervous and intellectual system through these ‘fixed ideas’.” *Ibid.*, 38/Second essay, 3.

Nietzsche is the agonistic interplay of all the value-creating forces in nature, none of which ever become fixed into permanence.

Returning to *The Gay Science* we are confronted with the question: “If not reason, what then is really at work in promoting the species at the expense of the individual?” In asking this question we must always keep in mind Nietzsche’s own endorsement of the individual, the *Übermensch* type, over the herd. He offers the following explanation:

This drive [*Jener Trieb*], which rules the highest as well as the basest of human beings—the drive for the preservation of the species—erupts from time to time as reason and passion of mind [*Vernunft und Leidenschaft des Geistes*]; it is then surrounded by a resplendent retinue of reasons and tries with all its might to make us forget [*vergessen*] that fundamentally it is drive, instinct, stupidity, lack of reasons.<sup>220</sup>

What is comedic, then, is that behind the appearance of purpose and reason in history with all the subsequent “resplendent retinue of reasons” really lies its opposite: unreason, instinct, chaos, recklessness, Dionysian madness. Only when this dynamic of the species over the individual has become “part of humanity,” which is to say only when one comes to recognize that they are a single voice within a multitude of voices that constitutes an *agon*, will this secretive laughter for the few and the rare become accessible to all. It is only then, as he states above, will “laughter have a future” and form “an alliance with wisdom.” When the game is up, so to speak, *gaya scienza* is what will remain.

Although Nietzsche does not mention Hegel here or anywhere in this first aphorism (he offers only poets as an example of teachers of existence), nonetheless Nietzsche’s phrasing, “reason and passion of mind” and “resplendent retinue of reasons”

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<sup>220</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 28/Aphorism 1.

offers the chance to present a contrast as well as a few similarities to Nietzsche's views. Hegel's lecture "Reason in History," published after his death as part of *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, argues that rationality is behind all motivations and appearances in history driving it forward in a progression to absolute consciousness. "Reason" he states, "...is both *substance* and *infinite power*."<sup>221</sup> Reason in the individual, a people, and a state are subsumed under the teleological pull of Spirit as it progresses towards itself as self-knowing. At one point Hegel asserts, "This restless succession of individuals and peoples, who exist for a time and then disappear, presents to us a universal thought, a category: that of *change*."<sup>222</sup> This notion of the "restless succession of individuals and peoples" as well as the idea of change seems to be *prima facie* in accord with Nietzsche's appreciation of change and becoming. However, a closer look reveals the similarities to be more apparent than real and a cause for laughter.

The difference between Hegel and Nietzsche is that, although Hegel recognizes the phenomena of change within the unfolding of Spirit, Spirit nonetheless achieves in the end wholeness and completion. Any production of difference is always subsumed under an over-arching homogeneity as a totality of self-knowing, self-same Spirit. Simply put, according to Hegel unreason and chaos are always *vanquished* by reason and order. Therefore, he would never accept Nietzsche's premise that unreason, error, and folly play *the* crucial role in history's development. Where Hegel sees the march forward of reason, Nietzsche is always quick to point out that far from originating out of the lofty heights of a transcendental plane, the genealogy of our moral and ethical valuations lie in a sort of

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<sup>221</sup> G. F. W. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert Hartman (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1953), 11.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

primordial grayness and fog as, for example, Michel Foucault has shown.<sup>223</sup> In addition there is not a single mention of laughter (*Lachen*), humor (*Humor*), comedy (*Komödie*) or cheerfulness (*die Frölichkeit*) in this particular lecture by Hegel. It purports to find only dispassionate reason in history.

To be fair, one ought not conclude that Hegel does not appreciate comedy and the laughter that accompanies it. As we saw in the introduction, Hegel, like Nietzsche, lauds comedy, particularly the genius of Aristophanes. Both philosophers grant that much of Aristophanes' gift lies in the fact that he was aware that he was part of the actual "tumult of history" of his time. This is to say, he was part of becoming yet was able through much of the (non)sense of his comedy to stand outside that tumult as a spectator, enabling him to write the kind of comedies that never betray the most profound philosophical issues. So we see Hegel's deep appreciation of Aristophanes and his craft just as we saw Nietzsche's appreciation of the same.

This however raises a point of contention concerning Hegel, Aristophanes, and even comedy in general. How can Hegel, the philosopher of reason and Spirit, appreciate Aristophanes even to the point of elevating comedy above the epic and tragedy? In other words, how can Hegelian rationality and Spirit appreciate comedy whose essence is absurdity and, if Nietzsche is correct, an inversion of reason? The answer I argue revolves around the *perspective* Hegel takes, which can be broached two ways.

First, Hegel is taking the perspective of the subject and ordinary consciousness. By adhering to a dialectical critique of consciousness, he is able to reflect on and critique consciousness. This is because in Hegel's account contradiction cannot stand, that is,

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<sup>223</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. II, Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 369-91.

contradictions must be resolved. By observing consciousness as a phenomenon, and what appears to it he is able to follow it as it moves from a lack of knowing to self-certainty. Because Hegel sees the world as inherently rational, all objects of inquiry must, in the end, conform to the subject. In other words, a subject's reason and the way they comport themselves in the world and see the world are preeminently important. To some degree this diminishes the importance of the object, comedy being no exception. With the stress put on the subject and consciousness, comedy as a phenomenon is important only in that it is represented *in* consciousness and, moreover, that it is *understood*, however absurd it may appear. One must, in a sense, "get one's mind right" if one is to achieve any self-certainty about the external world, which means the use of dialectical reason that relieves the tension of dualistic thinking.

Second, because the subject is both distinguished from the lived world and yet finds itself part of it, Hegel will maintain that all of our particular theories (in all of the sciences) can not be dislocated from the conceptual-historical framework that gives rise to them. In other words, even our theories are given through a perspective; one that locates them at a particular place and time in history. The same is true for religion and art, including comedy. They too are *historical* developments (as stated above Hegel treats them in the section on art and in the privileged position of just preceding the pinnacle of Spirit's absolute knowing). Hegel argues essentially that, historically speaking, comedy exceeds both epic and tragedy because behind the comedic mask lies an actor. In other words, the spectator *understands* what the mask really conceals. But what of the gods? Hegel claims:

With the vanishing of the contingent character and superficial individuality which imagination lent to the divine Beings, all that is left to them as regards their *natural* aspect is the bareness of their immediate existence; they are clouds, an evanescent mist, those imaginative representations. The essence of these having been given the form of *thought*, they have become the *simple* thoughts of the Beautiful and the Good, which tolerate being filled with any kind of content.<sup>224</sup>

The divine beings that once were present have now been vanquished by the comedies of Aristophanes and are now thoughts and concepts deprived of real existence.

Both of these reasons, indeed because of them, allow Hegel to laud comedy in all of its absurdity and still maintain the critical stance. Even a phenomenon such as comedy which may appear to exceed the limits of reason is, nonetheless, brought into reason's purview as well as his phenomenological investigation just like all other phenomena so that consciousness might correct itself as it relates to the world in which it is situated. In Hegel's words:

The scepticism that is directed against the whole range of phenomenal consciousness,...renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what truth is. For it brings about a state of despair about all the so-called natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions, regardless of whether they are called one's own or someone else's, ideas with which the consciousness that sets about the examination [of truth] *straight away* is still filled and hampered, so that it is, in fact, incapable of carrying out what it wants to undertake.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §746.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, §78.

Then there is the notion of transgression. Unlike Hegel, Nietzsche's view of comedy and laughter always comports itself to the transgression of limit. This is why Nietzsche refers to humankind's reconciliation back to nature as a "primal contradiction," because at its core the Dionysian *never* gets resolved. It is never "worked out," unlike Hegel's system of dialectical consciousness, onto a higher plane. As abysmal, the primal pain and joy are always *held together in their opposition*. Logic simply fails to account for this phenomenon. Hence comedy and laughter enact the very moment when limits are either torn asunder, or at least when limit is recognized as limit to then be subsequently targeted for demolition. Nietzsche's assertion that "the comedy of existence is not yet conscious of itself" expresses just this assertion. Nietzsche is saying that the successive appearances of moralities and tragedies that bring a certain order out of the chaos of nature and history and help perpetuate the species, that is, have demarcated their own limits out of themselves, have yet to be seen *as* appearances, that is, as successive appearances in history. To transgress this limit is to garner the perspective Nietzsche supposedly has and thus to be consciously aware of these appearances as appearances and so as a comedy of history unawares. The "fearless ones," or free-spirited individuals as subjects, are able to recognize the appearances for what they are. This is precisely why Nietzsche always promotes the robust individual—the *Übermensch* type—as one who treads lightly on the periphery of history, as one who is able to use history only as a springboard forward, as one who recognizes the burden of memory and so attempts to forget. "Healthy is who can't recall" Nietzsche says in "'Joke, Cunning and Revenge': Prelude in German Rhymes," which played the part of a preface for the first edition of *The Gay Science* and is itself a playful hint of the transgression that occurs in the rest of

the text, most notably the transgression that laughter and cheerfulness perpetrate. Hence, similar to Aristophanes, those fearless ones recognize that they too exist within a particular historical epoch yet through the conscious knowledge of successive appearances and illusion are also on the outside. Nietzsche also promotes this kind of notion. It is as if, on the one hand, we are swept along on the inside of the great stream of becoming but, on the other hand, when we take a different perspective we are also on the outside looking in at ourselves.

For Hegel, change is surely part of his thinking. Indeed Nietzsche in section 357 of *The Gay Science* (Book Five “We Fearless Ones”) asserts that, “We Germans are Hegelians even had there been no Hegel, insofar as we (as opposed to all Latins) instinctively attribute a deeper meaning and greater value to becoming and development than to what ‘is’; we hardly believe in the justification of the concept ‘being.’”<sup>226</sup> In one sense, then, Hegel also attributes change in and through the negating subject. Through sublation [*Aufheben*] the subject is able to negate what is initially given to consciousness into a new, higher level. As Tom Rockmore states, “Through this new concept [sublation], Hegel stresses that the developmental process of knowledge preserves what is true (*wahr*) in the prior moment.”<sup>227</sup> Yet Hegel’s conception of subject and change, as dynamic as it is, is always already an emergence towards Spirit (*Geist*). There is no standing out of the subject. Indeed the individual subject and its will appear to be sublated evermore as Spirit unfolds. Thus, although Hegel recognizes change as part of his phenomenology, and Nietzsche too recognizes this kind of change in Hegel, Hegel’s

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<sup>226</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 218/Aphorism 357.

<sup>227</sup> Tom Rockmore, *Cognition: An Introduction to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, 45. He quotes Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* §113, “Sublation [*Aufheben*] expounds its true twofold meaning which we have seen in the negative: it is at once a *negating* and a *preserving* [*Aufbewahren*].”

sense of change is still an ordered, structured change that never transgresses the limit of Spirit. It is as if the change manifested by the negating subject is never able to transgress the closed circuit of Spirit which provides the ultimate meaning to the world. For Hegel there really does not exist a Dionysian element (call it *Abgrund* or unreason) that appearances *scheinen* forth from. This is exactly what is so crucial to Nietzsche who retains this element as well as the more robust, will-to-power expressing, noble value creating subject.

Coming full circle, Nietzsche refers to this lack of consciousness on the part of humanity (who normally believe themselves to be aware of it) as “the comedy of existence.”<sup>228</sup> This lack of awareness, often manifested as the will to conscious illusion, that is, the need for the illusions provided by in this case the teachers of existence, provides fertile ground for comedy. The notion of being unaware, of self-forgetting has always been a cornerstone of much comedy, including that perpetrated by great thinkers. As Freyberg points out (albeit in reference to Sallis’s thought on comedy), “comedy involves the *playful* collapsing of differences, the *playful* transgression of limits proper to a human being.”<sup>229</sup> Often great comedic characters suffer from exactly this notion of self-forgetting, of not being able to distance themselves from their own existential quandaries so as to obtain a more enlightening and comedic perspective on their own situation. And for Nietzsche, there is hardly a difference in this case between “enlightening” and “comedy.”

In book one of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche locates an example of the eternal comedy of existence in the historical figure of the Roman emperor Augustus. In aphorism

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<sup>228</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 28/Aphorism 1.

<sup>229</sup> Freyberg, *The Thought of John Sallis*, 95.

36, titled “Last words,” Nietzsche discloses the play of concealment and unconcealment in terms of the masks that this ruler had worn during his reign. However, his inability to remain silent on his death-bed betrayed his “act”:

[H]e let his mask fall for the first time when he made it clear that he had worn a mask and acted a comedy [*Komödie gespielt*]*—*he had played the father of the fatherland and the wisdom of the throne well enough to create the proper illusion!  
*Plaudite amici, comoedia finita est!*<sup>230</sup>

Augustus’s failure in Nietzsche’s eyes to remain disciplined and silent let slip the notion to those around him the necessary illusions needed in order to rule. In other words, the illusions were unmasked. Notwithstanding the many achievements under the purvey of the Roman Empire as a whole, when we consider the level of brutality that also took place it was only under the guise, *the disguise*, of a mask that such terror could be perpetrated by a legitimate leader. Most notable though to Nietzsche was that behind this mask of Augustus was not concealed a tragedy, or drama, but *comedy*. This is not to say that Augustus did not take his rule seriously or that he saw his rule as something frivolous. The comedy lies in the fact that Augustus, unlike the vast majority who believed the illusions themselves to be real, was conscious of the play of appearances needed to rule. The great emperor Augustus saw himself perpetrating a comedy even amidst the bloodshed and terror of the time.

This criticism is also leveled at Nero in the same aphorism when Nietzsche states that, “The thought of the dying Nero—*qualis artifex pereo!*—was also the thought of the

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<sup>230</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 54/Aphorism 36. *Plaudite amici, comoedia finita est!* translates “Applaud my friends, the comedy is over!” These were also the last words spoken by the temperamental Beethoven on his deathbed.

dying Augustus: actor's vanity! Actor's prolixity!"<sup>231</sup> Both Augustus and Nero's purported last words were the kind of admission that saw life as shining appearance; they saw their capacity as rulers not just in political terms or in the skill needed to manipulate the mechanisms of government apparatus, but as lead actors on the stage of life. And, at least for Augustus, this stage was a stage of comedy where the follies of humankind played out.

In *Daybreak* Nietzsche speaks of this phenomenon although he uses men of Greek antiquity instead of Roman leaders. Because virtue (*aretē*) was highly prized by the Greeks, Nietzsche's claim is that many play-acted, that is, showcased themselves before others in a kind of competition of virtue:

Among the men of antiquity famed for their virtue there were, it appears, a countless number who *play-acted before themselves* (vor sich selber schauspielerten): the Greeks especially, as actors incarnate, will have done this quite involuntarily and have approved it. Everyone, moreover, was with his virtue in *competition* (*Tugend im Wettstreit*) with the virtue of another or of all others: how should one not have employed every kind of art (*alle Künste aufgewendet haben*) to bring one's virtue to public attention, above all before oneself, even if only for the sake of practice! Of what use was a virtue one could not exhibit or which did not know how to exhibit itself?<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid. "*qualis artifex pereo*" translates "I die, what a loss to art!" This notion of the play of appearance also brings to mind Friedrich Schiller's unfinished drama *Demetrius* based on the rule of Dmitry I of Russia who claimed to be the son of Ivan the Terrible and thus rightful heir to the throne. Although Tsar for a short time, this claim turned out to be false. Schiller's drama revolves around the unconcealing of Demetrius's real identity (that he was not a son of Ivan IV) and the responsibility of a ruler.

<sup>232</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 22/29. In this aphorism Nietzsche goes on to contrast the play-acting of Greek virtue with what he calls the Christian, "repellent flaunting of sin" that the sinner has "lyingly made up" suggesting that the Christian unlike the ancient Greeks consciously volunteers their sin as spectacle.

Nietzsche's insight, if he is correct, suggests that in Greek ethical life, virtue and acting were not mutually exclusive but were so closely mixed that the "play-acting" was involuntary, which is to say that it was unconscious. Acting, which in essence is a way to appear, was intimately tied to one's ethical standing.

There is however a danger that Nietzsche discerns here. When an "actor" of this kind—especially for example a Roman emperor—reveals the illusions necessary for the ruled to be ruled, then there is the danger for chaos and terror to return. Similar to the noble lies told for the benefit of the ruled in Plato's *Republic*,<sup>233</sup> Nietzsche is stressing the need for disciplined rulers who maintain the requisite silence. Hence his example of Tiberius, whom he claims, "was genuine and no actor!" and who was the "most tormented of all self-tormentors"<sup>234</sup> in that he underwent the pain of knowing the secrets and contradictions involved in political rule. Unlike Tiberius, both Augustus and Nero failed to remain silent and to take the truth of necessary illusions with them to their grave. They betrayed this truth unconcealing it as "the comedy of existence."

However, Nietzsche's comedic take here is not necessarily aimed at any certain individual, as apropos as the example of these Roman emperors may be. Nor is it aimed at any particular teacher of the purpose of existence or any specific believer of these teachers. Instead it is the largest scale of humanity and history itself that Nietzsche locates the comedy. From Nietzsche's perspective, existence (*Dasein*) and the unconscious parade of humanity who unknowingly promote the species over themselves, but think otherwise, is worthy of the greatest laughter. It is a perspective on the whole: a perspective in which life itself is the sum total of the great phenomena that appears.

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<sup>233</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, 414d-415e and 459c-d.

<sup>234</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 54/Aphorism 36.

Moreover his claim that, “We still live in the age of tragedy, in the age of moralities and religions” because “the comedy of existence has not yet ‘become conscious’ of itself” attests to his view that on whole we are only on the cusp, indeed hardly prepared, for the inevitable dawning of the tragic view of life. One that says that life is often painful and destructive and that there are no eternal rewards waiting for us behind life and at the end of life. Until this realization, the need for life to have a purpose and meaning will continue to be filled by countless heroes on “the stage” of history, whether theologians, moral and ethical philosophers, or even Nietzsche’s example of poets. Perhaps, if he sees himself as part of the eternal comedy of existence and the evidence surely points to this, Nietzsche too is a hero on this stage, albeit the kind of hero who hopes to proffer a move towards life ascending values as a counterbalance to the nihilism that he believes looms on the horizon of existence. To illustrate this, as well as the necessity of comedy as a response to this existential dilemma, he appropriates a key passage from Horace’s *Ars poetica*:

‘I myself, who most single-handedly made this tragedy of tragedies, insofar as it is finished [*sie fertig ist*]; I, having first tied the knot of morality into existence and drawn it so tight that only a god can loosen it—which is what Horace demands!—I myself have now in the fourth act slain all gods, out of morality! What is now to become of the fifth act? From where shall I take the tragic solution? Should I start considering a comic solution [*komische Lösung*]?’<sup>235</sup>

One might be tempted to suggest after reading this aphorism that Nietzsche suffers from *hubris*, that he sees himself as a new god that can “loosen” the knot of morality that has gripped existence. But this would be a misreading. For Nietzsche, all

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 132/Aphorism 153. The reference to Horace’s *Ars poetica* is lines 189-192.

gods must be overcome, but surely not to be replaced with another, including himself. If read in its entirety, this aphorism exhibits Nietzsche's irony and playfulness, especially when he states that he has slain the gods out of morality, the very phenomenon that gives rise to them in the first place. Moreover, the slaying of the old gods ultimately gives way to the need for comedy as a means to confront the "tragic solution" in a "fifth act." If Nietzsche sees himself as a hero in any sense, then it must surely be a kind of comic-hero, or even an anti-hero, that is attempting a furtherance of life ascending values and not a restoration to any previous historical norms. And even he as a "hero" would have to see himself and this bombastic task as a target for its own earth-grounding laughter.

And this is just what Nietzsche stresses. The heroes on the stage of life have their own shocking counterpart in the form of laughter. To be sure, Nietzsche's idea is not to laugh at any particular hero (however laughter provoking they might be at times); they are a necessity "by promoting a faith in life." Instead, he calls from the perspective of "the long run" of "the whole" because he notes:

[E]ach of these great teachers of a purpose was vanquished by laughter [*das Lachen*], reason and nature: the brief tragedy always changed and returned into the eternal comedy of existence [*Komödie des Daseins*], and the 'waves of uncountable laughter' [*Wellen unzähligen Gelächters*]<sup>236</sup>—to cite Aeschylus—must in the end also come crashing down on the greatest of these tragedians.<sup>236</sup>

Just like the comedy performed at the end of the tragedies at the Dionysia by the ancient Greeks, the heroes that have ascended the stage of history are in the end vanquished by laughter. However, notwithstanding all of this "corrective laughter," Nietzsche claims that human beings are the beings that still crave its teachers, beings who require *teachers*

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 29/Aphorism 1.

*of the purpose of existence.* The appearance of teachers then is necessary, even though the substance of their teachings, under the guise of reason or dutiful purpose, always betrays unreason, instinct, and a motivation to protect a certain kind of life they are promoting. It is these masks that betray comedy.

For Nietzsche nothing is more worthy of laughter for those free spirits, the “fearless ones” who are able to recognize the truth of our instinctual drives and impulses and who are consciously aware of the succeeding generations of the play of appearances that conceal these drives. In a sense, laughter plays just as important a role as the need for illusions; both are necessary for life. The ability to grasp this grand perspective, of standing out of any particular situation that may appear as the most solemn and important to them, that *understands that there are only perspectives* is a worthy goal and one that Zarathustra will soon come to embrace.

But what are we to make of Nietzsche’s views on truth and perspective? “Perspectivism” Nietzsche claims, “is the fundamental condition of all life.”<sup>237</sup> How can Nietzsche claim that the only thing human beings can have is a perspective while believing his perspective is of the whole? Is not a perspective of this kind exactly what he claims we ought not to try and take, indeed that is impossible to take “that of the whole” as if we were a divinity of some sort? Recall that he says, “To laugh at oneself as one would have to laugh in order to laugh *from the whole truth*—for that, not even the best have had enough sense of truth, and the most gifted have had far too little genius!”<sup>238</sup> I argue that this can be addressed two ways.

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<sup>237</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 4/Preface.

<sup>238</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 27/Aphorism 1.

First, Nietzsche might well be engaging in his own play on perspective. By this I mean that Nietzsche's perspective is less a "godlike" perspective and more of the kind of perspective suitable to someone human, all too human. It is only a grand perspective, that is, a perspective of perspectives in that his understanding of "the whole" does not entail some transcendent meta-position from which we have the luxury of standing completely outside the prescribed limits of our earthbound humanity. In other words, as a meta-perspective it is a perspective that is keenly aware of itself *as a perspective* and thus never succumbs to the temptation to step outside space, time and the world of becoming. Human beings must be content, indeed cheerful with the knowledge, that there is no "meta" position outside of nature from which one could judge existence as good or evil.

Second, if one were to analyze Nietzsche on purely strict, logical terms, his comments on perspective and the whole would surely be found lacking. Yet, this is exactly the kind of "restrictive" thinking he is trying to escape. Recall that, for Nietzsche, philosophy must be in service to life. And the lighthearted, cheerful, free-spirited life he is espousing in *The Gay Science* is the kind that utilizes humor to advance this particular kind of life at the expense of always being "logical." This point is expounded in aphorism 82 of book two where he compares the supposed disposition of the Greeks to the French. Here Nietzsche's claim is that logic is equated not only with lack of spirit but lack of humor as well:

The Greeks are indescribably logical and simple in all their thought; at least in their long good age they never wearied of this; as so often do the French, who all too gladly take a little leap into the opposite and actually only endure the spirit of logic when, through a series of such small leaps into the opposite, it betrays its

*sociable* civility, its sociable self-denial....The Greeks' sense of sociability was far less developed than that of the French is and was; that is why there is so little *esprit* in even their most spirited men; that is why there is so little humour [*geistreichsten*] in even their humorists [*Witzbolden*].<sup>239</sup>

For Nietzsche it is not that logic is not necessary or does not play a role at all, and as we shall see, he even claims that it is even necessary to promote a certain kind of life among its practitioners. His point in this aphorism is that the purely logical stance and those who may see everything only through its lens, suffer from a lack of energetic imagination and sociability (one can surely argue against Nietzsche on this point). Logic, claims Nietzsche, ought to be used in doses much like the “bread and water” of prisoners, that is, sparingly so that it may provide a minimum of sustenance. However, it should never be allowed to dominate and therefore ruin the spirit of “*sociable* civility.”

Moreover, the notion that we can locate certain tendencies in whole groups, in the way that Nietzsche appears to be doing, is itself ripe for laughter in that these types of sweeping judgments although they appear logical (“this group is all X” and “this group is all Y”) are in essence hardly valid. But even though it appears that Nietzsche believes these statements to be absolutely binding, this is deceiving and the deception is eventually unveiled. Consider book two, aphorism 95 where he says of the French politician and writer Nicolas Chamfort that he:

[W]as rich in depths and backgrounds of the soul—gloomy, suffering, ardent—a thinker who found laughter [*Lachen*] necessary as a remedy against life and who nearly considered himself lost on those days when he had not laughed [*gelacht*]—seems much more like an Italian, related to Dante and Leopardi, than a

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 82/Aphorism 82.

Frenchman! We know Chamfort's last words: 'Ah! Mon ami', he said to Sieyès, 'je m'en vais enfin de ce monde, où il faut que le cœur se brise ou se bronze—'.

Those are surely not the words of a dying Frenchman.<sup>240</sup>

Nietzsche held Chamfort, along with a few other French writers and thinkers, in high esteem because of their wit and passion. But here the laughter that Chamfort employed in his life as a way to forego disillusionment, the kind of laughter that was previously attributed to the French as opposed to the solemn logic of the Greeks, now belongs to the Italians. There certainly appears to be a contradiction but one that Nietzsche surely recognizes. He uses this contradiction as a weapon against those wielders of reason who would demand a rigid consistency that Nietzsche simply does not believe can be maintained in lived experience. We are our contradictions because lived existence often times outstrips formal logic. So in the end, we come to recognize that Nietzsche himself sees a certain fluidity and heterogeneity of traits—in a sense a coming and going of traits as opposed to a stable essence—that allows for a more dynamic subject that can navigate these multiple textures of life, both good and bad.

He does, however, state in aphorism 348 "On the origin of scholars" in book five that one may find certain idiosyncrasies behind the scholarly work of individuals. These idiosyncrasies betray what is motivating the kind of thinking they are undertaking. One of the examples he gives is that of Jews. In defense of them he says of logic:

A Jew, on the other hand, in keeping with the characteristic occupations and the past of his people, is not at all used to being believed [*glaubt*]. Consider Jewish scholars in this light: they all have a high regard for logic, that is for *compelling*

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 92/Aphorism 95. The French translates, "Ah, my friend, I am finally about to leave this world in which the heart must either break or plate itself with steel."

agreement by force of reasons [*das Erzwingen der Zustimmung durch Gründe*]; they know that with logic, they are bound to win [*siegen müssen*] even when faced with class and race prejudices, where people do not willingly believe them.<sup>241</sup>

Here logic serves the particular life of Jewish culture, that in Nietzsche's time especially, was under pervasive racism and discrimination (and was to become even more so as the next few decades dawned in Germany and elsewhere on the continent). Indeed, Nietzsche ends this aphorism to say that Europe, especially Germans, owe a great deal of reverence to Jews and Jewish thinkers for "making its people more logical, for *cleaner* intellectual habits."<sup>242</sup>

We can also locate the ebb and flow of logic and humor in a poignant example from more recent history. In his book, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, Elie Wiesel presents his own thoughts on the inversion, indeed the *perversion* of logic and reason during the period of National Socialism in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Wiesel brings this notion of inversion to prominence through the image of The Tower of Babel. The Holocaust is described this way by Wiesel:

Mankind, jewel of His creation, had succeeded in building an inverted Tower of Babel, reaching not toward heaven but toward an anti-heaven, and there to create a parallel society, a new "creation" with its own princes and gods, laws and principles, jailers and prisoners. A world where the past no longer counted—no longer meant anything.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 206/Aphorism 348.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 207. I can't help but think here of Nietzsche's deep admiration for Spinoza.

<sup>243</sup> Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 239.

Just as Guido's world was inverted in the film *Life is Beautiful*, so too was Wiesel's world, and the world of the Jews, and other European minorities in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Or one might say *the world* underwent an inversion and a withdrawal of all that was familiar. Wiesel says that by this inversion that Jews were prisoners "in a social and cultural void," "another universe," a universe "so distorted, so unnatural."

Yet, in the midst of this nihilistic void, Wiesel also relates the story of the French-Jewish humorist Tristan Bernard who was arrested by the Germans; "[A]fter months in hiding, his fellow prisoners were surprised by his smiling face. 'How can you smile?' they asked. 'Until now, I have lived in fear,' he said. 'From now on, I shall live in hope.'"<sup>244</sup> What is evident then in Tristan Bernard's account is a *non-logical* giving over into opposites. Bernard feels most free *after* his capture. His humor and ability to smile happens *in the midst* of the most tragic and severe event of his life. What good would logic do for Bernard Tristan at this point? The reign of National Socialism marks the very closing of logic and the ability to persuade by rational argument. As the most irrational of events, it marks out the very limit of logic and reason whose ability to persuade was no longer felt. Yet in this desert of reason, laughter found a home amidst madness.

If we were to appraise this in terms of Nietzsche's views, it becomes evident that the logic that he sees permeating Jewish thinking in his time, which helped further the life of this culture, met its fate in the madness of National Socialism. I would argue that for Tristan Bernard the ability to appear cheerful and smile even in the midst of this tragic finale of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is an act of extreme courage. This courage comes from the conscious awareness that human absurdity may appear as comic, even if set in the most horrific of circumstances, allowing one to surmount it in order to conquer despair. Those

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 221.

who come to realize the play of appearance made manifest by many perspectives and the play of reason and unreason should begin to see the “eternal comedy of existence.” The necessity of a “*gaya scienza*,” that frees thinking into a new playful, but still serious space, where we can stave off disillusionment enabling us to become the noble beings that we are.

### III. The Fool’s Cap and the Play of Appearance

Nietzsche’s thoughtful appraisal of comedy and appearance continues throughout the rest of *The Gay Science*. Because Nietzsche rejects any essence that somehow lies behind an appearance, he refuses to accept then that appearances are only a dim counterpart to essences. He states in aphorism 54 of book one, “What is ‘appearance’ [*Schein*] to me now! Certainly not the opposite of some essence [*Wesens*].”<sup>245</sup> Life itself is appearance, or better yet “beautiful shining.” Nietzsche is at pains to disavow any belief in a binary appearance/essence distinction. He further characterizes life and appearance as if one were dreaming, but conscious that one is dreaming. Indeed, what are dreams if not appearances and if life consists of things that appear—objects, other subjects—what then is life if not the conscious awareness of these appearances? He states, “appearance [*Schein*] is the active and living itself, which goes so far in its self-mockery [*Selbstverspottung*] that it makes me feel that here there is appearance [*Schein*] and a will-o’-the-wisp and a dance of spirits and nothing else.”<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 63/Aphorism 54.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

In terms of comedy this idea of existence or life as appearance works in two ways. First, as we saw in the first section that focused almost exclusively on *The Birth of Tragedy*, comedy was tragedy's counterpart and equal that disclosed the Dionysian impulse in its own way. Comedy, along with tragedy, allows the spectator to behold those aspects of existence that are painful or absurd. They allowed for the discharge of Dionysian madness through beautiful Apollonian appearances so that we may say "yes" to life and not succumb to disillusionment.

The second way appearance works is that by looking at life itself as an appearance without the need for essences behind it generates its own comedic moments. These comedic, laughter provoking moments are born out by the "actors" who themselves appear consciously unaware of the kind of insight Nietzsche believes he has. The supposed serious business of bustling humanity, of people consumed with their own self-importance, is really fleeting appearances that help constitute the "eternal comedy of existence." So, unlike the first way, where appearance works in a sort of pre-established arena where we consciously gather, in this second aspect it is not necessary that one gather into a theater as a spectator to witness a tragedy or comedy. This distinction between the proper theater of comedy found in the early work *The Birth of Tragedy* and the kind of comedy one can locate in lived reality (one's own lived reality and the appearance of others) is made clear by Nietzsche later in *The Gay Science* when he states:

Whoever has enough tragedy and comedy in himself probably does best to stay away from the theatre; or, should there be an exception, the entire event—including theatre and audience and poet—becomes the actual tragic and comic

spectacle to him, so that the piece that is performed means little to him by comparison.<sup>247</sup>

In what is the remarkable workings of irony, existence itself many times harbors its own comedic elements as we appear before each other deceptively unaware in the play of humanity. We become the cause of provocative laughter.

Nietzsche proffers many good examples of this second understanding of appearance in *The Gay Science*. Aphorism 30 of book one provides a model example. This aphorism titled “The comedy of the famous [*Komödienspiel der Berühmten*]” discloses the motivations that “famous men” undertake in order to maintain the appearance of their fame, which Nietzsche claims “they need.” His example of famous men (*Männer*) are politicians (apparently women are not considered here, an omission that provokes its very own cautious laughter). Nietzsche offers a keen insight into the play of appearances that these men of fame undertake; a play of concealment and unconcealment that to the conscious eye of the aware observer discloses some of the most sublime comedic moments.

These famous men, says Nietzsche, typically act with “ulterior motives” so that they may appear to others in an advantageous light. Accordingly he states, “from one they want a piece of the splendour and reflected splendour of his virtue; from another the fear-inspiring aspects of certain dubious qualities that everyone knows him to have”<sup>248</sup> and so forth. Depending on those who appear as his company, he gravitates to the required mask of his own appearance. As Nietzsche points out in this quote, this play of appearance is often a doubling, that is, a “splendour and reflected splendour” or one

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 87/Aphorism 86.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 52/Aphorism 30.

might say “a shining of what *das Scheinen*.” For many, especially politicians, this doubling or layering of appearance provides a cushion from which to absorb the accolades, fears or sympathy they seek from others, as well as give those who bestow these praises an object for their attention. For Nietzsche there is no distance between the wearing of masks and the comic—the masks are us. But how exactly?

If we consider Plato’s cave-like image at the beginning of book seven in the *Republic*, then to a large degree politics is based on images, that is, the phenomenon of appearance. In turn, when we take into account Nietzsche’s view that no essence lies behind appearance, then politics as an endeavor is *least tethered* to some original form or essence, such as justice, even though we believe it to be or believe that it ought to be. If justice and the nature of the political is anything in Nietzsche’s scheme, then it is certainly the understanding, appreciation, and ability to manipulate appearance to one’s advantage. The typical politician seeks his own advantage and that most likely means an advantage that asserts his power. However, this power is the *image* that the politician projects to his followers. In other words, it is one’s appearance that is in service for politicians and other men of fame. Justice, then, ends up as a phenomenon that is intimately tied to appearance and not something distinct, distant and transcendent. “And so the surroundings and exteriors of famous men die off continually”<sup>249</sup> says Nietzsche. Appearance then is at one time something very powerful and yet is something that can be shed like the skin of a snake. The potency of appearance and its chameleon-like character is its power...but for Nietzsche also its comedic value.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> This obviously raises the question of the intersection of political power and justice. What if a politician *believes* justice to be a charade, that is, to a large degree the play of appearance? Moreover, if justice is a charade that the politician is aware of and thus can manipulate, then would not the consummate politician

Nietzsche describes this phenomenon of famous men and the play of appearance in terms of comedic stagecraft. The constant shuffle of props as well as the coming and going of friends and allies that reinforce a particular appearance all but fulfill the spectacle of a comedy. Accordingly he states:

Their friends and allies belong, as I said, to these stage properties [*Bühnen-Eigenschaften*]. What they want, however, must stand all the much more firmly and unshakeably and be splendidly seen [*weithin glänzend stehen bleiben*] from afar; and this, too, sometimes requires its comedy [*Komödie*] and its theatrics [*Bühnenspiel*].<sup>251</sup>

For Nietzsche, notwithstanding the seriousness of the political and its objectives, the individual characters that make up the political as well as their sycophants are nothing short of comical. Moreover, Nietzsche stresses the need for a more detached, birds-eye perspective if one is to see the laughter-provoking scenes generated by these so called “famous men.” One is, of course, always situated within a state with its political apparatus and one may also be involved to a healthy extent in the important issues of the time. Yet the perspective Nietzsche is advocating is both a figurative and literal stepping back, allowing one to be on the outside looking in. The result? Nothing less than existence as a comic stage where famous men betrayed by their motivations appear *for us* as “*glänzend... Komödie*.” The word “*glänzend*” is translated as “splendidly.” However, keeping faithful to Nietzsche’s high regard for the image as that which appears, *glänzend*

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be an *Übermensch* and one who is able to move the state beyond the conventional morality of good and evil? I would argue that Nietzsche would make the distinction between those leaders that understand ruling to involve the play of appearances (and who may only look out for private, narrow gain) and those rulers who not only understand that ruling involves the play of appearance but utilize it to advance noble, aristocratic, life ascending values, even if those ruled believe *their* justice refers to some original, transcendent referent.

<sup>251</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 52/Aphorism 30.

can also be translated as “shining.” Once again, to appropriate Shakespeare, “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players” on this stage of life, radiantly shining for each of us in what often times are comic moments amidst the most serious of pursuits.

Some might object that Nietzsche is disparaging politics, the political process and those who participate in them. That politics has all of its serious issues—going to war, civil equality, economic justice, to name a few—is hardly an occasion to disassociate oneself from it, let alone see it as comic. However, although it may be least apparent, the opposite is true. To appreciate this one has to, as always with Nietzsche, navigate the many masks that he wears. In a strange irony, Nietzsche could quite convincingly be arguing that if one were to engage the political in a serious manner, that is, if one were predisposed to effect some sort of social change by direct and frequent participation in the political process, then to take the political seriously there is required not a full immersion into the political currents but a healthy *distance*. Often times when one is immersed in something directly, one’s perspective of the whole is diminished. How often have we provided our time (and financial assistance!) to a political figure or cause that we thought we understood and believed in and then became disillusioned as either little changed or the opposite took effect? From a distance, one has the advantage to see what is motivating many or most of its practitioners, allowing one not only to understand better the phenomenon at hand but perhaps generating some well needed laughter at the spectacle of “famous men” and their “stage properties.” With the healthy perspective of distance we are better judges of those who hold political power than those who are close, but unknowingly relegated, to stage props.

This observation of humanity by Nietzsche, in this case the intersubjectivity of so called “famous men,” takes place from a distance. It occurs from an anonymous place within the space of the shining of appearance, which allows him to feel the power that results from these appearances in their very play. In part, this power consists of the joy one gets from the conscious knowledge of these illusions *as* illusions. It is, in a sense, the reward of the transgression Nietzsche feels he is making through this conscious awareness of this play of appearance. One that has not “yet become conscious of itself” to others but to him, is nothing less than the finest comedy. As a result, existence is likened by Nietzsche to a state of dreaming where Apollonian images *scheinen*:

[A]mong all these dreamers, even I, the ‘knower’, am dancing my dance; that the one who comes to know is a means of prolonging the earthly dance and thus is one of the masters of ceremony of existence [*den Festordnern des Daseins*], and that the sublime consistency and interrelatedness of all knowledge [*die erhabene Konsequenz und Verbundenheit aller Erkenntnisse*] may be and will be the highest means to *sustain* the universality of dreaming, the mutual comprehension of all dreamers, and thereby also *the duration of the dream*.<sup>252</sup>

This perspective allows Nietzsche and any conscious observer of human folly not only to bear the tragedies and moralities that still grip life but to begin to twist free of them into a new, cheerful thinking. It is a space in thought where these tragedies and moralities start to lose their force and dissolve into “the eternal comedy of existence.” Accordingly, we see then that comedy and serious matters are hardly antithetical just as we saw with tragedy and comedy that often times mingle in close proximity so that each bends and folds into the other, sometimes giving over into one the other yet able to remain distinct.

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 63-64/Aphorism 54.

Nietzsche continues his analysis and appreciation of appearance as it relates to comedy and laughter in the critical aphorism that concludes book two. However aphorism 107, “Our ultimate gratitude to art,” treats appearance in a much different way than we have seen in *The Gay Science* thus far. In this aphorism, he looks at existence as the phenomenon of appearance and art as the most sublime kind of appearance. By doing this we hear the continued reverberations of his most important insights from *The Birth of Tragedy*. This aphorism not only reiterates Nietzsche’s profound belief in the necessity of art, it also showcases laughter and folly in the most significant way, whereas *The Birth of Tragedy* concentrated mainly on tragedy.

In this aphorism Nietzsche uses art as a “counterforce” to science. Recall that in the preface to the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” which was published in 1886 only a year before *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asks, “what indeed is the meaning of all science, viewed as a symptom of life? What is the purpose, and, worse still, what is the *origin* of all science? What? Is scientific method perhaps no more than fear of and flight from pessimism? A subtle defence against—*truth*?”<sup>253</sup> Nietzsche is concerned with science in terms of how it affects life. More specifically, he sees it not as many of his contemporaries see it, which is the overwhelming tendency to treat it as if it is the supreme method of disclosing the deepest truths. In other words, many believe that science describes and understands the world as it actually is. But for Nietzsche the theoretical tendency is a fleeing in the face of Dionysian truth, which is to say tragic knowledge, because it veils this truth with its own Apollonian illusion in the form of a runaway theoretical optimism. The very premise of science rests not only on the quest to discover truth by its own method but it also rests on the notion that life itself

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<sup>253</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 4/Section 1 of the preface to the second edition.

is a problem that needs to be “fixed,” a premise that Nietzsche rejects. Nietzsche reverses this, viewing science as a problem and something hostile to life and unable to come to grips with tragic knowledge: “a problem with horns” he says in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

In aphorism 107 Nietzsche posits art as a counterpoint to science. It is the phenomenon that is best suited to deliver us from disillusionment that results from the failure of science to “correct” existence. Thus he states:

Had we not approved of the arts and invented this type of cult of the untrue [*Unwahren*], the insight into general untruth and mendacity that is now given to us by science [*die Wissenschaft*]<sup>254</sup>—the insight into delusion and error as a condition of cognitive and sensate existence—would be utterly unbearable. *Honesty* [*Redlichkeit*] would lead to nausea and suicide. But now our honesty has a counterforce [*eine Gegenmacht*] that helps us avoid such consequences: art, as the *good will to appearance* [*guten Willen zum Scheine*].<sup>254</sup>

First, what is newly apparent in this aphorism of *The Gay Science* is that Nietzsche is less hostile to science. The tone is less an outright rejection of science and more accepting of science, but only under the guise of its intrinsic limits. In other words, it recognizes the value of science by pointing out the very limits that science can never overcome. This was certainly less evident in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where science was harshly critiqued and even personified in the figure of Socrates who championed dialectical reasoning. There is little doubt that at the conclusion of *The Birth of Tragedy*, art was seen as the unquestioned champion of man’s “highest task” and the “greatest metaphysical activity.” But what is striking here is Nietzsche’s claim that art too, like science, is its own type of “untruth” indeed, a “cult of the untrue.” Hence we see a more balanced tone between art

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<sup>254</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 104/Aphorism 107.

and science than we did in *The Birth of Tragedy*. One is compelled to ask then, does art still retain the same status over science as it did in *The Birth of Tragedy*? And if so, What is the difference? The answer to the first question is yes. However, the second question requires scrutiny.

What Nietzsche is preeminently concerned with here is honesty. Honesty (*Redlichkeit*) has a more nuanced meaning in German. It denotes more than the general prohibition against telling untruths in that it is mainly focused on the scholarly work of academia, which in Nietzsche's time was the work done by thinkers that made up the totality of sciences the Germans called *Wissenschaft*. Thus it is aimed at intellectual honesty as the cohesiveness that binds all the sciences together, including the humanities.

Nietzsche's critique is that science is never free of error "as a condition of cognitive and sensate experience." Science requires its own necessary illusions in order to function at all.<sup>255</sup> However, we expect science and its practitioners—those concerned with the truth—to be least likely to utilize illusions because we equate truth with something transcendent and fixed. Most people are either unaware of this dynamic or do not believe it. Posited science, for them, is describing the world the way it really is because it assumes that the fixed, rigid realm of Being lies behind the world as its guarantor. Hence Nietzsche's assertion is that if one were to exercise intellectual honesty, or *Redlichkeit*, then the truth of science and its method could only lead to disillusionment (literally the taking away of the illusion). To reiterate, this is not to say that Nietzsche is

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<sup>255</sup> Hans Vaihinger says in *The Philosophy of 'As if'* "That life and science are not possible without imaginary or false conceptions was also recognized by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche early observed that such invented and therefore erroneous conceptions are unconsciously employed by men to the advantage of life and science." *The Philosophy of 'As if'* trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 2001). This "early observation" of Nietzsche's surely refers to his unpublished essay "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" (1873).

opposed to science and its practice, but only that at its heart lies the type of “untruth” that few people are aware of or fail to acknowledge. Hence it is once again a failure of *Redlichkeit*, of honesty, that Nietzsche finds as the problem. Somewhat similar to the kind of nausea we saw with Sartre, a truly honest appraisal of science, Nietzsche believes, “would lead to nausea and suicide.”

But of course Nietzsche, the philosopher *of life*, does not want us to take our own life. Instead he would have us recognize these illogical “foundations” and irrational beginnings of science and the subsequent need for art. It is when philosophers of all people fail in this recognition that comedy ensues. Indeed this kind of self-forgetting is at the heart of almost all great comedy, and for Nietzsche counts as one of the severest transgressions in his catalogue of crimes.

There is, however, an important distinction that must be made between that of memory related to history and the self-forgetting intrinsic to comedy. This comic self-forgetting that is tied to the philosopher’s epistemological enterprise must not be confused with the type of healthy unhistorical thinking Nietzsche advocates in the essay, “On the uses and disadvantages of history for life” in the *Untimely Meditations*. In this essay the idea that one can “live almost without memory”<sup>256</sup> is tied to happiness, history, and action. Nietzsche uses the image of grazing cattle that live contently because they live unhistorically in that they do not burden themselves with the past and are unaware of the great stream of becoming they are part of. For the human being though, memory can be a burden if it becomes oppressive. If the human being is unable to forget, to de-memorialize at least to a large extent the past and is, “thus condemned to see everywhere

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<sup>256</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 62/1.

a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being.”<sup>257</sup> This kind of burdensome memory would lead to inaction much in the same vein as we saw above with lethargy in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche goes on to stress that both, “*the unhistorical and the historical are necessary*”<sup>258</sup> although he characterizes the unhistorical “as being more vital and more fundamental”<sup>259</sup> to the action of a healthy individual.

And this is where we see the difference between science, art, and their respective illusions. Nietzsche’s appreciation of art, including the appearances that constitute both tragedy and comedy, are indeed appearances but of a much different kind. Unlike science, art “as the *good* will to appearance” (Nietzsche’s emphasis) allows us to derive sublime pleasure from our own creations. “*Good will*” here denotes the kind of will that recognizes appearance *as* appearance and does not attempt to seek meaning behind the appearance. In other words, it is a reveling in appearance without prejudice. Nietzsche states that with art, “We do not always keep our eyes from rounding off, from finishing off the poem,”<sup>260</sup> which is to say that art hovers before us as if it were a mirror. Whereas with science its “function” is almost always in service to the kind of life that seeks to correct existence and devalue the world of becoming. This is why it has always been necessary for science to posit the unchanging world of being behind appearance: the same kind of positing we saw in “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” above.

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 62/1.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 63/1.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 104/Aphorism 107.

By appearing to ourselves in the form of art, we are able to bear and even affirm the changing world of becoming where we find ourselves at the mercy of time, change, cause and effect, but most importantly tragedies and follies:

As an aesthetic phenomenon [*ästhetisches Phänomen*] existence is still *bearable* to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience [*gute Gewissen*] to be *able* to make such a phenomenon of ourselves. At times we need to have a rest from ourselves by looking at and down at ourselves and, from an artistic distance, laughing [*lachen*] *at* ourselves or crying *at* ourselves; we have to discover the *hero* no less than the *fool* [*den Narren*] in our passion for knowledge; we must now and again be pleased about our folly [*froh*] in order to be able to stay pleased about our wisdom! And precisely because we are at bottom grave and serious human beings and more weights than human beings, nothing does us as much good as the *fool's cap* [*die Schelmenkappe*].<sup>261</sup>

Unlike the world of being, which is posited outside of space and time in a realm that can never truly be bridged, art allows us to distance ourselves from ourselves within the world of becoming because it allows us within our space and time to hold up pieces and moments of ourselves for reflection. On the one hand, we are part of the stream of becoming, on the other hand, art allows us a reprieve to behold ourselves within this stream. For Nietzsche it is the only significant way we can bear and affirm the contingent world of becoming that we are part of.

What is even more evident in this aphorism is Nietzsche's appreciation of folly and laughter as it relates to the kind of *Redlichkeit* he is speaking about. Nietzsche

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 104/Aphorism 107.

stresses that if we are to remain faithful to the kind of beings that we are—human, all too human beings—then honesty really means recognizing the kind of dishonesty inherent in our desire for knowledge. In other words, there is a lawful and fluid play between honesty and dishonesty that Nietzsche recognized as far back as 1873, when he wrote in “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” that, “The feeling that one is obliged to describe something as red, another as cold, and a third as dumb, prompts a moral impulse which pertains to truth; from its opposite, the liar whom no one trusts and all exclude.”<sup>262</sup> Perhaps Nietzsche is suggesting that the liar—the artist and/or the philosopher of Zarathustra’s *strain*—really is the truth teller because the liar, especially through the analysis of language, challenges the “lawful” and supposed universal designation of things. In this context then art, as a “cult of the untrue,” really is a truth teller. This was not lost on Pablo Picasso who professed, “Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth.”<sup>263</sup>

When we locate this aphorism in the context of *The Gay Science* and its call to release thinking from the kind of heaviness that has dominated it until Nietzsche’s time (a heaviness characterized by imperatives and “goal oriented” metaphysics such as Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit), we find again a playfulness between folly and seriousness and between science and art. If our science and knowledge are to be taken seriously, and more importantly if they are to be honest, then laughter, folly and comedy are necessary counter-elements. They help to bring balance to the lawfulness of all knowledge seeking endeavors. Why exactly do we need folly to help achieve this?:

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<sup>262</sup> Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 146.

<sup>263</sup> Pablo Picasso, “Picasso Speaks,” trans. Marius de Zayas for *The Arts* (New York, 1923).

[W]e need it against ourselves—we need all exuberant, floating, dancing, mocking, childish, and blissful art lest we lose that *freedom over things* [Freiheit über den Dingen] that our ideal demands of us. It would be a *relapse* [Rückfall] for us, with our irritable honesty [*reizbaren Redlichkeit*], to get completely caught up in morality and, for the sake of the overly severe demands that we make on ourselves, to become virtuous monsters and scarecrows. We have also to *be able* to stand *above* morality—and not just to stand with the anxious stiffness of someone who is afraid of slipping and falling at any moment, but also to float and play above it! How then could we possibly do without art and with the fool [*Narren*]—And as long as you are in any way *ashamed* of yourselves, you do not yet belong among us!<sup>264</sup>

It is clear that Nietzsche equates art, especially comedy and the fool, with freedom. Unable to see folly in our endeavors, it is as if we are condemning ourselves and the way in which we practice science and the quest for knowledge, to the kind of oppressive weightiness that Nietzsche's thinking hopes to free us. This thinking is characterized by transgression that says "no" to imperatives, that "floats and plays" outside of any syllogistic structure, that is out of step with the *march* enough so that it *dances*. If necessity that has traditionally been allied with Being has any role at all, it is that art and folly are what is necessary as they temper our lives within the contingent world of becoming. They allow us to remain free or, as Nietzsche puts it in quasi medical terms, art as medicine, keeps us from relapsing so that we do not lose the very freedom over the things we seek to understand. Especially as they are manifest in art, folly and laughter allow us the distance necessary, not only from the serious work that we do as human

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<sup>264</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 104-05/Aphorism 107.

beings, indeed “more weights than human beings,” but it allows for us to distance ourselves *from ourselves*. All of this occurs within the world of becoming so that we can showcase our folly and in turn reground our scientific and philosophical excess back to the earth. And because “ground” has a long history within the Western philosophical tradition this notion of a regrounding that returns to the earth is very different from this history. It is to see these practices under the auspices of their intrinsic limits and the illusions they employ. It is to see the endeavors of science and philosophy as part of the world of nature, that is, of becoming where we are subject to its flux and chaos and yes, to affirm all this as necessary in the manner of *amor fati*. Hence this “ground” is far from the ground that guarantees certainty, it is in essence an *abgrund*.

To be sure we can find just such an image of this crazy mixture of seriousness and folly much farther back in philosophical history than Nietzsche states here. As was related in the Introduction, Thales was engaging in his own pursuit of knowledge and discovery in the form of astronomy. While looking up and making his astronomical observations, Thales forgot himself and stumbled into a well, much to the mirth of a servant girl. If this image teaches us anything, then it surely is that folly and wisdom are aligned and not antithetical. Nietzsche recognizes this about “the first philosopher of the West” as well. In *Philosophy During the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche is trying to show the type of creative genesis that lies behind the scientific edifice that will come to dominate thinking for millennia in a short time. His characterization of the kind of thinking undertaken by Thales, who believed water to be the one underlying substance of the world, shows it to be more free and poetic or unmoored from the purely scientific and logical:

What then is it that brings philosophical thinking so quickly to its goal? Is it different from the thinking that calculates and measures [*dem rechnenden und abmessenden*], only by virtue of the greater rapidity with which it transcends all space? No, its feet are propelled by an alien, illogical power [*unlogische Macht*]*—*the power of creative imagination [*die Phantasie*]....Even if all the footholds have crumbled by the time logic and empiric rigidity want to cross over to such a proposition as “all is water,” even after the total demolition [*Zertrümmerung*] of any scientific edifice, something remains. And in this remainder lies an impelling force [*treibende Kraft*] which is the hope of future fruitfulness [*die Hoffnung zukünftiger Fruchtbarkeit*].<sup>265</sup>

Creative imagination that precedes both sensibility and understanding and is the root of all our artistic endeavors, indeed *any* of our endeavors, emancipates thinking out into the freely open. One might prefer another perspective and say that imagination allows for the boundless to enter *back into* our thinking once again. Hence the greatest weight and importance of the Thales image lies not in any of its scientific discoveries and analyses, although these have their own measure of importance. The important image is one of seriousness sewn with laughter and folly which forms a shining rhapsody of humankind. Far from being a distant, irrelevant image of the past, the image of Thales appears before us as our image...as an image of us.

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<sup>265</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1996), 40-41. In the appendix to *The Gay Science* titled “Songs of Prince Vogelfrei” Nietzsche relates an image of the poet that is similar to the Thales image: “Declaration of Love (whereby however the poet fell into a ditch).”

#### IV. Conclusion: From *The Gay Science* to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

The laughter and comedy that is central to *The Gay Science* showcased Nietzsche's appeal for a new approach to thinking and its attendant wisdom. We saw that *Wissenschaft* was henceforth released from the kind of heaviness that had constituted it at least since the time of Socrates. This was accomplished in a number of ways.

First, *gaya scienza* itself was a new orientation towards existence that stressed an unmooring from the kind of thinking anchored to "thou shalt" binding imperatives. This new thinking achieved this not through any resentment of the old order, that is, it was not simply a reactionary stance that was an antithesis to this order. It released itself in and through its own cheerfulness and "yes saying" to life. One of the ways Nietzsche believes we can achieve this is by having recourse to our own bodies—letting otherwise inchoate states translate themselves into a vital, cheerful philosophy. Thus, there is a strong emphasis in Nietzsche, especially in *The Gay Science*, on the transfiguration of the body from something that formally was the seat of sin to a phenomenon that celebrates cheerful life in its return and replenishment. The body's pain was something to be transfigured and affirmed and used to forge an outlook on life that celebrated strength and life ascending values. Nietzsche appears to say that the key to this overcoming of pain in large part lies in a hermeneutics of our *physiological* state: "The fact that someone *feels* 'guilty', 'sinful', by no means proves that he is right in feeling this way; any more than someone is healthy just because he feels healthy."<sup>266</sup> Instead of interpreting physiological pain as the factual state of sin, it ought to be transfigured, or as he says in this same aphorism "digested" in the same way one "digests his meals."

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<sup>266</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 95/Third essay, 16.

What becomes evident then is the close connection between hermeneutics and the body.<sup>267</sup> To be sure, the feeling, affected body before any valuating, before any psychological or transcendent cause is posited, is already undergoing interpretation as Nietzsche makes clear:

[*W*]hat does valuating mean itself? Does it refer back or down to a different, metaphysical world? As Kant (living before the great historical movement) still believed. In short, *where did it 'originate'?* Or did it not 'originate'? Answer: [M]oral valuating is an *interpretation*, a way of interpreting. The interpretation itself is a *symptom* of particular physiological conditions, as well as of a particular intellectual level among the ruling judgments. *Who interprets?*—Our affects.<sup>268</sup>

To be a body that is affected is always already an interpretation. I believe Nietzsche is saying that he wants his readers to ruminate and think about the body just as carefully as we do psychological states, and even to entertain the possibility that the pain we may feel in our soul may be an effect of our physiology. When our physiology is affected some way—once again suffering seems to be Nietzsche's prime example—our interpretation ought not rush to a conclusion, especially one that posits a cause of our pain due to some transcendental transgression (our very Being as a state of sin). Instead, Nietzsche would have us hover in the "in between," our initial inchoate physiological states and thinking consciousness that gives rise to hermeneutical explanation. It is as if, contra Kant, Nietzsche is saying that authentic duty lies in mastery of one's own affected body and its

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<sup>267</sup> See Susan West, "When Nietzsche's Texts 'Disappear Under the Interpretation'" in *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 34, ed. Peg Birmingham (Chicago: DePaul University, 2009), 98-107. West finds a close connection between the body and hermeneutics as well as the need to navigate carefully between an interpretation of the body that is purely literal or purely metaphorical.

<sup>268</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 96/2[190].

subsequent interpretation (hopefully into cheerfulness and laughter) before our affects are assimilated by others into the socio-cultural formations of the herd.

Second, to come to grips with the kind of tragic knowledge examined in the first section, knowledge essentially of nihilism and the collapse of all values hitherto, as Nietzsche says many times, a necessary first step is to recognize oneself *as* homeless, *as* nomadic much in the tradition of the troubadours. This is to say that because of the loss of any transcendent meaning—the death of God is announced in this work—existence becomes a place of unfamiliarity unlike one’s home. Nonetheless, because we find ourselves here, existence no matter how familiar or unfamiliar is always *our* home. But to be able to grapple with this homelessness, Nietzsche attempts a kind of reversal that is as troubling as it is liberating. It turns us out into the freely open in which thinking can become creative once again. To be sure, Nietzsche recognizes that his thinking is for the few and the rare, that his thinking is in a sense untimely because he sees himself keenly aware of the tragic view of existence where others do not. He is also quite aware of the repercussions that take the form of pessimism. If he is to have us transform this pessimism into life affirming laughter, a necessary first step is to take the perspective on one’s new home, the existence into which we are thrown, so that we can become who we are without illusions.

Third, there is a paradigm shift at work that attempts to rethink humankind only in relation to the earth as opposed to “other worldly hopes.” Existence is to be understood in purely human terms, which means that sensate experience is given more weight than the intelligible realm. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche stressed that “only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence eternally justified,” which is to say that only that which appears

to sense is to hold sway. For Nietzsche the most important aesthetic phenomena are those of art, especially tragedy and comedy, which disclose in the deepest way the symbols that constitute our humanity. They are the only appearances able to disclose the Dionysian *abgrund* to which we are all subject.

Fourth, there is a constant stress in Nietzsche that the most human beings can have on things is a perspective. This provides a tension, a very comic tension at times, because most people, including philosophical thinkers, believe first that metaphysics is a hierarchy. For example, this paradigm has god at the top and we are a pale reflection of its supposed perfection, and two, that if there are perspectives, then the belief is that they harbor an all-encompassing bird's eye view of things. In other words, they fail to see their particular perspective *as a perspective*, as extremely limited and narrow in its relation to millennia and history. One of Nietzsche's examples is the idea that we are all in service to the species, even though it may appear to us that we are promoting our own self-interest. For Nietzsche, this is laughter provoking in that we not only fail to recognize this but we also fail to comprehend that errors have played the major role in the development of our species.

Fifth, the mocking tone of *The Gay Science* promotes the idea of transgression as opposed to obedience. Nietzsche's preface to the first edition, "Joke, Cunning, and Revenge' Prelude in German Rhymes" set the stage for the mischievousness that was to take place in this work. One of the ways Nietzsche says we can begin to transgress the kind of limits he believes characterizes thinking since at least Socrates. To be sure, transgression exists within laughter itself, which in its very discharge says that one is no longer swayed by previous thinking. Moreover, laughter itself is also a way to

disassociate oneself from the very dialectical process that keeps one bound to such thinking (this will come to even more prominence in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). To use Nietzsche's own metaphor on dancing, there is a freedom in laughter that releases thinking from a march to a dance.

Last and perhaps most poignantly Nietzsche stresses the need to see life itself in all of its beauty and hideousness as an appearance that provides us with its own laughter provoking moments. Amidst the kind of tragic view of life Nietzsche is arguing that existence itself, when we step back and let it appear to us, can shine. This can happen even when or where it is least likely, in even the most depraved and serious of times laughter is always possible, if not necessary. We can now start to see how *The Gay Science* is in a certain sense an opening act for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The first mention of Zarathustra does not occur in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* but in *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche ends the first edition of this work in 1882 with aphorism 342, "Incipit tragoedia," introducing us to his Zarathustra and it is clearly evident that Nietzsche is invoking the kind of poetic imagery that showcases the kind of inversion that he envisions for philosophical thinking.

For example, in this aphorism Nietzsche invokes the image of the sun. Of course the sun is a central image especially as it occurs in Plato's *Republic* as an offspring of the good.<sup>269</sup> For Nietzsche the sun has a much different significance as it relates to the inversion of the sensible/intelligible distinction. Nietzsche's emphasis lies not on the sun itself, nor as an "offspring of the good" but on those *for whom* the sun shines—earth-bound human beings. Thus he says of the sun, "What would your happiness be if you did

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<sup>269</sup> See Plato's *Republic*, 508 b-c.

not have those for whom you shine!”<sup>270</sup> Second, Nietzsche states that the sun rises to Zarathustra’s place in the mountain not that Zarathustra or anyone else has to ascend to it (whether through thinking or otherwise). Thus Nietzsche says that Zarathustra became “sick” of his wisdom and there was now a need for “going under” in order to “undermine” previous philosophical grounds. A major aspect of this going under for Zarathustra is to bring back laughter and folly to human beings who have forgotten how to laugh. Thus Zarathustra says, “Behold, I am sick of my wisdom [*Weisheit*], like a bee that has collected too much honey; I need outstretched hands; I would like to give away and distribute until the wise among humans once again enjoy their folly [*Thorheit*].”<sup>271</sup>

Once again it is clear that for Nietzsche wisdom and folly are never divorced. As we will see, one of Zarathustra’s first tasks in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is to invoke the “higher men,” that is, men of learning, so that they *learn* to laugh again, which means to recognize the appearance of folly in human affairs as well as in the kind of thinking done by men and women of learning. But the set-up to the laughter and the higher men actually occurs in book three of *The Gay Science*. Aphorism 177, “On ‘the educational establishment,’” states, “In Germany, higher men lack one great means of education: the laughter [*Gelächter*] of higher men; for in Germany, these do not laugh [*lachen*].”<sup>272</sup> Here we do find a significant difference, in that the lack of laughter amongst higher men is limited to those in Germany whereas in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we will see that this is extended to all human beings, regardless of nationality. The “higher men” are of the earth. Hence we can say that Nietzsche will end up broadening his perspective to include any higher men of learning.

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<sup>270</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 3/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

<sup>271</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 195/Aphorism 342.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 137/Aphorism 177.

Perhaps the greatest primer that *The Gay Science* offers its readers as a preparation for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is its inclusion of laughter, a bestiary and other animal imagery that helps us to see ourselves in our human, all too human capacities. Aphorism 224, “Animal’s criticism” in book three states, “I fear that the animals see man as a being like them who in a most dangerous manner has lost his animal common sense—as the insane animal, the laughing animal [*das lachende Thier*], the weeping animal, the miserable animal.”<sup>273</sup> Nietzsche leaves much room for interpretation here. Nonetheless two things can be said. First, Nietzsche seems to want to stress a continuity if not a likeness with animals so that we do not simply privilege ourselves over them to the point that our illusions strip us of our earthbound situatedness. Similar to animals, we too are biological beings and creatures of the earth. Second, if this first interpretation is correct then it calls into question the very question of our humanity. If we are not privileged and the death of God and the advent of nihilism shows that we are, at a minimum biologically speaking, just another animal, what will then fill this nihilistic void? By taking the perspective of an animal as Nietzsche does in this aphorism, he is asking how it is possible in the midst of tragic knowledge to consolidate all of these individual, disparate characteristics that an animal might see—the insane, laughing, weeping, and miserable animal—into a “common sense” so as to counter nihilism.

Aphorism 314, “New domestic animals” states, “I want my lion and eagle around so that I can always have hints and forebodings to know how great or small my strength is. Must I look down on them today and fear them? And will the hour return when they look up at me – in fear?”<sup>274</sup> Once again, these kind of pronouncements by Nietzsche

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 145/Aphorism 224.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 177/Aphorism 314.

surely grant the fact that there is much hermeneutical license involved, indeed required in Nietzsche's writings. Nonetheless the polemic in both of these aphorisms revolves around the notion of perspective and whether we are capable of having the kind of perspective on ourselves where we see each other as human creatures of the earth that have "become interesting."

Nietzsche is stressing the need to have a perspective on oneself that in light of all that we have called ourselves—rational animal, a thinking thing, something worthy as an end in itself—we have forgotten that we are also all the things (and more) that he claims we are in this aphorism. Once again we see Nietzsche in the mode of a psychologist, stressing the kind of phenomena that constitute us as a human animal but that we too often sublimate to the values of the herd. Laughter is just one such example he uses in conjunction with the animal perspective. It will reoccur in full splendor in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

In the second aphorism there is again a play of animals and perspective. In Nietzsche's view, when things have reached their zenith and have fulfilled their role, whether it is Christ and Christianity or Socrates and the Greeks, then all must perish under the weight of its own greatness. In other words, there is typically an almost palpable tension found in Nietzsche's writings: an *agōn* either between people, thinkers, cultures or values. Both the lion and eagle are metaphors of strength and vitality. The lion's perspective is of the earth as it roams and seeks its prey and the eagle's perspective is of the sky from which it descends to its prey. For Nietzsche, we might say that both the lion and eagle are reminders of one's own vitality, in both body and spirit, and whether he has reached his heights as a thinker or is falling short of his own noble goals.

Before we transition to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the prolific laughter that one finds amidst that work, it seems as though a necessary first step is to address Nietzsche's appropriation of Zarathustra. Why does Nietzsche choose such an archaic figure from whom many things are said and from which laughter resounds on many occasions? What is the significance of Zarathustra the historical figure and Nietzsche's literary-philosophical Zarathustra?

*The Gay Science* saw Nietzsche trying to reassert the need for laughter and folly. If we are to successfully confront nihilism and pessimism, remain optimistic, and forego resentment, then laughter and comedy are all the more necessary. With *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we come to see this laughter enacted in this character. Zarathustra, as a historical figure of Persia, was the first to introduce the distinct notions of good and evil in the West. These moral tenets gripped thinking, argues Nietzsche, until his time. The tragedy is that they are beginning to lose their grip on culture. Nietzsche believes they are dissolving and he recognizes this fulcrum of world history in which all previous values are becoming devalued. Nietzsche's Zarathustra, through laughter, comedy and parody, will attempt to teach "higher men" the need for these qualities if life is to be not only bearable but joyful. In other words Nietzsche's Zarathustra is a precocious character. Unlike the vast majority he addresses in this work, he is *conscious* of the tragic outlook. Learning to laugh, that is, to attune oneself so that one is able to locate laughter at the intersection of good and evil, where it was previously forbidden, allows for a movement beyond good and evil. The task is to be the figure who can disclose to others—especially the learned—the tragedy that looms on the horizon of existence: a horizon that has hitherto provided metaphysical comfort and meaning to countless peoples. This is why

didactic as Zarathustra can be at times, he is also poetic. Through his own unique *logos* he discloses a new perspective on existence, fulfilling the role of poet who attempts to move “beyond good and evil,” that is, beyond the old order of things. As Higgins writes, “The mission of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is not to pronounce and enforce moral judgments on others. Instead, it is the on-going attainment and revision of insights, which he does not dishonestly force into easy consistency with one another...”<sup>275</sup> But most notable to this task is Nietzsche’s insistence that Zarathustra not only speak in this work (hence the title), but laugh. This pervasive laughter that takes many forms—scorn, destruction, humor and so forth—even overflows Zarathustra himself. Many of the other characters, such as the animals in this work, laugh as well. In the last analysis Nietzsche invokes us to step back into a new perspective and laugh as well at the “eternal comedy of existence.”

In essence, then Nietzsche’s literary-philosophical creation enacts a palimpsest on the old, historical Zarathustra (from the Greek *palimpsestos*, “scraped again,” from *palin* “again” and *psen* “to rub smooth”). Keeping in mind Nietzsche’s notion that knowledge should be forward looking, that is, a will to new knowledge as opposed to a return to some original in order that we copy it, Nietzsche appropriates the old historical Zarathustra who introduced the world to good and evil so that he could create a new perspective through his own palimpsest that looks towards the future even though there might not yet be ears for such an untimely message. Thus begins, as Nietzsche has it, the “wicked and malicious” parody.

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<sup>275</sup> Higgins, *Comic Relief: Nietzsche’s Gay Science*, 163.

## Chapter Three: Thus Laughed Zarathustra

“I am leaving Genoa as soon as possible and going into the mountains—*this* year I do not want to talk to anybody.

Do you want to know a new name for me? The language of the church *has* one—I am...the *Antichrist*.

Let us not forget how to laugh!”

~Nietzsche, Letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, 1883~

### I. Zarathustra’s Laughing Call

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is perhaps the work of Nietzsche’s that is most different from all his other texts. It is written mostly in the aphorism style, which is different from most other philosophical treatises in which a subject is announced, problematized and then defended one way or the other. However, the aphorisms contained within this text exhibit a poetic and dramatic texture even unlike his previous works. This leads Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to proclaim, “Nietzsche’s aphorisms shatter the linear unity of knowledge, only to invoke the cyclic unity of the eternal return, present as the nonknown in thought.”<sup>276</sup> As the title makes clear, Zarathustra indeed speaks but this speaking is not limited to the normally privileged form of formal philosophic discourse, such as dialectics. The Zarathustra who speaks, that is, who conveys his wisdom, does so in many ways. Besides the use of language and dialogue that he has with others, Zarathustra also at times sings and dances. However, included in all of these phenomena that constitute

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<sup>276</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6.

Zarathustra's voice is laughter and, as we shall see, laughter and comedy abound in this most idiosyncratic of Nietzsche's work, helping to weave lightness amidst its profound message.

To begin to see how laughter resonates in this text, we can think of its occurrence along two axes. The first axis denotes *who* is doing the laughing. It is not always Zarathustra. His animals are also his "followers,"<sup>277</sup> that is, those he encounters along his way who gather in his cave, who laugh on many occasions. Moreover, when Zarathustra leaves his cave to commence "going down" (*untergehen*) the townspeople respond with their own laughter. It is a laughter that provides Zarathustra with his first philosophical challenge to his going under.

The second axis denotes the *kind* of laughter that occurs. In this text, laughter takes on many different forms and textures and on no occasion is laughter simply gratuitous. Thus laughter erupts on occasion as something provocative and even at times scornful. Laughter may also occur as a form of affirmation that signals Nietzsche's willingness to harness what he sees as his task in and through his parody of the historical Zarathustra (including the moral concepts of good and evil that he initiated) with his own literary Zarathustra, preparing the way for a new future that affirms life in the face of nihilism. In effect there are two voices of Zarathustra, one historical and one that parodies the historical Zarathustra. To be sure, there are many more voices that emanate from this work, as one of Nietzsche's goals is to gather all the voices of the earth as if they were a chorus because we are all, in a sense, subject to one another. For Nietzsche, parody is the

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<sup>277</sup> One has to keep in mind that Nietzsche doesn't want followers in the traditional sense, that is, people who look to him as a guide or figurehead that determines to a large extent their path in life. Nietzsche wants people to take up the possibilities of their own authentic existence and create themselves as if they were an artist, which is to say compose their soul.

prime comedic device that showcases the many layers and interconnections of Zarathustra not only to the other characters but to wider, philosophical history as well. In his book, *The Multivoiced Body*, Fred Evans makes clear this interconnection of voices:

Because the subject matter of this struggle is embedded in the linguistic community, it reflects these other points of view from the beginning. Thus any new utterance about this subject matter is already partially constituted by and in contest with the other social languages of the community.<sup>278</sup>

Although Evans is using Dostoevsky's novels as his example *via* Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of linguistic hybridization, nonetheless he lists "[p]arody, hidden polemic, reverence" as examples of "dialogic overtones,"<sup>279</sup> all of which are present in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Descending from his isolation in his cave Zarathustra is, to be sure, embedded in the very community of human beings with their views and corresponding voices that he wants to usurp.

There are of course many more examples. Suffice it to say that in terms of laughter, a finely attuned hermeneutical lens is needed to navigate up and down the poles of both axes in order to unconceal its significance. Zarathustra's laughter often times lacks subtlety and may appear as abrasive, even belittling, but its occurrence is never frivolous and it is surely a sign of something deep in his teaching. However, before beginning, a few short words ought to be made<sup>280</sup> that attempt to frame the over-arching

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<sup>278</sup> Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 71. See also Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), especially chapter five, "Discourse in Dostoevsky."

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> I am aware that a few short words could never adequately render the meaning of this complex work. Laurence Lampert notes that Nietzsche himself states in *Ecce Homo* that, "At some point,...perhaps there will be endowed chairs dedicated to *Zarathustra* interpretation." Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 100/Section I of "Why I Write Such Good Books." Laurence

issue at hand in this distinctive work of Nietzsche's so that we can best see how humor and laughter play their key role.

There are three overriding issues at play in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The first two involve Nietzsche's pronouncement of the major metaphysical claims of the eternal return of the same (the eternal recurrence) and the will to power. Although there are many interpretations of the eternal return, mine is twofold. To begin we must recall that Nietzsche first introduces the eternal return in *The Gay Science* and not *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the former work I argue that Nietzsche's initial thought on the eternal return revolves around a regulative fiction in the form of an existential calling. Nietzsche is asking his reader to consider his or her life in terms of having to live it over again for eternity. In other words, the existential imperative is to have lived a life in which you had become who you are and fulfilled your highest aspirations or your "will to power." Thus he says:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it [*nichts Neues daran*], but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you [*muss dir wiederkommen*], all in the same succession and sequence.'<sup>281</sup>

The eternal return that Nietzsche speaks of here clearly indicates an existential dimension, but in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* there is a more refined effort underway by

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Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teachings: An Interpretation of 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra,'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 1.

<sup>281</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 194/Aphorism 341.

Nietzsche. He treats the eternal return as a metaphysical idea while still keeping its existential overtones:

Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally [*ewig wiederkehren*] and we ourselves along with them, and that we have already been here times eternal and all things along with us....But the knot of causes [*der Knoten von Ursachen*] in which I am entangled recurs—it will create me again! I myself belong to the causes of the eternal recurrence. I will return, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this snake—not to a new life or better life or a similar life:—I will return to this same and selfsame life [*gleichen und selbigen Leben*], in what is greatest as well as in what is smallest, to once again teach the eternal recurrence of all things.<sup>282</sup>

Here, the stress is not on a metaphysics taken in its literal sense as that which is beyond the physical, that is, as the positing and appeal to some supersensible criteria. Instead it is the kind of metaphysics that constitutes the causes and repetitions of that which eternally returns. Reflecting on the eternal return in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche says, “The doctrine of the ‘eternal return,’ which is to say the unconditioned and infinitely repeated cycle of all things—this is Zarathustra’s doctrine.”<sup>283</sup> We can understand the “unconditioned” here as that which occurs without the imposition of form, in other words what eternally returns is chaos. If the cheerfulness that beats at the heart of *The Gay Science* shows anything it is that even though we are heirs of the past, nonetheless we are responsible for our time now, which lies between the infinite expanse of the past and the infinite expanse of the future. Babich links the eternal return with love stating:

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<sup>282</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 178/“The Convalescent.”

<sup>283</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 110/Section 3 of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

*Amor fati* is not the resignation of destiny but blessing wrought in the moment of perfection. The consummation of love is to take them all together. *Amor fati* affirms the past and the future turning like the path the walker traces on either side of the lake at Silva Plana....The affirmation of the eternal return is a selective benediction transfiguring everything with the same golden or silver glance.<sup>284</sup>

Nietzsche's imperative is to refuse assimilation into what he sees as the weighty, serious, transcendental oppressiveness of the morality of his time. Laughter and cheerfulness are key characteristics envisioned for the psyche of the new artist-philosopher, which is given in the voice and image of Zarathustra. His focus is of the earth which was, perhaps, glimpsed in the Socrates of the *Phaedo* as the reborn "music-making Socrates."

However, Nietzsche is still concerned about how meaning or value is generated by human beings in light of this new existential condition: there is no eternal, pre-given meaning especially the notions of good and evil which had until Nietzsche's time "book-ended" all moral discourse. So entrenched were they that Zarathustra says, "No greater market place on earth did Zarathustra find than good and evil."<sup>285</sup> Now Zarathustra is at pains to deconstruct (some might say "destruct") and overcome these notions. In light of this lack of any teleological, pre-established "ends" we must create our meaning. For Nietzsche the eternal recurrence becomes two things. First, it becomes the illustration of this meaningless (Nietzsche says in *The Gay Science* aphorism 341, "[W]ould you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?" Zarathustra is in many ways this "demon" that heralds the eternal return). Second, it becomes more importantly, the fertile ground, the chaos, that is always there from which

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<sup>284</sup> Babich, "The Culture of Science as Art," in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 11.

<sup>285</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 42/"On a Thousand and One Goals."

one can confront nihilism by first recognizing it and then setting to work on creating one's soul within the freedom opened up by the eternal return.

It is important to stress that what Nietzsche is saying in terms of the eternal recurrence is not that the same events will return over and over again. Nor does he mean that all subjects will return over and over again eternally to live the same life. What returns is chaos or, “the knot of causes” in which we are a part; “I myself belong to the *causes* of the eternal recurrence” says Zarathustra’s companions the snake and eagle when they formulate what Zarathustra might say of the eternal return (my emphasis on “causes”). And what is another name for chaos if not what the young Nietzsche “formalized” in his earlier work, *The Birth of Tragedy*—the Dionysian or that which is without ground. The deep Dionysian chaos that Nietzsche describes in section four, as “that which truly exists, the eternally suffering and contradictory, primordial unity,” is antecedent to any manifest structure—individuals, systems, society, culture—and thus is the primal unity of all things. Hence, if the eternal return attempts to establish anything, then this “anything” is *uncertainty*.

The second over-arching issue found in this work is the will to power. Like the eternal return, the will to power has various interpretations. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche treats the will to power as the mechanism or force by which we create meaning for ourselves and also that which pervades all living things. He states, “Wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power.”<sup>286</sup> If the eternal return is the *Abgrund* that always brings chaos, then the will to power is the force that attempts to organize itself out of this primordial raw material so that we “become such as we are.”<sup>287</sup> So, for example, a

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 89/“On Self-Overcoming.”

<sup>287</sup> Nietzsche appropriated these words (and variations of them) from Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 2, line 72.

poet may enhance his or her feeling of power by disclosing a vision of the world in and through the play of signs, semiotic systems and images. Indeed, their power may stem from challenging the prevailing systems of the day.<sup>288</sup>

But Nietzsche is careful to delineate the will to power along two main paths. The will to power can act as a nihilistic force. In other words it can, by virtue of its volition, will nothing in the sense that it may continually say “no” to life. This will to power is essentially reactive. Nietzsche stresses the need to overcome this tendency:

‘No deed can be annihilated [*vernichtet*]; how could it be undone through punishment? This, this is what is eternal about the punishment called existence [*der Strafe Dasein*], that existence must also eternally be deed and guilt again! Unless the will were to finally redeem itself and willing became not-willing [*Nicht-Wollen*]—;’ but my brothers, you know this fable song of madness!<sup>289</sup>

What is being stressed here is the same line of argument that Nietzsche makes in *The Birth of Tragedy* when he addresses Buddhism (via Schopenhauer). What the Buddhist seeks to overcome is desire and to do that one must stop willing or at least diminish one’s will as much as possible. But for Nietzsche this is neither possible nor desirable—“man still prefers to *will nothingness*, than *not will*...”<sup>290</sup> he says at the conclusion to *On the Genealogy of Morality*.

On the other hand, one can will in an active way. Again, *On the Genealogy of Morality* best illustrates this notion of an active force. Nietzsche details in the first essay the noble, aristocratic class that refuses the *ressentiment* of the reactive priestly class and

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<sup>288</sup> Thomas Mann says about Friedrich Schiller in an excerpt from “A Weary Hour,” “He must not descend into chaos; or at least he must not stop there. Rather out of chaos, which is fullness, he must draw up to the light whatever he found there fit and ripe for form. No brooding!” Mann, *Last Essays*, 210.

<sup>289</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 112/“On Redemption.”

<sup>290</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 120/Third essay, 28.

their designation of good and bad into good and evil that has gripped morality and ethics. The active force of those that see themselves as noble affirms life in *all* of its conditions, which means affirming even suffering as well as chaos, which is essentially another name for the Dionysian phenomenon.

But we must also keep in mind one more crucial point in terms of the will to power and the forces that come to direct it. These active and reactive forces can be either outwardly directed, that is, understood in terms of wider culture that seeks to organize the chaos of nature or they can be inwardly directed as a struggle within an individual. For example, Nietzsche argues that if reactive forces are to permeate a culture (one must keep in mind that there is always an *agōn* at some level between active and reactive forces and never a complete annihilation by one over another) then that culture will decline. But if active forces are allowed to ascend and the instincts are given an outlet, then culture will flourish. This Nietzsche makes clear in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in the example above of the aristocratic and priestly classes.

However, there is also an inward directedness of active and reactive forces. In this sense, the living subject possesses its own will to power, which is to say that there is a constant struggle within the individual of competing drives that are constantly changing and shifting. Nietzsche wants the individual to harness active forces so that its will to power becomes enhanced towards its own noble, value creating ends. This outward/inward directedness of the will to power is illustrated by Nietzsche when he states:

*Development of mankind*

A. To gain power over nature [*Macht über die Natur*] and *to that end* a certain power over oneself. Morality was necessary *in order* for man to prevail in the struggle with nature and the ‘wild animal.’

B. Once power over nature *has been* gained, one can use this power to continue freely shaping *oneself* [*sich selbst frei weiterzubilden*]: will to power [*Wille zur Macht*] as self-heightening and strengthening.<sup>291</sup>

The will to power, then, is intimately connected to the eternal return.<sup>292</sup> Gaining power over nature means looking into and fathoming its depth without illusions and affirming what one sees, which for Nietzsche *is* will to power. Then, in turn, one can declare, in the spirit of the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus, “Once more, and again!” What we will see as a feature of these staples of Nietzsche’s thought is the way in which laughter plays a key role in their expression and attainment—laughter that is brought into play by Zarathustra to help convey his wisdom.

The last over-arching issue in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* concerns the nature of this work, which is more of a poem or novel than a typical philosophical treatise. It can also be defended as a song, that is, a “musical” work, that Nietzsche composes for his readers because it possesses many of the characteristics of a musical score—its own refrain, rhythm, intensity, speed and so forth. It is also musical in that it comes from that Dionysian space that it wants to showcase to the world, a space that is antecedent to language, as Nietzsche stressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Indeed Nietzsche claimed that *The Birth of Tragedy* should have sung and not spoken. I believe that with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche is giving us his gift of song that he had hoped for in his earlier

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<sup>291</sup> Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 114-15/5[63].

<sup>292</sup> See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 50-51/Aphorism 56.

work. Both Sallis and Freydberg recognize Nietzsche's stress on the musicality of a work as well as the Dionysian and the irreducibility or synthesis of these elements. In his work that examines Sallis's thought Freydberg states:

Sallis points out throughout *Crossings* that the thought of *The Birth of Tragedy* and of the Apollonian/Dionysian resists synthesis at every turn. He calls it a "questionable, almost inaccessible, impossible" book on account of the strange, foreign voice that sounds from it—"it should have *sung*, this 'new soul'—and not spoken!" But sung how? Not in a Wagnerian voice, nor—I suggest—even in a Greek voice. Sallis's final sentence: "Rather, a song to which one could dance, a song of holy laughter," a Zarathustrian song.<sup>293</sup>

In this light, it is crucial to remember that as a work of this kind it is not only important to keep in mind how this song is composed and sung but more importantly how it is *heard*, how it (*re*)*sounds* in the mind and ear of the listener, how the song of holy laughter resonates with those willing to affirm their ties to the earth and the other elementals that are gathered by it, presuming of course that there are ears ready to hear such a song.

Taken together, all of this showcases this work as something dramatic. This dramatic structure, as Laurence Lampert maintains, includes many of the requisite elements such as characters both human and animal, place, time as well as rising action and dénouement. These elements come to *dramatize* Nietzsche's views rather than present it in the form of a logically defended position. Thus Lampert states, "the point of the drama is to show how Zarathustra grows into the task required of the philosopher in that destitute time that Nietzsche diagnosed as the terminal nihilism of Western culture,

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<sup>293</sup> Freydberg, *The Thought of John Sallis*, 269-70. References to John Sallis are in *Crossings*, 150.

how he is educated to the task of a new founding.”<sup>294</sup> In essence, then, when we read a work such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, we must let the themes of laughter and comedy resonate in a way proper to this kind of dramatic composition: a reading that brings into sharp focus the challenges that human beings face as they inevitably confront nihilism in the postmodern world. In many ways, Nietzsche considers *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to be his crowning achievement as is evidenced by a look at the letters he wrote to his friends and colleagues at the time and *Ecce Homo* as well.<sup>295</sup> Still, he never lost sight of the fact that folly resided at its very heart. As he wrote to Franz Overbeck in 1883 after completing the first part, “This reminds me of my latest folly—I mean *Zarathustra*.”

Because the intersection of literature and philosophy becomes prevalent with French postmodern thinkers<sup>296</sup> and because *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* faithfully fulfills its role as literature as well as philosophy, it would appear prudent then to see how this work relates to contemporary thought. Many postmodern philosophers were influenced by Nietzsche, prominent among them is Gilles Deleuze. We saw an overview of how his and Guattari’s major work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, emphasized a non-traditional, non-hierarchical metaphysics. Instead of a metaphysics that posited a teleological goal (God,

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<sup>294</sup> Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 4.

<sup>295</sup> Nietzsche says in *Ecce Homo*, “My Zarathustra has a special place for me in my writings.” Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, 72/Part 4 of the Preface.

<sup>296</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Discourse of the Syncope* (Stanford University Press, 2008) comes to mind. In this work Nancy explores why Kant, the greatest philosopher of the Enlightenment project, was a bad writer thus calling into radical questioning the intersection of critical philosophy and literature. While Nancy concludes this work by labeling Kant a “Logodaedalus” (one who quibbles over words and semantics) he writes that philosophers are hardly oblivious to the question. He quotes Nietzsche from *Ecce Homo* in a footnote; “I have some notion of my privileges as a writer; in a few instances I have been told, too, how getting used to my writings ‘spoils’ one’s taste. One simply can no longer endure other books, least of all philosophical works. It is a distinction without equal to enter this noble and delicate world—one must not by any means be a German!” (147) (*Ecce Homo* trans. by Walter Kaufmann, Vintage Books, 1967).

Forms, Spirit etc.),<sup>297</sup> their metaphysics generates in perpetuity multiplicity through the dynamic play of the plane of consistency with the plane of organization; multiplicity being either what Deleuze refers to as “arborescent” with hierarchical elements or “rhizomatic” that possesses diverse and diverging elements. For Deleuze and Guattari both kinds of assemblages communicate with one another. However, rhizomatic multiplicities by their very nature always maintain an advantage over their arborescent counterparts. This is not because they necessarily dominate them in some way but because, as rhizomatic, they are always already giving rise to new genetic lines of development and expansion and thus are never totalized as a unity the way arborescent multiplicities may appear.<sup>298</sup> In addition, because their system is non-totalizing since there is no single, stable transcendent principle under which all else is subordinated and thus reality is constituted as pure immanence, I refer to it as a radical materialism.

Although there are indeed differences between Nietzsche and Deleuze’s philosophical views, there is also a deep kinship. For example, Nietzsche speaks of multiplicity on many different levels (a multiple interpretation of multiplicity itself) including physiological drives, psychological drives, and the multiplicity of affects just to name a few. Likewise Zarathustra says, “The body is a great reason, a multiplicity with one sense, a war and a peace, one herd and one shepherd.”<sup>299</sup> And even what appears to

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<sup>297</sup> These are what Fred Evans in *The Multivoiced Body* refers to as “oracles” or “a discourse that elevates itself above the others by presenting itself as universal or absolute” (11). This, in my view, is very similar to Nietzsche’s notion of “ascetic ideal” which has its expression in different spheres of life (philosophical, religious, artistic etc.). What the ascetic ideal does is to fill life devoid of meaning with a supposed highest meaning. The ascetic ideal is important for Nietzsche, not because of what may or may not be posited in each sphere, but because it discloses a profound impulse in man, namely that, “man still prefers to *will nothingness*, than not *will*...” (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 120/Third essay, 28.)

<sup>298</sup> This is why Deleuze and Guattari express rhizomatic multiplicities as “ $n - 1$ ” where the unique one is always subtracted from the total unlike arborescent multiplicities where the one would be added and subsumed within the hierarchy. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 6.)

<sup>299</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 23/“On the Despisers of the Body.”

be the kind of metaphysics that describes reality itself, such as Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblages and absolute deterritorialization, Nietzsche says something very similar:

And do you know what 'the world' is to me? Shall I show you it in my mirror? This world: a monster of force [*Ungeheuer von Kraft*], without beginning, without end, a fixed, iron quantity of force which grows neither large nor smaller, which doesn't exhaust but only transforms [*verwandelt*] itself, as a whole unchanging in size, an economy without expenditure and losses, but equally without increase, without income, enclosed by 'nothingness' as by a boundary, and not something blurred, squandered, not something infinitely extended [*nichts Unendlich-Ausgedehntes*].<sup>300</sup>

In this same passage Nietzsche goes on to describe this eternal process of construction and destruction as "multifarious" (*vielfältigsten*) and even "Dionysian," which stays faithful to our earlier analysis that the Dionysian is seen as non-rational, non-foundational, that is, as an *Abgrund*. We will come to see how Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* attempts to usurp the prevailing nihilistic tendencies of the West, most importantly morality and its leveling influence, by facilitating its reterritorialization. If Zarathustra's message is meant to convey anything it is the importance of affirming life within the world of becoming by authentically owning up to the tragic knowledge I have detailed thus far.

These are the overarching issues in this work and they provide the framework within which provocative laughter occurs. Because laughter is so ubiquitous in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I will examine those occasions where its impact is felt most deeply.

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<sup>300</sup> Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 38/38[12].

We will see that Nietzsche's Zarathustra laughs often because he sees it as his task to affirm an ethos of affirmation; one that celebrates our ties to the earth in all of its and our multiplicity.

## II. Zarathustra and the Costumed Drama

We saw in the second chapter on *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche harbors a deep appreciation for appearance (*Erscheinung*), especially appearance as beautiful *Schein*. This is not only because appearance is what constitutes reality for us but also because the aesthetic justification of life in which beautiful, shining appearance is disclosed is done through appearing. This disclosing is one that privileges the *eye* and not one that privileges the ego or "I" of the self-certain Cartesian cogito, which attempts to know phenomena through calculation and clear and distinct ideas. Moreover, shining appearance can take the form of the sublime or of the absurd in which "the eternal comedy of existence" parades before us in a timeless play.

As unique a work that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is, we can use one of Nietzsche's comic examples from *The Gay Science* that we previously examined as a bridge to this work. In *The Gay Science* the comedy of existence often times disclosed itself as the comic appearance of famous men, most notably political leaders. The main emphasis was on the kind of pathos of distance that Nietzsche advocates which lets us view the otherwise serious issues of a political nature in a comic light. These included the kind of "stage play" that famous men engage in as they utilize other people as props in order to

present the type of appearance that is beneficial to them at any given moment. Of course the comedy laid in the fact that this image-play, which most are not aware of, provided a comic spectacle for the acute observer of appearance. The proper perspective—a perspective that few have—allows the eternal comedy of existence that has “not yet become conscious of itself” to play forth for them in its absurdity, even as those deeply immersed in it perhaps believe it to be a pivotal moment in history in which they are a key player.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche revisits this same phenomena although this time the spectator is Zarathustra himself. In the section titled “On Human Prudence” in the second part, the polemic Zarathustra struggles with revolves around prudence. Normally prudence—the ability to govern oneself and one’s affairs wisely especially by use of reason—is understood and embraced by those seeking a solid, practical ethic. But for Nietzsche, who is advocating for the ethic of the overman (*Übermensch*) and the will to knowledge that happens “beyond good and evil,” prudence is at war with itself. Zarathustra struggles with his commitment to mankind and his disciples and also to the overman for which mankind is a bridge; “I bind myself with chains to mankind because I am drawn upward to the overman.”<sup>301</sup> Zarathustra’s prudence, which takes four forms in this section, has allowed him to be committed to mankind in his project of overcoming. In terms of action and speech, he has been able to project the proper intensity to his listeners yet at the same time this prudence by its very nature has made him overly cautious and shrewd to the point that the lightness of touch needed to ascend to the overman has been stifled.

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<sup>301</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 113/“On Human Prudence.”

What Zarathustra enacts at this point in his wanderings is essentially the prudence of imprudence, that is, the necessity at times of being imprudent so as to allow his project that paves the way for the overman to move forward. This play of prudence and imprudence harbors its own comedic value, namely that at times prudence *requires one* to be imprudent! Indeed the very nature of prudence with its cautious, guarded stance requires in this instance imprudence or the abandonment of these principles. In other words the play involves what is essentially a comedic giving over into opposites.

In the case of Zarathustra, prudence and imprudence plays itself out in his closeness and detachment from mankind—the very people he is attempting to help. He is aware that he is seeking ears for his message but that his message of mankind as a bridge to the overman may not be suitable for *all* ears. Thus he must act imprudently at times in his relationship with them, which is to say he must temper his showing of himself to them. In essence, the play of prudence and imprudence really is the play of appearance or with appearance, that is, the ability to know when to appear to mankind as well as when to let mankind appear to him in its splendor. One of Zarathustra's preferred means of prudence involves the spectacle of vain people whom he admires, not necessarily for their particular mode of vanity but for the appearance vanity itself provides *as* spectacle. Thus Zarathustra says of the vain:

For life to be a proper spectacle, its play [*Spiel*] must be well-played [*gespielt*]; but for this good play actors are needed. I found all vain people to be good actors; they play and want to be spectacular—all their spirit is focused in this willing. They perform themselves, they invent themselves; in their proximity I love to be a spectator of life [*dem Leben Schauspiele*]*—it heals me of my melancholy.*

Therefore I spare the vain, because they are physicians for my melancholy and keep me riveted to people as if to a play [*Schauspiele*].<sup>302</sup>

Most notable is the fact that Nietzsche characterizes this phenomenon of appearance as a play that happens in life. Being “riveted to people” outside the formality of a theatre is to say that the appearances that constitute the very texture of life become the comic venue. In the case of the vain, the resounding excess they often exhibit remains faithful to the resounding excess of the comically masked Dionysus. So, comparable to the play of appearance of the famous men in *The Gay Science*, Zarathustra also recognizes the playfulness of the vain.

However, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* there is marked difference. This time a certain depth appears that the example of the famous men in *The Gay Science* only hinted at. Nietzsche is attempting to confront the nihilism that he sees as beginning to grip humankind by advocating a coming to grips with tragic knowledge that refuses to allow any “meta” positions to condition life or provide it meaning. It becomes clear that Zarathustra is that voice that attempts to achieve these goals. Moreover, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche is not just engaged in detached observation of the phenomenon of appearance as the section in *The Gay Science* treated above seems to suggest. Instead, his Zarathustra is the appearance on the historical stage parodying the older notions of good and evil in all their variety. This parody heralds an overcoming by the more-than-human type of the overman. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* then cannot be reduced to the text with its plot and characters. It overflows the text into life itself in order to propagate its message of the eternal return, the overman, and the coming to grips and overcoming of nihilism. If this message is not tempered by Zarathustra in a nuanced way, so that his audience either

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 113/“On Human Prudence.”

fails to grasp it or becomes overly frightened and unwilling to be the ears for his message, then he will have failed.

In this same section, this is exactly why Zarathustra muses to himself that his fourth kind of human prudence requires a “secret laughter” because of its dangerousness to ears that are not yet ready to hear his message. He says, “I do not allow my view of *evil ones* to be spoiled by your fearfulness,” which is to say that what others (most notably the “good and just” and “wise and knowing” ones as Nietzsche refers to them) call and fear as “evil” or the “devil” are essentially small and petty things. “In you,” says Zarathustra “there is much to laugh at [*zum Lachen*] and especially your fear [*Furcht*] of what up till now has been called ‘devil!’”<sup>303</sup> Nietzsche’s claim is that Zarathustra and his message, although wise to ears that are prepared to hear his message, would nonetheless appear as frightful to the supposed good, just, and knowing. Nietzsche says their judgments about what is evil or demonic are small and petty compared to the profound, honest but unsettling message of Zarathustra:

So estranged from greatness are you in your souls that the overman would seem *terrible* [*furchtbar*] to you in his kindness! And you wise and knowing ones, you would flee [*flüchten*] from the sunburn of wisdom in which the overman joyfully bathes his nakedness! You highest human beings whom I have ever laid eyes on—this is my doubt in you [*Zweifel an euch*] and my secret laughter [*mein heimliches Lachen*]: I suspect you would call my overman—devil!<sup>304</sup>

The reason that Zarathustra’s laughter is secretive is precisely because he harbors the kind of tragic knowledge that the “highest human beings” do not yet understand, have

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 114/“On Human Prudence.”

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

failed to recognize or, and this is a generous “or,” have failed to own up to if in fact they are conscious of such knowledge. This is why Zarathustra’s pronouncement of the overman, although an act of extreme kindness from the perspective of Zarathustra because it is a gift to humankind, nonetheless would strike terror into the hearts of the highest human beings who are the recipients of this gift thinking him a devil of some sorts. “[A]ll great things, in order to inscribe eternal demands [*ewigen Forderungen*] in the heart of humanity, must first wander the earth under monstrous and terrifying masks [*ungeheure und furchteinflössende Fratzen*],”<sup>305</sup> Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil*. In this sense, Zarathustra, who is at play with appearance, is much like Dionysus who wears the mask of both comedy and tragedy that conceals the monstrousness behind it—the monstrousness as the death of god and the resulting nihilism in the West. For Zarathustra to be prudent, so that he is able to disclose what many will take as a monstrous message, he must practice imprudence, that is, he must engage in a careful play of concealment/unconcealment of the truth he himself is aware of amongst the many:

But I want to see *you* costumed [*verkleidet*], you neighbors and fellow human beings, and well groomed, and vain, and dignified, as “the good and the just”—  
And costumed I myself want to sit among you—so that I might *not recognize* [*verkenne*] you and myself; for that is my final human prudence. Thus spoke Zarathustra.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 3/Preface.

<sup>306</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 115/“On Human Prudence.”

This costumed drama with its many players—those who still hold to the old valuations of good and evil as well as Zarathustra who is a harbinger of the overman—is in part what constitutes this secret and knowing laughter.

By casting this in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblages we can begin to see how far reaching Nietzsche's thought is in this crucial work. To reiterate, Nietzsche's literary figure is a parody of the historical Zarathustra of ancient Persia. The historical Zarathustra, (as well as Zoroastrianism) is the assemblage that, through its expression and content, brought the notions of good and evil onto the world stage. Or one might say that because the notions of good and evil are so pervasive in our morality, the historical name "Zarathustra" really just suffices for Western morality and ethics in general. Likewise, Nietzsche's Zarathustra is also an assemblage. It is one that utilizes the comic device of parody in order to bring a new perspective to morality. One might say that Zarathustra is bringing perspective itself, or an assemblage of perspective. And because the position of perspectival thought says that it is not possible to know "the whole" from a single perspective, the hegemony of this whole—call it God, the One, Spirit et al—begins to strain and crack under the pressure of infinite multiplicities and perspectives that have always been at play in history, even though not always apparent. But how exactly is this so?

The arborescent assemblage "Western morality,"<sup>307</sup> if we may call it that, always had as its final, teleological signifier something transcendent. It was the phenomenon that stood outside of the sensible world. In ontological terms this signifier always possessed unity as part of its Being in that it is always the self-same and unchanging as opposed to

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<sup>307</sup> I define this arborescent assemblage as the totality of ways in which human beings in the West have comported themselves to nature, to each other and which required a teleological signifier to which this totality was subordinate.

the world of becoming in which chance and change are at play within pure immanence. Throughout history becoming and the beings in it have always been constituted as something derivative of Being, such as “the intelligible realm” or “the watchful eye of God.” If Nietzsche’s thinking has shown us anything, it is that he wants to invert the Being/becoming paradigm. He wants to twist free from it altogether in a grand aesthetic turn to the shining sensible. Because we are *here* as beings in the world of becoming, then any attempt to transcend this, any attempts to posit supersensible criteria such as “otherworldly hopes” constitutes a nihilistic impulse.

When we consider Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, which is to say when we think of the character of the text but also when we consider the text “*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*” itself as an assemblage, what we have is a rhizomatic assemblage in an *agōn* with an arborescent assemblage.<sup>308</sup> The assemblage “Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*” has arrived on the world-historical stage to confront and hopefully diminish the influence of the historical assemblage “Western morality” (the historical *Zarathustra*), and what Nietzsche sees as its corrosive influence as nihilism. In other words, through mimetic parody there is *Zarathustra* vs. *Zarathustra*, with the stakes being either the continued dominance of the prevailing tendencies of the West or, if Nietzsche is successful, allowing chaos, the indefinite, the Dionysian a presence through their own expression and content to be a recognized part of shining reality. The comic device of parody is supremely important because it presents us with *images*, in this case comic, laughter provoking images.

The idea that Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* must *provoke* his audience through laughter is important. Nietzsche is well aware that if he is to present a remedy to Western nihilism,

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<sup>308</sup> Deleuze and Guattari are clear that, far from being isolated entities, assemblages not only interact dynamically with one another but that, “There are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 21) Hence they are shot through and through with one another.

then he cannot do so by simply positing his own “meta” criteria, that is, a transcendent reference that stands outside the aesthetic forms of space and time. He would be violating his own “rules” by replacing one meta position with another, thus keeping him engaged in the overly simplistic binary thinking that he wants to avoid altogether. If Zarathustra is to succeed he must, appropriating Otto Neurath’s metaphor of a sinking boat at sea, repair the “sinking ship” only using other parts of the ship as material to fix it. By using parody he is able (hopefully) to turn Western thinking in a new direction because *parody shows ourselves to us*. We can behold ourselves in our folly so that we (“we” as individuals and as parts of groups) may undergo our own organic transfiguration so that amidst the tragic knowledge, indeed because of it, we can become a “laughing animal” once again.

We can focus even more in terms of Deleuze and Guattari and say that because the planes of consistency and organization are always engaged in a dynamic interaction, then the rhizomatic assemblage “Nietzsche’s Zarathustra” is attempting, through means that include parody and provocative laughter, to disrupt or dismantle the already situated arborescent assemblage “Western morality” within the striated space of the plane of organization. According to the function of the plane of consistency, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is a pure intensity, which is to say, it is either at rest or in motion in relative proximity amongst other elements. Moreover, Zarathustra as a pure intensity and a haecceity<sup>309</sup> will, in the manner of a palimpsest, begin to inscribed or code itself by way

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<sup>309</sup> Deleuze and Guattari define a haecceity as “relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 261) The important thing about haecceities is that they do not possess an essence, or at least a stable essence. Hence, their power and function derive from what they can affect as opposed to what they are. See also Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 39. This presents its own thorny issues with Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and the *Übermensch*. For example, the *Übermensch*, on the one hand, surely fulfills the notion of a haecceity because it is a type and a “not yet” which has yet to affect others. On the other hand, Nietzsche does appear to characterize this future type as needing to possess at least the minimal quality of courage, having a taste for danger as well as for recognizing life as will to power.

of absolute deterritorialization onto the plane of organization and this deterritorialization often times erupts as provocative laughter that says, “we are no longer impressed!”

As we just noted Nietzsche is well aware of two critical things. First is the danger his Zarathustra possesses to those who hear his message because many will believe it to be a grave transgression against what the people that make up the arborescent assemblage “Western morality” see as their permanent values. Second is the time it may take for the kind of paradigm shift he desires to take full effect. The kind of inversion that promulgates a turn to the aesthetic will not happen rapidly although the speed of which it will happen is an unknown. With these two critical things in mind, we can say that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is, in Deleuzian language, a “pure intensity” who must carefully navigate the striated space of the plane of organization. His tact must include knowing not only when to appear and to whom, but also the mode in which to appear to others. This is why many of Zarathustra’s interactions with other human beings are done under the guise of a “costume drama” in which he is at play with appearance, that is, at play with how he appears to others and how others appear to him. It is as if both of these pure intensities—Nietzsche himself in his particular time and place and his Zarathustra—are on a reconnaissance mission with their own modes of expression and content which often includes provocative laughter to seek out and find cracks, to find *fatigue* in the assemblage “Western morality.” Hence their prudence consists in not being exposed or caught by the totalizing elements that would in turn de-mask them.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> To be sure Nietzsche titles one of his sections in *Twilight of the Idols*, “Skirmishes of an Untimely Man.” Moreover many of the friends he corresponded with warned Nietzsche of a possible backlash because of the transgressions inherent in his writings, reminding me of atheist David Hume who also received similar counsel from many of his friends.

It is also precisely the reason Zarathustra refers at times to his laughter as “secret laughter” as opposed to simply just laughing at others who reject his overman. When we say that the assemblage “Western morality,” with all of the characteristics Nietzsche attributes to it, has dominated the world historical-philosophical stage, what we are saying is that this assemblage exists on the actual plane of organization, that is, it has already undergone its own absolute deterritorialization from the virtual state on the plane of consistency. But because the two planes are constantly interacting, what exists on the plane of organization is never rendered permanent. Its existence means that it is always already undergoing its own reterritorialization, the speed of which is variable—its reterritorialization can happen quickly or it may take millennia.<sup>311</sup> The secret laughter of Zarathustra is thus a cautious laughter. Because Zarathustra cannot outright offend, lest he lose the humanity he wishes to save, he must temper his message according to the particular milieu he is in at any given time. Thus his interaction with the saint will be different than his speeches to the human beings he has descended to.

At this point in Nietzsche’s work, Zarathustra’s laughter is secretive for the reasons just mentioned. However, there was initially an opposite phenomena that occurred in which Zarathustra was the target of derisive laughter. This occurs in “Zarathustra’s Prologue.” Normally being the object of derisive or scornful laughter is hardly a pleasant experience, however for Zarathustra, it is an essential moment in his own awakening in terms of the project that he has readied for humankind, which he hopes to bring the eternal comedy of existence in its full shining to the world.

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<sup>311</sup> For example the scientific theory “phrenology” was relatively short lived, existing from the late 1700’s until the mid-19th century. Nietzsche believes “Western morality” has a much longer history dating before even the pre-Socratics hence his judgment in *The Gay Science*; “After Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries,...God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow...” (109/Aphorism 108)

Nietzsche is clear in the prologue the necessity of folly and laughter. Human beings need to recognize that many of their endeavors contain an element of folly at their heart *because* we are human and as such we are always given over to a measure of opacity in our affairs, even the most serious affairs. This is also true for Zarathustra who desires to leave his cave in order to “go under” (*untergehen*), that is, initiate the movement from man to overman. Thus one of the first things Zarathustra utters is wanting “to bestow and distribute [*verschenken und austheilen*] until the wise among human beings have once again enjoyed their folly [*Thorheit*].”<sup>312</sup> We see that Zarathustra stresses the connection of folly *to* wisdom as opposed to a disassociation between the two which Nietzsche believes has gripped ethics, morality, and philosophy in general.

The gravity of Zarathustra’s project becomes evident in the second section of the prologue. As Zarathustra is descending from his cave to make what will be three speeches to the people, he meets the saint. This meeting of the saint and Zarathustra is symbolic of the deepest *parting*. For even though there is a coming together of these two wise human beings it essentially marks that transition in history that Nietzsche desires: the kind of transition that we saw with “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” in which the sun that has reached its zenith is beginning to descend and bring light where there is darkness.

To the saint Zarathustra appears transformed, like a child ready to begin a new playfulness with humankind (this image of a child and the innocence of child’s play will reoccur again, most notably in “On the Three Metamorphoses”). The saint is skeptical of Zarathustra and his project, believing human beings “too imperfect.” This is why the saint has chosen to lead a cloistered life in the forest because he has grown weary of

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<sup>312</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 3/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

human beings and thus only wants to revere God. “With singing, weeping, laughing and growling I praise the god who is my god,”<sup>313</sup> says the saint. The saint laughs at Zarathustra who is descending to human beings whom the saint believes are no longer worthy even of the kind of going under Zarathustra is attempting.

For Zarathustra, however, the saint has failed to grasp a crucial event, perhaps *the* crucial event of the time—the death of God. “Could it be possible! This old saint in his woods has not yet heard the news that *God is dead!*”<sup>314</sup> exclaims Zarathustra to himself. This meeting of the saint and Zarathustra, is a meeting of the untimely. Nietzsche had previously characterized his thinking in *Untimely Meditations* as untimely, that is, his thought was ahead of its time and without ears ready to hear what he had to say. By the time he has completed *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it appears as though he thinks that there might now be ears for Zarathustra’s message or that human beings at this time in history are on the cusp of hearing, or possibly embracing such a message. Hence Nietzsche believes that his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is that critical eruption in history balanced on the fulcrum between past and future. And speaking more narrowly in terms of Zarathustra’s own voice, he “goes down” because he believes there might finally be ears for what were his previous untimely thoughts.

On the other hand, the saint is also untimely but in a critically different manner. One might say that the saint’s time has come or come to pass. Through his own admission, the saint says there is no longer an audience for his teachings and more importantly that the saint has not yet recognized let alone come to grips with the fact of the death of God, which represents Nietzsche’s point of departure in *Thus Spoke*

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 5/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

*Zarathustra*. Thus the saint is untimely in the opposite sense of Nietzsche's untimeliness in that the saint's allegiance is or was to the past and not towards the future. These two notions of the untimely mark the critical intersection of past morality and Zarathustra's project of the future that along with the eternal return, places the most emphasis on the future.

But something additional marks this critical divergence of the saint and Zarathustra and the two notions of untimeliness. It is laughter that marks the very departure between man and god. For after the saint asks Zarathustra what gifts he bears, he tells Zarathustra that he praises God even by way of laughter. But Zarathustra shortly thereafter parts from the saint with these words:

When Zarathustra had heard these words [*diese Worte gehört*] he took his leave of the saint and spoke: "What would I have to give you! But let me leave quickly before I take something from you!"—And so they parted [*trennten*], the oldster and the man, laughing [*lachend*] like two boys laugh.<sup>315</sup>

This laughter is a laughter that separates. It is the laughter of a schism, laughter that in and through its very eruption *is* that schism. The saint's laughter arises from his belief that human beings are no longer worthy of god nor any teaching that Zarathustra might bring to them. Zarathustra's laughter is, again, a laughter of the secret knowledge of the death of god—a terrible knowledge the saint is not yet aware of—as well as the knowledge of the overman and the eternal return that he will attempt to reveal to humankind. We might say that laughter is the symbolic phenomenon that clears the space of all older values based on good and evil so that human beings can once again create life affirming values. To be sure, Zarathustra's laughter at this point is not one of disrespect

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

or scorn aimed at the saint himself. We must bear in mind the saint is laughing as well although from the perspective of not yet being conscious of what Zarathustra is aware of. Zarathustra's laughter simply signifies that in he is no longer *impressed* with morality based upon the distinction of good and evil.<sup>316</sup>

In postmodern thinking, Michel Foucault best encapsulates this kind of moment: a disquieting moment that severs us from our supposed familiarity of things in the stream of time so that we are immersed again in chaos:

[T]he death of God—or, rather, in the wake of that death and in a profound correlation with it—what Nietzsche's thought heralds is the end of his murderer; it is the explosion of man's face in laughter, and the return of masks; it is the scattering of the pro-found stream of time by which he felt himself carried along and whose pressure he suspected in the very being of things; it is the identity of the Return of the Same with the absolute dispersion of man.<sup>317</sup>

Foucault's point is that "the explosion of man's face in laughter" is intimately tied to the death of god as well as those responsible for his murder, namely *us*. It is as if Foucault is saying that the game and the time needed to play it is up and now the once "pro-found stream of time," which is to say the understanding of time as a linear directed flow that supposedly carried us all along to our otherworldly ends, has now exploded. Man is laid bare or, as Foucault says above, "dispersed" and left without essence except for his own freedom...and many masks.

Foucault does not refer to it here, but there seems to be at least some parallel between the death of god, at the hands of his murderers, and Dionysus who was,

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<sup>316</sup> Nietzsche means that in addition to Zarathustra we (Western civilization) are no longer inclined to have our morality enframed by the signifiers "good and evil."

<sup>317</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 420.

according to the myth, chased down in ancient forests and torn to pieces. But Dionysus, as Nietzsche states, “will eternally be reborn and come home out of destruction,”<sup>318</sup> which is a way of saying that what will return is the same, the same being *chaos*. In addition, if we consider Foucault’s remark about “the return of masks” along the same Dionysian lines, then one of these masks is certainly the mask of comedy worn by Dionysus in order to conceal his monstrousness. What we have then in this crucial section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is nothing less than a comedy of grand proportions. It is the simultaneity of order and destruction at the moment of their divergence, a divergence that is marked by nothing other than the laughter of the saint and Zarathustra. If one were to characterize this simultaneity of order and destruction along the lines of the social body it might best be expressed as *chaosmos*, the term Evans uses to describe the agonistic but creative interplay of the many voices within a society that are, on the one hand, their own singular voice, yet on the other hand are shot through with all of the other voices as well. Chaosmos then is a hybrid of both chaos and cosmos and because of its perpetual production of difference is never reducible to either term.<sup>319</sup>

In accordance with Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking, the meeting of Zarathustra and the saint causes absolute divergence with laughter as the phenomenon that best traces out this critical departure. As we saw earlier the rhizomatic assemblage that I referred to as “Nietzsche’s Zarathustra” is in a struggle with the arborescent assemblage “Western morality.” Nothing captures this divergence of Zarathustra and the saint more aptly than Zarathustra’s surreptitious laughter, in the sense that Zarathustra possesses his “secret knowledge” and also because he is aware of the tragic knowledge that is only beginning

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<sup>318</sup> Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, 250/14[89].

<sup>319</sup> Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 35.

to dawn on the rest of humankind. However, we must take into account this notion of divergence and convergence and ask, “Is Nietzsche’s philosophy one of absolute divergence at the expense of convergence?” If not then, “How is this divergence marked by the simultaneous laughter of the saint and Zarathustra to be understood?”

On the one hand Nietzsche, the philosopher who “philosophizes with a hammer,” wants to deconstruct if not destruct those philosophical systems he deems unworthy. If we retrieve the kind of Dionysian terminology that he is fond of, it might appear as if Nietzsche’s goal is absolute divergence as that which undermines the established order of things. And because Nietzsche’s thought and language is so abrasive to many, it appears as if divergence is posited as a goal in itself in which convergence is absolutely excluded.

On the other hand, we must also keep a few things in mind for balance. While I argue that Nietzsche wants what we can call absolute divergence from hostile systems and their propagators—systems that through dissimulation seek to protect the kind of life descending values he wants to reverse—nonetheless the goal is always to maintain a healthy *tension* that, by definition, *requires* philosophical adversaries. This we saw above in the first chapter with his *agōn* with Socrates.

Moreover philosophical systems rarely, if ever, appear as if they arose from a vacuum, that is, detached from a specific historical place and time. Philosophical systems can either build upon previous thought or challenge previous thought but they all, in one way or another, must recognize previous thought. Nietzsche’s philosophy, as untimely and radical as it is, is no different. This becomes most evident when we consider the very nature of language itself, especially as it relates to the particular way in which he uses language (in all of its forms, including parody and laughter) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

With this said, convergence rests on a much deeper premise than the simple need for philosophical adversaries or as a response to the philosophical tradition. It rests on the very foundation of consciousness and its nexus to language. Language is what binds all of us, delivering us by default to the intersection of communication with others. Nietzsche himself is clear about the link between language, consciousness and communication when he insists in *The Gay Science*, “*consciousness in general has developed only under the pressure of the need to communicate;....[It] is really just a net connecting one person with another,*”<sup>320</sup> Convergence, then, is inevitable. To demonstrate this, we can take a fruitful detour to Mikhail Bakhtin’s account of language in terms of dialogic relationships. This detour will allow us to see how language not only binds us to one another in the present but also to the past and future. Moreover Bakhtin, much in the manner of Nietzsche, is keenly aware of language’s power as a legislating, value creating force.

Bakhtin’s major premise is that all language acts possess a vivacity and force, a perpetual kinetic function as opposed to being a stagnant, closed system of signs and signifiers that never change. As such, there is always an inherent tension within any particular socio-linguistic community (as well as a tension between socio-linguistic communities) because of the multitude of heterogeneous forces that interact within it. In Bakhtin’s words, this tension results from, “the co-existence of socio-ideological contradiction between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between socio-ideological different groups in the present, between tendencies, schools,

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<sup>320</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 212/Aphorism 354.

circles, and so forth, all given bodily form.”<sup>321</sup> In other words, language, performatively speaking,<sup>322</sup> is never a complete unchanging universal phenomenon but a hybridization of “two semantic and axiological belief systems” competing within it, and it is always predisposed toward the production of difference.<sup>323</sup>

In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin elaborates on this hybridization of language that explores these tensions. With hybridization, we see how language constantly changes due to its inherent make-up of multiple impulses and perspectives (what Bakhtin calls “‘languages’ of heteroglossia”) that take up a particular “understanding” of the world. As a particular perspective, a tension is inherent in that this perspective is almost always competing against other perspectives. Moreover, hybridization entails the very notion of the other’s language already appropriated in our own voice and vice versa, even if we may think that we are the exclusive executors of that language and value system.<sup>324</sup>

One of the many manifestations of hybridization that Bakhtin examines is comedic parody. Parody, says Bakhtin, allows an author to speak “in someone else’s discourse” and “parody introduces into that discourse a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original one.” Moreover, the voice “having made its home in the other’s discourse, clashes hostilely with its primordial host and forces him to serve directly opposing aims.”<sup>325</sup> The thrust of Bakhtin’s point is that parody, as an example of

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<sup>321</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 364-65.

<sup>322</sup> Bakhtin maintains that, “logical and semantically referential relationships, in order to become dialogic, must be embodied.” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 184)

<sup>323</sup> See Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 304-7. Hybrid construction takes the form of either intentional or nonintentional. (358-59)

<sup>324</sup> For a thorough elaboration on Bakhtin’s notion of language, especially hybridization and its relation to the socio-political body see Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 62-74.

<sup>325</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 193.

intentional hybridization, has within it a tension between two viewpoints: one of which seeks to usurp the other.

What begins to emerge is a close kinship between Nietzsche's thoughts on language—its evaluative function, its designating quality, its “truth” function—and the competing elements within Bakhtin's hybridization of language. And thus far we have seen that comedy, in the form of parody,<sup>326</sup> is one of the ways Nietzsche challenges other philosophers and philosophical history. For example, Nietzsche is clear, in “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” that dissimulation through language is nothing but the attempted preservation of the individual who tries to evaluate and signify the world so as to claim the mantle of fixed truth. In Nietzsche's words:

For that which is to count as ‘truth’ [*Wahrheit*] from this point onwards now becomes fixed [*fixirt*], i.e., a way of designating things is invented which has the same validity and force everywhere, and the legislation of language [*Gesetzgebung der Sprache*] also produces the first laws of truth [*Gesetze der Wahrheit*], for the contrast between truth and lying comes into existence here for the first time.<sup>327</sup>

Nietzsche is clear; language is used by individuals as a legislating force that attempts to designate truth. However, this drive towards universal truth is always only a particular perspective on the world, one that always plays the role of preserving the individual that uses it. Moreover, this impulse of preservation found in discursive practices has already

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<sup>326</sup> Parody can surely evoke laughter and has comic overtones. Although parody has taken on different meanings in different ages, that is, the Greek understanding is distinct from the Roman understanding, nonetheless an element of all parody is imitation. When one imitates one does so usually to invoke a comic effect in reference to the action or agent imitated (cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a 1-17). Thus parody often times, especially in Nietzsche's usage, co-opts what is usually held in serious reverence and targets it for laughter.

<sup>327</sup> Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 143.

appropriated within it the linguistic referential intentions of others.<sup>328</sup> As such, language overflows its intended semantic boundaries. The result, similar to Bakhtin's "languages of heteroglossia," is often a crossing of, or a struggle among, competing value systems or, to use Deleuzian language, antagonistic assemblages.

In terms of philosophy, Nietzsche's point is that this same dynamic of the legislative quality of language is also at work especially as it relates to our epistemological constructs. In the following example Nietzsche doesn't explicitly reference Kant and the schematism in the *Critique of Pure Reason* but the schematism's function in this work bears at least some similarities:

Everything which distinguishes human beings from animals depends on this ability to sublimate [*verflüchtigen*] sensuous metaphors into a schema [*Schema*], in other words, to dissolve an image into a concept [*ein Bild in einen Begriff auflösen*]. This is because something becomes possible in the realm of these schemata [*Schemata*] which could never be achieved in the realm of those sensuous first impressions, namely the construction of a pyramidal order based on castes and degrees, the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, definitions of borders, which now confronts the other, sensuously perceived world as something firmer, more general, more familiar, more human, and hence as something regulatory and imperative [*das Regulirende und Imperativische*].<sup>329</sup>

In other words, the immediate, rich, individual sensual metaphors (what would be appearances conditioned by the intuitions of space and time) become sublimated to more

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<sup>328</sup> See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 202.

<sup>329</sup> Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 146.

and more universal designations in and through language. This is because the schematism works as a homogenizing procedure that is able to link the first sensual impressions of a given object to what are otherwise heterogeneous categories radically cut off from objects in intuition. The process of the schematism, then, which itself is powered by the force of imagination<sup>330</sup> come to “shape” objects of intuition so that judgments are possible (one of Kant’s examples is the concept “dog” or the rule by which the schematism powered by imagination can “trace the shape of such a four-footed animal in a general way.”<sup>331</sup>) In turn, these judgments in the form of universal designations take on a legislative, juridical force as they are appropriated consciously or not by subjects and their use within the intersubjective social body. In the wider scope of philosophy, these universal forms might be Plato’s *eidē* (forms), the God of some scholastics, or Kant’s categorical imperative based in pure reason. But it is these “sensuous first impressions” and appearances within becoming that Nietzsche wants to stress as being more fundamental and important. As Babich succinctly has it:

Apart from Nietzsche’s epistemologically bold style, he merely reminds us that empirical reality (i.e., “nature”) ought never be identified with the ideal or metaphysical world of Platonic truth. The real world has its closest family resemblance to the world of becoming or change first recognized by the Ionian philosophers. This empirical reality remains incommensurable with the Eleatic or Platonic ideal of truth.<sup>332</sup>

For Babich (and myself), Nietzsche recognizes the fact that science is unable adequately to bridge the divide between the intelligible, that is, Being and the sensual world of

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<sup>330</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A141/B180.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, A140/B179.

<sup>332</sup> Babich, “The Culture of Science as Art,” in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 4.

becoming. A satisfactory ground can never truly be established to include language in its attempt to reconcile these two realms. Again as Babich has it:

Because reality is in flux away from what has been and toward what is not yet, reality—that is: empirical nature—is always change. It is, like ourselves, part of that species of being hostage in time to the immutable reality of the dynamic mode of becoming—as both what is *and* what is not. Because of the “stone” fact that no fact is stone, the supreme law of philosophic knowledge lacks any purchase on the empirical world because what is is never beyond change or time.<sup>333</sup>

This cleft between Being and becoming is a schism that Nietzsche often exploits and he does so on in terms of honesty (*Redlichkeit*) and its transgression. And this transgression often takes the form of provocative laughter.

Returning to parody, we see that Nietzsche utilizes this comic device to call into question those philosophical systems that attempt to signify the whole, that is, to homogenize heterogeneity. This surely has parallels to Bakhtin’s understanding of parody and its far reaching power when he asserts, “one can parody superficial verbal forms, but one can also parody the very deepest principles governing another’s discourse.”<sup>334</sup>

Laughter, too, is also a form of communication, albeit in a much different mode than language, possessing its own intrinsic pragmatic function that allow for a diversity of expression. Most notable about laughter, though, is that when we consider Zarathustra’s pervasive use of this phenomenon coupled with Nietzsche’s turn to the shining aesthetic, it seems faithfully to fulfill its function as something that moves

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 194.

beyond the usually privileged modes of conventional, logical, or philosophical discourse such as dialectic. Bakhtin too is clear on laughter's relationship to reality:

Laughter is a specific aesthetic relationship to reality, but not one that can be translated into logical language; that is, it is a specific means for artistically visualizing and comprehending reality and, consequently, a specific means for structuring an artistic image, plot, or genre. Enormous creative, and therefore genre-shaping, power was possessed by ambivalent carnivalistic laughter. This laughter could grasp and comprehend a phenomenon in the process of change and transition, it could fix in a phenomenon both poles of its evolution in their uninterrupted and creative renewing changeability: in death birth is foreseen and in birth death, in victory defeat and in defeat victory, in crowning a decrowning. Carnival laughter does not permit a single one of these aspects of change to be absolutized or to congeal in one-sided seriousness.<sup>335</sup>

Bakhtin presents us with an apt image and one that resonates with what is perhaps Nietzsche's goal (Deleuze and Guattari's as well). The "goal" is, in a sense, an anti-goal in that no single phenomenon ought to exist that ossifies itself above all others for all time. In other words, the goal is the acknowledgement of multiplicity and *becoming*. The carnival, and its attendant "carnivalistic laughter," is in a sense a microcosm of the world of becoming with all of its settings, characters, beauty and absurdity. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin speaks of laughter's transformative power in terms of multiplicity, what he calls "ambivalent wholeness," when he asserts:

Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and imitation, from didacticism,

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 164.

naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness.”<sup>336</sup>

A brief detour to *Beyond Good and Evil* sheds light on Nietzsche’s insight that the present age is an age of costumes and concealment but one that is ripe for the kind of parody and laughter that frees. The same carnival laughter that Bakhtin maintains affirms our becoming in time is used by Nietzsche as a platform from which to project a parody of world history which is to say, a parody of transcendent Being dressed in a multiplicity of costumes:

We are the first age to be educated *in puncto* [with respect to] “costumes,” I mean of morals, articles of faith, artistic tastes, and religions, and prepared as no age has ever been for a carnival in the grand style (*zum Karneval grossen Stils*), for the most spiritually carnivalesque laughter (*Fasching-Gelächter*) and high spirits, for the transcendental heights of the highest inanity and Aristophanean world mockery. Perhaps it’s that we still discover a realm of our *invention* here, a realm where we can still be original too, as parodists of world history (*Parodisten der Weltgeschichte*) or buffoons of God, or something like that,—perhaps it’s that, when nothing else from today has a future, our *laughter* (*unser Lachen*) is the one thing that does!<sup>337</sup>

Written in 1886, this aphorism encapsulates Nietzsche’s project of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Zarathustra is the costumed one among the people who may not yet be ready

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<sup>336</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 124.

<sup>337</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 114/Aphorism 223.

to hear his message. Amidst this costumed age of tragedy and morality, Zarathustra enacts his parody ensuring that if anything has a certain future in this time of nihilism that he alone discerns it is laughter.

Zarathustra's setting also takes place among many characters and places. Zarathustra's laughter, like carnivalistic laughter, finds itself in the in-between of the past with its absolutist moral dictums of good and evil, and a future free of such pronouncements. Because Zarathustra refuses to replace one moral system with another (Zarathustra never demands obedience to a moral system) his laughter is that aesthetic phenomenon that clears the space of all absolutes so that all can laugh once again. Thus carnivalistic laughter is an image of humanity free of the weight of moral heaviness. It is a humanity that finds itself in a new aesthetic reattunement to existence—it is humanity at play. Given all that we have seen thus far, there is hardly a philosopher who fulfils the potential to communicate the most serious issues in and through the use of comedy and laughter than Nietzsche.

What we can conclude, then, about the relationship Nietzsche's thought has to divergence and convergence is that on the one hand, he wants to contribute to the absolute divergence away from those thinkers who promote what he views as life descending values. In this sense, all forms of Nietzsche's language—poetry, the aphoristic style, provocative laughter—act as subversive agents, as pure intensities ready to act within the philosophical tradition in order to destabilize and topple it so that chaos can be *recognized*.

But the divergence from such (totalizing) systems is one that returns the philosophical project back to the freedom that is unleashed from their collapse. When we

recognize and come to grips with tragic knowledge and nihilism, a knowledge that is surely frightening, we can in turn embrace the resulting freedom. And this freedom by its very nature is one that engenders multiplicity as opposed to totality. Unlike domination, multiplicity restores a healthy tension that perpetuates many genetic lines of communication and development that occur on the margins of any assemblage—even those that appear to be permanent. Nietzsche's Zarathustra is at war with the arborescent assemblages that have held sway for so long on their nomadic edges, where the expression and content, that is far from its center, starts to dissolve, lose force, and meet the laughter that eventually deterritorializes it. But before this grand usurpation by Zarathustra, he must first overcome a species of laughter itself. It is one that is directed at him as it has been directed at many philosophers for millennia.

The difficulties that Nietzsche's Zarathustra faces are no different. Zarathustra's secret laughter is countered with laughter of a very different sort when he initially descends to the people to make his three speeches on the overman, going under, and the last man. If the shared laughter of him and the saint signaled the kind of radical divergence explored above, then the laughter of the people whom he has descended to is uni-directional—it is directed *at him*. The cause for Zarathustra's need of three speeches instead of one is that he is misunderstood in his first two speeches (although misunderstood is once again a very generous appraisal). His first attempt to explain the overman as the meaning of the earth appear not to be understood at all. Even at the close of Zarathustra's second speech the human beings laugh, demanding to see the tightrope walker, failing to grasp his deeper significance as that which hovers between man and superman. For them, he is only a performer to provide a spectacle for their comfortable

lives. Hence at the beginning of his third speech Nietzsche states, “When Zarathustra had spoken these words [heralding the overman] he looked again at the people and fell silent. ‘There they stand,’ he said to his heart, ‘they laugh [*lachen sie*], they do not understand me, I am not the mouth for these ears.’”<sup>338</sup> Zarathustra and his message have now become the object of scornful laughter that presents a challenging hurdle to him and his teaching. But before broaching this particular episode in Zarathustra’s going under, a detour by way of the ancients will help shed light on this particular phenomenon of scornful laughter.

To be sure, this notion of scornful laughter had its comedic and philosophical precedent long before Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. We can look to the ancients to see this particular phenomenon on display in the works of Plato and Aristophanes. In both *Lysistrata* and *The Assemblywomen* we see this phenomena of scornful laughter directed at the women of these two inspired comedies.

Both *Lysistrata* and *Praxagora* represent a threat to the normative conventions of ancient Athens, especially patriarchal power. *Lysistrata* is motivated by a noble endeavor, which is to end the Peloponnesian War and bring peace. To achieve this she and the other women agree to withhold all sexual intercourse with their lovers and husbands. Of course the men returning from war are looking forward to the “release” of their sexual energy only to realize that the painful abstinence they are being subject to is due to *Lysistrata* and her condition that peace be restored. The men are flabbergasted (to say the least!) but we as comic spectators revel in this laughter provoking scheme and the scorn and contempt the men have, at least initially, for this ploy against them.

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<sup>338</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 9/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

Praxagora, too, seeks change. In *The Assemblywomen*, the change she seeks is a new form of justice in the Athenian *polis*. Justice here, though, is of a very different and comedic kind than the men of Athens are accustomed to. Believing that she and her followers can administer justice much better than the men, Praxagora initiates changes that are more socially distributive. For example, before a man can sleep with an attractive young woman, he must first have intercourse with an older, less attractive woman. Once again we as spectators of Aristophanes' genius find these situations laughter provoking even though many of the characters within the comedy, most notably the men, can respond only with scornful laughter at the attempt by the women to usurp their social privileges.

These images are certainly absurd, which is to say that as *paralogos* they are set apart from formal *logos*. No such ploy by the women of ancient Athens ever happened—let alone succeeded—in ending a war. Nor did the political apparatus ever fall into the hands of women, facilitating a change or inversion of social norms deeply entrenched in this ancient society. Yet, in the very absurdity of these comic images lies the deepest and most profound philosophical import. In fact, because of the scornful laughter they produce amongst the characters—the Magistrates and Blepyrus' of Aristophanes' imagination—we are brought face to face with the seriousness of the issues themselves. Indeed, the shining appearance of this comedy *is* a testament to the philosophical issues and not an escape from them providing us with vicarious images of ourselves.

Philosophy, too, harbors its own comedic value. Generally speaking, laughter and playfulness abound in Plato's *Republic*. The particular type of scornful laughter we are examining here plays a key role at multiple points in the *Republic*. But there is one

example from this particular work that presents itself as a supreme example of this type of laughter and its implication for the philosopher's endeavor. Just as Zarathustra has to surmount the scorn of the human beings he has descended to, in the *Republic* it is Socrates who has to grapple with the scornful laughter of the overbearing Thrasymachus.

When Thrasymachus appears in the dialogue, he responds to Socrates' supposed inability or reluctance to answer the question about what the just is. Thrasymachus, who surely represents an instinctual Dionysian type that Nietzsche admires, demands the question to be answered by Socrates; "answer yourself and say what you assert the just to be."<sup>339</sup> Socrates responds that if he and Polemarchus have made any mistakes in the consideration of the arguments, they are unintentional. Exasperated by the nuance that dialectic often requires, Thrasymachus responds in the following way:

He listened, burst out laughing very scornfully [*anekanchase te mala sardanion*], and said, "Heracles! Here is that habitual irony of Socrates. I knew it, and I predicted to these fellows that you wouldn't be willing to answer, that you would be ironic and do anything rather than answer if someone asked you something."<sup>340</sup>

Thrasymachus's scornful laughter is indicative of two major things. First, the usual Greek word for laughter is *gelōs*, the infinitive verb being *gelaō* "to laugh." Here, however, Plato uses *sardanion* which, as a species of laughter, partakes in its own precise meaning according to the particular social milieu in which it is expressed. The word *sardanion*, meaning "scornful laughter," is derived from a type of plant from Sardinia that when eaten "caused facial convulsions resembling those of sardonic laughter, usually followed

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<sup>339</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 336c.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 337a.

by death.”<sup>341</sup> This kind of scornful laughter, then, is allied with Thrasymachus’s contempt for Socrates and the dialectical method. Thrasymachus wants a direct answer to the question about what is the just. He becomes exasperated at Socrates who refutes the answers only of those who have proffered a response to the question. Thrasymachus’s exasperation, then, is aimed at the very dialectic that will, if one comports oneself properly to its questioning, disclose the truth or at least bring one closer to it through its essential questioning. We can say then that his scornful laughter is an attempt to rout philosophical *logos* from the space being created for it by Socrates. It is not letting philosophical *logos* clear the space for truth or its search. In this sense Plato’s appropriation of this particular kind of scornful laughter (*sardanion*) originating from a far away land is indicative of the kind of foreignness that Thrasymachus’s exhibits as an interlocutor in the dialectical exchange of the *Republic*. Thrasymachus’s *logos* is alien to the true sense of justice that Socrates is attempting to disclose. This notion of scornful laughter will gain more significance momentarily at the conclusion of Socrates’ dialogue with Thrasymachus.

The second significance revolves around irony. Thrasymachus asserts that Socrates is being “habitually ironic.” But Thrasymachus’s understanding of irony represents a marked difference from true Socratic irony. For Thrasymachus, irony means that Socrates is unwilling to answer when asked by another interlocutor even though he could answer. In other words he believes Socrates to be deceptive. Socratic irony however, like dialectic, partakes in much finer distinctions. Socratic irony is saying one thing although meaning another but always for the sake of moving the dialogue forward

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<sup>341</sup> See *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “sardonic,” <http://www.etymonline.com/>. Also see entry for *sardanion* in Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised and augmented by H. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

as well as providing a “cushion” to those who offer accounts of their own that ultimately fail. Socratic irony then is used with other interlocutors so that they will hopefully follow the lead of dialectic to a more enlightened account. Thrasymachus, however, believes he has exposed Socrates’ motivations and therefore will not succumb to his cross examination. But Thrasymachus ends up unknowingly investing himself in the very dialectic he seeks to avoid, thus succumbing in the end to true, Socratic irony.

Although here is not the place to litigate the twists and turns of Socrates’ interaction with Thrasymachus concerning justice, nonetheless recall that Thrasymachus is advocating that the just is “nothing other than the advantage of the stronger”<sup>342</sup> so that the laws governing a city will inevitably favor the rulers. Socrates, however, demonstrates that surely those who rule will on occasion make laws or rules that are not to their advantage so that when the ruled obey them the rulers will have acted against their own self-interests. Moreover, Thrasymachus believes that the teaching of rhetoric to those who are to rule should be the norm. Thrasymachus is more interested in what *sounds* good than Socrates’ pursuit of what *is* the good. This presents its own level of irony in that Thrasymachus is used to teaching and giving long persuasive speeches (for large sums of money) in order to persuade the audience and potential rulers. But here Thrasymachus, first, is unable to give a sustained account of justice to even one person, or to Socrates himself and, second, he has made it clear to Socrates that he wants Socrates to answer not only quickly but decisively—as if the question of justice in the *polis* were

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<sup>342</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 338c.

trivial enough to be answered in such a way. When Socrates repeatedly counters Thrasymachus's definitions of justice, it is Thrasymachus who attempts to flee.<sup>343</sup>

Socrates inevitably shows why Thrasymachus's definition of justice falls short. He is merely prescribing justice (that the strong should rule) and not providing the essence or form of justice. But in terms of the scornful laughter that Thrasymachus directed at Socrates (keeping in mind the etymology of *sardanion*) a poignant event transpires after Socrates shows how "the just man is like the wise and good, but the unjust man like the bad and unlearned."<sup>344</sup> An inversion happens in which Thrasymachus appears to undergo the symptoms of the scornful laughter he impulsively directed at Socrates moments before; "Now, Thrasymachus did not agree to all of this so easily as I tell it now, but he dragged his feet and resisted, and he produced a wonderful quantity of sweat, for it was summer. And then I saw what I had not yet seen before—Thrasymachus blushing."<sup>345</sup> To be sure, it is at this moment that Thrasymachus senses fear although the source of this fear is far from any brute, physical threat. It is from Socrates' *logos* whose strength simply lies in the truth that it discloses.

Just as Socrates demonstrates that the just are happier and stronger than the unjust, we see that the very scornful laughter directed at Socrates in order to mock him has now reversed and found its target in the one doing the mocking. The blood rushing to the face when blushing is similar to a wound. In this sense then it mimics scornful laughter and the symptoms of the one who ingests the poisonous plant from Sardinia.

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<sup>343</sup> Socrates admonishes, "Thrasymachus, you demonic man, do you toss in such an argument, and have it in mind to go away before teaching us adequately or finding out whether it is so or not? Or do you suppose you are trying to determine a small matter and not a course of life on the basis of which each of us would have the most profitable existence?" (*Republic*, 344d-e).

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 350c.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 350c-d.

Moreover, when we attend closely to the layered definition of *elenchus* and its verbal forms we come to see that this Socratic way of questioning means, among other things, “to disgrace, put to shame”<sup>346</sup> exactly the way Thrasymachus’s blushing from shame indicates. As we saw in the Introduction, Aquinas will describe centuries after the ancient Greeks that sardonic laughter or scornful laughter, is a physiological phenomenon, its locus the face. Even the throat from which it erupts—the throat functioning as the physiological manifestation of language—is the cause of something pre-linguistic and antecedent to true philosophical dialectic. Just as death results from the ingestion of the Sardonian plant, Thrasymachus’s scornful laughter initially directed at Socrates in order to make him blush ends up signaling his own defeat. Like Plato’s use of the foreign *sardanion* as opposed to the more well known and conventional *gelōs*, Thrasymachus and his account of justice is itself foreign to a truly just *polis*. Indeed, Thrasymachus’s account presents a real danger to the *polis* and the subjects who would constitute it. As one of the strong and unjust Thrasymachus’s “death” occurs because of the very Socratic dialectic he sought to avoid and quell. In the long quest for justice that the *Republic* pursues, Thrasymachus’s red faced scornful laughter becomes indistinguishable from his red faced blushing signaling his own undoing.

What all of these examples of scornful laughter demonstrate (and there are many more), is that the philosopher more often times than not will experience his or her own *aporia* in terms of his teaching. Scornful laughter then is indicative of dangerousness and transgression. For the many (*hoi polloi*), the philosopher often times appears threatening, even contemptible because he usually attempts to introduce new teachings or different perspectives to others who are comfortable with a given tradition and its attendant power

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<sup>346</sup> Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 531.

structure derived from the discursive practices of that age (or any other practice). Or, if they are in positions of power the philosopher may appear as a danger to that power because he facilitates a new consciousness of the human situation. Nietzsche's Zarathustra is no different. So it is his task to navigate the opposition he faces in the form of scornful laughter in order to convey his wisdom.

The similarities between the kind of scornful laughter directed at Zarathustra and the scornful laughter directed at Socrates ends here. Socrates is engaged in dialectic, that is, he is engaged with those who are willing to participate honestly in its mechanics. Dialectic, in its broadest sense, is that which is made manifest through *logos*, thus seeking the best account through question and answer.<sup>347</sup> In the *Republic* the question is, "What is justice?" Socrates and his interlocutors explore this question. Nietzsche's Zarathustra, on the other hand, at least in terms of the people he descends to, is not engaged in dialectic. Zarathustra does not seek the kind of back and forth in *logos* that dialectic requires. He is there as a herald in order to proclaim the overman as the meaning of the earth. The pertinent question for Zarathustra, his audience, and as us readers of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is, "Are we ready to hear and accept his teaching?"

But what if we were to examine this phenomenon of scornful laughter from the opposite direction? Instead of looking at instances taken from the ancients, instances that no doubt disclose their own particular wisdom, what if we pivoted towards the future where the signs and symbols of dialectical thinking, which have shaped philosophy for so long, have come under scrutiny? This is relevant especially in our present era where

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<sup>347</sup> Dialectic in its Socratic sense is the art of philosophical discourse. It seeks to give an account for a position, or the Being of a thing, in which all of the assumptions of that position have been explored so that no inconsistencies remain. This is why in its broadest sense I define it as that which makes the Being of something manifest (from *dia-* "through" and *legein* "speak").

dialectical thinking, at best, is seen as only one type of discourse among the supposed throng of endless discourse that characterizes postmodernism.

As we saw with Deleuze and Guattari, Nietzsche's thinking is given a voice through Zarathustra. This voice constitutes a rhizomatic assemblage that attempts to deterritorialize the kind of philosophical thinking best characterized as arborescent and whose assemblage attempts to assimilate, to make "the same," what is other. Zarathustra is a voice, but it is one voice among many. Zarathustra's voice is attempting to emphasize a perspective that calls into question all previous, totalizing systems that imposed, in either a direct or indirect way, a compulsory allegiance to or tacit recognition of their supremacy. Previously attempted divergence from these assemblages could bring rejection, ostracism, and even death (for example, the supposed apostates of natural science whose work and discoveries challenged the authority of their day). When we look at the scornful laughter directed at Zarathustra many things begin to emerge in terms of expression and content on the plane of organization. Zarathustra begins to emerge as an abstract machine seeking to disrupt these supposed ossified edifices through the deterritorializing effects of laughter. Evans describes Deleuze and Guattari's notions of expression and content this way:

The form of expression is a semiotic system, whether we are talking about the genetic code on the level of genes or the language and coded practices of a group.

The form of content is that to which the form of expression is related, whether we are speaking of genetic material, or the members and surroundings of a group.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 43.

The laughter of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, including the scornful laughter of the townspeople to whom Zarathustra descends, also finds its place among the expression and content of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy.

First, the scornful laughter of the people already exists on the plane of organization in that it has its origin in the people who direct it at Zarathustra's speeches. Thus in terms of content (which itself is made up of form and substance), the people who laugh, which is to say those embodied subjects who gesture at Zarathustra with their laughter, compose the substance part of content. The form is composed of the multitude of these bodies that coalesce in Zarathustra's particular time to form a particular community. Nietzsche writes, "When Zarathustra came into the nearest town lying on the edge of the forest, he found many people gathered in the marketplace, for it had been promised that a tightrope walker would perform."<sup>349</sup> However, what we must always keep in mind is that for Nietzsche community here would not mean a singular, topical place, a "town on the edge of a forest," but would entail humankind itself, that is, the community that is the world. Metaphorically speaking it is a town as a microcosm of the world on the edge of a forest, the forest being symbolic of the unknown and what is alien. Nietzsche believes human beings exist on the edge of this wilderness of the unknown or what was described above as an inversion of all that is familiar and its attendant loss of all previously ascribed values.

Second, expression that also has the division of form and substance constitutes the "semiotic systems" of the human beings as they respond to Zarathustra. In other words, the form that expression takes is the language that they employ in response to Zarathustra's provocative message such as their calling out for the tightrope walker, that

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<sup>349</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 5/"Zarathustra's Prologue."

is, to witness *his* danger as opposed to “living dangerously” themselves. The substance of Zarathustra’s audience (again, the town and townspeople are a metaphor for humankind) would be all of the symbols and icons that the people employ in terms of their discursive practices (religious symbols, signs, logos and so forth). In light of Deleuze and Guattari’s system of absolute deterritorialization, how ought laughter be understood? In this particular case what role does the scornful laughter of the townspeople play? The question is pertinent because it calls into question laughter itself.

The enactment of laughter appears not to be language proper. It is not a word among words in a discourse, thus it seems as though the laughter of the townspeople does not quite fit within the semiotic systems of expression. However laughter, as we have seen, does communicate. It is on the one hand a physiological phenomenon of our body (face, throat, larynx, diaphragm etc.) and as a gesture, a physiological gesture, it is closely allied with the content that is the body. But even though the act of laughter itself is not a word, it is an expression nonetheless, even though it appears to lie in the in-between area between actual content (an embodied person) and expression (language). As communication, it does signify many things. Perhaps Nietzsche is communicating to us that, at this point in history, the townspeople and potential “last men” either refuse to respond or unable to respond in the kind of elaborate linguistic, philosophical discourse to Zarathustra’s message of the *Übermensch* as the meaning of the earth. They can only offer their scornful laughter and we can see that it indicates two main things.

First, the scornful laughter of the people signifies that they either do not *understand* Zarathustra’s message, or that they understand it but are not willing to *accept* it, or a combination of both. Zarathustra seems to suggest the later, saying of the people,

“they do not understand me, I am not the mouth for these ears.”<sup>350</sup> The advent of Zarathustra on the philosophical scene, whether within the drama of the text or outward as a herald of a return to the earth and its fundamental meaning of the *Übermensch*, is going to meet with resistance, although a resistance that makes up much of the kind of tension Nietzsche approves of.

Second, the scornful laughter of the people expresses their comfort with the kind of assemblage which protects a way of life they have become accustomed to. We can say that the expression of this assemblage is the kind of language that evolves along with its institutions. For example, there is the Judeo-Christian language of the church, such as the Ten Commandments, or Immanuel Kant’s language of duty in the form of the categorical imperative that “sublimates sensuous metaphors into a schema”<sup>351</sup> of pure reason of which we are to be irrevocably bound. The human beings that constitute Zarathustra’s audience (which in essence are we who are Nietzsche’s actual heirs and readers), are not willing to surrender their semiotic systems that protect a certain way of life they have become accustomed to.

This is why laughter, whether the people’s or Zarathustra’s, signify a fault line that runs along the expression of both assemblages as they come into contact. The assemblage of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is novel compared to the entrenched assemblage of Western morality. It is just coming into its own being. This is why Nietzsche, as well as his Zarathustra, must temper his powerful message to the people who, as he quickly learns, are unassailable in the beginning. Thus Zarathustra needs to first find companions.

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 9/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

<sup>351</sup> Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, 146. Nietzsche also states in *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, “Thinking rationally is interpreting according to a scheme we cannot cast away.” (110/5[22]).

This is also why *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the kind of work that it is, namely an inspired *dramatic work* as opposed to the kind of philosophical “position paper” one might expect from a philosopher. Poetry, especially the kind that flows from the pen of Nietzsche and the mouth of Zarathustra, allows for a playfulness that in the end will hopefully help undermine the rigid, arborescent assemblage known here as “Western morality.” And we can also see that Nietzsche’s own lived bodily experience with its pervasive pain, his nomadic wanderings, his devotion to close friends—in essence what would be the content in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s thought in *A Thousand Plateaus*—have allowed his expression to take this experience and poeticize it into the form that it is. Evans, in accordance with Deleuze and Guattari, refers to this interaction of content and expression as “reciprocal presupposition,” stating:

[P]erceiving (as content) can move ahead of saying (as expression) in what it reveals of our surroundings—even disrupting or transforming the particular discourse in play at the time; discourse can affect what we do and are able to perceive, often opening up a space for new perceptions. An experience, for example, twists the poet’s idiom into a new expressions; a new way of speaking about things reveals dimensions of reality we had not previously noted.<sup>352</sup>

Nietzsche’s philosophy in general and his Zarathustra, in particular through their provocative laughter and poetic style, attune us to just these new ways of thinking and perceiving.

Returning to Zarathustra’s third speech to the human beings he has descended to, he realizes that he must somehow address the scornful laughter that is targeted at him, a laughter that betrays the unwillingness of humankind to accept his teaching if in fact they

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<sup>352</sup> Evans, *The Multivoiced Body*, 142.

even understand his message. In order to do this he gives a speech on the last man. Zarathustra says that the last man is the one who is truly contemptible; “Thus I shall speak to them of the most contemptible person: but he is *the last human being*.”<sup>353</sup>

Why, though, is the last man contemptible? Zarathustra says it is because the last man has pride. This pride however is not contemptible in the normal moral sense, such that it is an over-abundance of hubris. It is contemptible because they possess pride without reason to be prideful. Rejecting the overman and using language proper to the kind of messenger that he is, Zarathustra reveals that they are essentially content living according to the conventions of the past, of what has been prescribed for them in their education. The language that Nietzsche uses here denotes a sort of unhealthy contentment in which the last men no longer possess the kind of chaos that would stir their souls into going under to something more human than human, namely the overman. Hence Zarathustra says of them:

Beware! The time approaches when human beings no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human [*über den Menschen*], and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whirl! I say to you: one must still have chaos in oneself [*Chaos in sich haben*] in order to give birth to a dancing star.<sup>354</sup>

In essence Zarathustra is trying to convey that the last men are those who are contemptible and thus should be the object of scornful laughter. But this epiphany can not happen unless the last men recognize it, which is to say that they have to *image themselves*, that is, see themselves as the last human beings otherwise change is impossible. This is why the image of the tightrope walker is of great significance to

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<sup>353</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 9/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

Nietzsche. The tightrope walker is not only a profound symbol of that which hovers between man and superman, he also symbolizes in his very deed the need to live dangerously in order to tread this path. And the dangerousness here is precisely the message Zarathustra hopes to convey in terms of a new founding. However, this dangerousness is lost on the people. They do not yet understand his message of nihilism and the need for the overman and moreover the last men equate comfort with happiness and not danger; “‘We invented happiness’—say the last human beings, blinking.”<sup>355</sup>

At the end of Zarathustra’s final speech an *aporia* is reached. Zarathustra realizes that he has failed to persuade humankind of the need for the overman. If he is to succeed, he must first find the ears for his message not in the great mass of people but in a few creative companions like himself.<sup>356</sup> The scornful laughter directed at him by the people is indeed the symbol of this *aporia*. In other words, the *aporia* is marked by their scornful laughter. Just as we saw at the beginning of his third speech when the people laugh at him and fail to understand him, the same occurs at the end of this speech ensuring the need to continue “going under.” Zarathustra whispers to himself, “And now they look at me and laugh, and in laughing they hate me too. There is ice in their laughter.”<sup>357</sup> To be sure this scornful laughter provides the bookends to Zarathustra’s initial foray from his cave into the world.

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 10/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

<sup>356</sup> Zarathustra proclaims, “It dawned on me: let Zarathustra speak not to the people, but instead to companions! Zarathustra should not become the shepherd and dog of a herd!” (Ibid., 14/Section 9, First Part). In other words Zarathustra does not want the herd. He wants to be robbers of sheep.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 11/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

### III. Lions, Laughter, Affirmation.

Perhaps the greatest image of laughter that Nietzsche presents to us in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is not Zarathustra but instead the lion. The roaring laughter of the lion is emblematic of noble instincts and life affirmation. As such, it stands in stark contrast to the leveling kind of scornful laughter that was directed at Zarathustra by humankind in the prologue. Instead of laughter of contempt aimed at his teaching, the laughter of the lion symbolizes first and foremost a response to Western reason and morality. It says, better yet, it *roars* “I am no longer impressed!”

The image of the lion is first introduced in the prologue as part of Zarathustra’s first speech to humankind where he implores them to accept the overman as the meaning of the earth and forego “otherworldly” hopes. At this early stage Zarathustra is trying to convey the contempt they should hold for the things they have held in the highest esteem, such as their moral systems or epistemological pursuits based in reason. For example he says, “What matters my reason? Does it crave knowledge like the lion its food? It is poverty and filth and a pitiful contentment!”<sup>358</sup> Zarathustra says that reason craves knowledge the way the lion craves food. I interpret this to mean that if reason is to be of any value then it must be a reason that works *towards* new knowledge as that which affirms life as opposed to a *return* to an origin such as a Platonic original, or more generally anything that is posited as essential but lies outside the scope of life itself. In other words, reason ought to devour the old the way the lion devours its prey. In order to demolish reason as it has been understood and used until now requires courage and the ability to laugh at what formerly was held in the highest esteem.

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 7/“Zarathustra’s Prologue.”

This requires a deep scrutiny of reason itself, raising serious questions about its use and purpose. Does Nietzsche call for the abandonment of reason in life or is reason simply to refocus itself and crave something new? As I maintained in the first chapter, Nietzsche does not embrace the abandonment of the Apollonian in favor of the Dionysian. And in the second chapter it became clear that he doesn't want to disavow science and logic either. The same is true here. It is less an "either/or" proposition—either reason or not—but more of the proper role of reason. Mindful of the notion of limit and transgression, Nietzsche wants to say of reason that what began as an unbounded optimism has now not only run its course, but has delimited its own limits and thus led to the kind of pessimism and resignation that is fatal to life. For Nietzsche, the history of philosophy from Plato onwards has been the hegemony of reason and as such has worked against life. This culminated in the thought of Schopenhauer who professed, like Kant, that the thing-in-itself was unknowable and that life as will in-itself can only be unsatisfied desire.<sup>359</sup> In turn this lack of certain knowledge that ensures a constant desiring could only relegate life to despondency, even suffering. For Nietzsche, the blind adherence to reason can only by its very nature, lead to pessimism and skepticism, unlike his eternal return that says "yes" to life and wills it "once again." Laurence Lampert writes of reason's decline at its own hands:

In this symbolic way, the old tradition slays itself: the tradition that has mastered the world with its rational gravity in search of eternal security and that now lies in

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<sup>359</sup> Although Nietzsche is very critical of Kant and Schopenhauer for different reasons (he especially rejects Kant's practical philosophy and Schopenhauerian pessimism), he also appreciates them too because their thinking, intentional or not, disclosed the limits of knowledge (Kant), and the insatiable will (Schopenhauer). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 18, Nietzsche states, "The hardest-fought victory of all was won by the enormous courage and wisdom of *Kant* and *Schopenhauer*, a victory over the optimism which lies hidden in the nature of logic and which in turn is the hidden foundation of our culture."

the ruins of its necessary pessimism, is finally “stoned” to death by the thought that life as it is emerges eternally out of the enigmatic whole.<sup>360</sup>

What Nietzsche wants to call attention to actually *preserves* a good measure of reason by showing that if it is understood as not supported by “the webs of any cosmic spider,” that is, if it is understood to have limits “then reason itself can be reasonably employed to support the ideal that is the opposite of world denial.”<sup>361</sup> The key once again is twofold: first, to recognize what Nietzsche sees as the fundamental *irrational* genesis of the rational impulse and two, to exercise the kind of intellectual honesty (*Redlichkeit*) that allows for this recognition. As he puts it in *Daybreak*, “How did rationality arrive in the world? Irrationality, as might be expected: by a chance accident. If we want to know what that chance accident was we shall have to guess it, as one guesses the answer to a riddle.”<sup>362</sup> Nietzsche’s phrasing, his use of guessing the “chance accident,” suggests that in guessing we assume a similar stance as if one were answering “a riddle.” This alludes to tragedy and tragic knowledge itself, similar to Oedipus’s guessing of the riddle of the Sphinx which led to his demise. So in essence, it is not the vanquishing of science or logic that Nietzsche prescribes but, as Babich maintains, “Since science cannot critique itself, since the problem of science cannot be posed on the ground of science, Nietzsche proposes the perspective of the healing power of art.”<sup>363</sup> If science is to be of any value then it must serve life and to do so it must be seen, as he asserts in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “through the prism of the artist.”<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 167.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>362</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 77/123.

<sup>363</sup> Babich, “The Culture of Science as Art,” in *Nietzsche, Theories of Knowledge, and Critical Theory*, 9.

<sup>364</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5/Section 2 of the preface to the second edition.

If we understand this in a historical context, Nietzsche might also have in mind that if our reason is in service to life, then the knowledge it ought to pursue should find its impetus in that which is unhistorical. History should be used only as a springboard forward and not something to be simply revered and ossified into facts, events, and rituals or as something we blindly copy. Thus it appears that we need to *unlearn much* if we are to acquire the kind of knowledge that serves life and the future. The image of the lion works in favor of this unlearning, in that as an image of consumption, it devours its prey just as Zarathustra wants to unlearn much that has been handed down from history to the present.

One of the most notable images of the lion occurs in the first part of the section titled, “On the Three Metamorphoses.” Nietzsche uses the lion image once again to illustrate the kind of spirit needed to throw off the old values of good and evil. Coming after the camel, who is a “carrying spirit” since it has bore the weight of the past, the lion for Nietzsche is more a metaphor for freedom than anything else. For this reason he says, “To create new values—not even the lion is capable of that: but to create freedom for itself for new creation—that is within the power of the lion. To create freedom for oneself and also a sacred ‘No’ to duty: for that, my brothers, the lion is required.”<sup>365</sup> The lion, whose nature is predatory and prideful, is the kind of spirit that clears the space for the formation of new values. The values created in this novel space of the freely open happen through the spirit of the child—an innocence that plays freely because as new it has no memory and can affirm only its creations in a “sacred yes-saying.”<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 16-17/“On the Three Metamorphoses.”

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17/“On the Three Metamorphoses.” Nietzsche works through each phase of the metamorphoses.

The freedom of the lion can also be understood in terms of time. For Nietzsche, time is not to be understood as simply linear. Instead, time marks out the space of that which returns eternally and what always returns is chaos and the moment that continually needs to be refined, overcome, and affirmed. Thus the space-clearing freedom of the laughing lion is akin to the Dionysus myth. Like Dionysus, who was pursued, tracked down, and torn to pieces only to be eternally reborn, the laughter of the lion is one that affirms the eternal return of chaos, that is, the eternal return of the same so that within this space of freedom chaos will be given form and then perish.

In the second part in the section, titled “On the Famous Wise Men,” the lion image reappears. Here Nietzsche is deconstructing what is taken for wisdom and the supposed wise who wield it. He asserts that the famous wise men are famous only because they cater to the herd who, in turn, justify them as rulers: “The people you have served and the people’s superstition, all you famous wise men!—and *not* the truth! And precisely on that account you were accorded respect.”<sup>367</sup> Normally the wise are those who create values in the manner and spirit of the lion and child as understood in “On the Three Metamorphoses,” which is to say out of freedom and necessity. But here Nietzsche calls their bluff by exposing their motivations, which are linked to the plebian masses or what Nietzsche often refers to as the herd or herd mentality. How exactly does he do this? By inverting the image of the lion. A few stanzas later his Zarathustra states, “And now you famous wise men, I wish you would finally throw off the lion skin completely!”<sup>368</sup> In essence Nietzsche is exposing a comedy and one that is much in line with the kind of comedy of appearance we saw earlier with the famous men (most notably politicians) in

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 79/“On the Famous Wise Men.”

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

*The Gay Science*. The lion skin understood here presents an image. But unlike the image of an actual lion, this image, like a mask, is an image of concealment. It conceals the true motives of the famous wise people who are not truly wise because, according to Nietzsche, their “wisdom” is validated through the revering masses who are reflected in them. Keeping with the image of the lion Nietzsche says the truly wise want the “godless desert” which is to say, “Hungry, violent, lonely, godless; thus the lion-will wants itself.”<sup>369</sup>

Moreover Nietzsche believes he is also exposing something fraudulent. By wishing for the lion skin to be pulled away thus exposing the fact that the supposed wise do not really seek the truth in the manner of his Zarathustra, this constitutes another laughter provoking moment that is coupled with the highest seriousness. Just as we laugh at Aristophanes’ Praxagora and her cohorts who masquerade as men in order to trick them and bring about a more equitable change in the *polis*, we also laugh at Nietzsche’s comic view of the philosopher presented here. Keeping in mind that regardless of what method philosophers may utilize, they all in the end hope to unconceal the truth or something essential. For this they may gain a following and are often times revered. However, when Nietzsche’s hammer finds its target in these famous wise men the result is both shocking and comic. It is shocking because if we accept Nietzsche’s major premise of the tragic view of life, which calls on us to recognize ourselves as finite, earthbound beings, then we may come to realize that all of the “wise men,” whose thinking we held in the highest esteem, whose commandments and prohibitions for so

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 80/“On the Famous Wise Men.”

long helped shape the arc of history, are only “asses” that pulled “the *people’s* cart.”<sup>370</sup> It is shocking because this unconcealing reveals to us the nothingness, the nihilism that both philosophical and moral systems concealed. Yet, the image that Nietzsche paints here, of wise men, lions, lion skins, asses, and humankind, erupts amidst this tragedy as if it were a comedic cushion to help soften the blows of this hard truth. This is precisely why (as Higgins has shown) Nietzsche’s use of Zarathustra is done in parody. If the old, historical Zarathustra was responsible for introducing good and evil into human consciousness, then Nietzsche’s Zarathustra by parodying this historical figure heralds a new beginning, one that affirms our earthbound life *here* with its many perspectives.

Nietzsche’s use of the lion image reaches its fruition at two other critical moments in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In the section titled “On Old and New Tablets” of the third part, Nietzsche’s Zarathustra has reached a crucial moment in his journey. It is crucial because he finds himself in the time between the old and new, which is to say between the collapse of valuations based on good and evil and the potentiality for the will to new knowledge and the overman as the meaning of the earth: “Here I sit and wait, old broken tablets around me and also new tablets only partially written upon. When will my hour come?”<sup>371</sup> Although the “old broken tablets” could refer to any number of codified laws that helped shape past civilizations—Sumerian tablets, Egyptian tablets, the Code of Hammurabi—given Nietzsche’s antagonism to Christianity in general it is most likely

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid. I can not help but recall the image of Nietzsche and Paul Rée who are pulling a cart holding Lou Andres-Salomé wielding a whip. Both Nietzsche and Rée were romantically interested in Lou Salomé. However, David B. Allison gives a non-sexist interpretation of this image that is connected to a private moment of humor that became public when Aristotle was at Philip’s court. Still, I always maintained the possibility (even if Nietzsche did stage this photograph to disparage Rée) that Rée and Nietzsche were acting as beasts of burden at the hands of a beautiful, smart and powerful woman, perhaps in a playful moment of self-deprecating humor. See David Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche: The Birth of Tragedy, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, and On the Genealogy of Morals* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 155-57.

<sup>371</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 156/“On Old and New Tablets.”

that he has in mind the tablets of the Ten Commandments, commandments that were supposedly “written in stone” for eternity.

But Zarathustra’s question, “When will my hour come?,” affirms his locus in this crucial in-between time where he yearns to “go under” to mankind once more. In order to discern the right moment of time, that is, the moment when Zarathustra’s going under tips the scale towards the future, Zarathustra says he needs a sign. And this sign is the laughing lion; “This is what I wait for now; signs must come to me first that it is *my* hour—namely the laughing lion with a swarm of doves.”<sup>372</sup> Again, the lion is representative of pride and freedom. The lion itself does not create, which is left to the creative innocence of the child bound to nothing other than its own play. The laughing lion then is the cue Zarathustra is waiting for, a sign that mankind is prepared to hear his message and take up the freedom that is necessary if one is to live as an authentic, value creating voice. The laughing lion is also an affirmation of the tragic view of life. This is why the laughing lion is accompanied by doves. The doves are a symbol of lightness and the willingness to own up to tragic view so that one does not flee in the face of nihilism but affirms oneself as a value creator in the very midst of nihilism’s greatest and only gift—*freedom*. Thus, it is only when the lion roars with laughter that the pendulum swings and the time is ripe for the overman. In essence we may say that the laughing lion signals this very usurpation. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra says a few lines later when he came to mankind:

I told them to overthrow [*umwerfen*] their old professional chairs wherever that old conceit had sat; I told them to laugh [*lachen*] at their great masters of virtue and their saints and poets and world redeemers. I told them to laugh [*lachen*] at

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

their gloomy wise men and at any who ever perched in warning, like black scarecrows, in the tree of life. I sat down alongside their great road of graves and even among carrion and vultures—and I laughed [*lachte*] at all their yesteryear and its rotting, decaying glory. Indeed, like preachers of repentance and fools I screamed bloody murder about all their great and small—that their best is so very small! that their most evil is so very small!—I had to laugh [*lachte*]. Thus my wild longing cried and laughed out of me [*lachte also aus mir*], born in the mountains, a wild wisdom surely!—my great, winging, roaring longing. And often it swept me off my feet and up and away, in the midst of my laughter [*Lachen*]...<sup>373</sup>

It is evident the way in which laughter plays a pivotal role for Nietzsche. Zarathustra does not say to “engage in dialectics” with the old masters or even try and refute the old masters. Zarathustra’s call is not about creating a teaching that is logically sound, or about positing additional, supersensible criteria that all ought to be bound. Zarathustra’s call is to *laugh* because the audible explosion of laughter is the first act of a will that says, “No!” to what has held sway for so long. The laugh is a “No!” that shatters the same in order that chaos returns. The laughter of the lion and the laughter that Zarathustra implores us as potential *Übermenschen* to initiate is a laughter of disruption, even of transgression. It is laughter that says one is no longer impressed by previously ascribed beliefs and that one is taking up their freedom and authentic possibilities in the laughing moment of inspiration.

In the fourth and final part the laughing lion appears again. When Zarathustra returns to his cave in the section titled, “The Welcome,” he finds all of those he

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 157/“On Old and New Tablets.”

encountered in his going under gathered together at his cave. Although he addresses them as higher men and accepts their company, he tells them that they are not those he has been waiting for in the mountains. For Zarathustra the higher men are “mere bridges” that still higher people will “stride across.”<sup>374</sup> Once again Zarathustra affirms that what he waits for is that human being that will affirm its mortal ties to the earth and the joy that the moment has as if it were eternity, that is, as if it were to eternally return. This human being is, above all, characterized as laughing and cheerful:

Not for you do I wait here in these mountains, not with you shall I go down [*niedersteigen*] for the last time. You came to me only as an omen that higher ones are on their way to me—not the people of great longing, of great nausea, of great surfeit and that which you called the remnant of God.—No! No! Three times no! I wait for *others* here in these mountains and will not lift a foot from here without them,—for higher, stronger, more victorious, more cheerful ones [*Wohlgemutere*], those who are built right-angled in body and soul: *laughing lions* [*lachende Löwen*] must come!<sup>375</sup>

For Nietzsche and his Zarathustra the crucial element missing from the authentic higher man, who has yet to appear or in other words who is a “not yet,” is cheerfulness and laughter. Although those gathered at Zarathustra’s cave have heard his teaching, nonetheless the way to the overman is not a simple matter of executing some instruction, if indeed Zarathustra’s teaching can be called “instruction” at all. Zarathustra’s appeal aims more at a change of perspective, that is, a turning of thought from the way one is oriented in the world as a product of what has come before to seeing the human being as

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 229/“The Welcome.”

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

a bridge forward and the vehicle for the will (to new knowledge). This turning of consciousness that Zarathustra hopes will occur is facilitated by the very act of laughter itself. For Zarathustra laughter is the linchpin that tips the scales in favor of the future, in favor of the overman to come. But how exactly is this so?

Consider laughter itself as a phenomenon. Laughter is a phenomenon of the face or head. Unlike language that is tied to thought it originates *in* the body, more specifically the throat thus it is to a large extent a physiological phenomenon. Whereas language's physical manifestation is the tongue, mouth, lips, and lungs that articulate a particular voice or thought, and so is already on the way to representing something *in concreto*. Laughter, on the other hand, is not a representation. It is an act that affirms, denies or, in the case of Nietzsche's laughing lions, achieves both at the same time. The eruption of laughter from the prideful lion at once says "yes!," which is an affirmation of the human being as a bridge to the overman. At the same time this laughter says "no!," aiming itself at mediocrity, at *ressentiment*, at "thou shalt," at that which has held sway and commanded dutiful action. It is the "no" in "no longer impressed." In a word, it is a "no!" to nihilism. As a "no" to nihilism the eruption of laughter affirms chaos as our *amor fati* (love of fate) so that duty's only command now is to celebrate—a negative becomes a positive. Thus the use of laughter by Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a phenomenon that often times encompasses opposites; "yes" saying and "no" saying, past and future. Many of Nietzsche's pronouncements in this work surely transgress the rules of argumentation such as the principle of non-contradiction as we saw above. But Nietzsche's Zarathustra revels in the inconsistencies and contradictions of life and these are always best expressed in laughter, his and others. Its plentiful occurrence is, in a very

ironic sense, of the utmost seriousness that marks out the intersection of the past and the future.

This plea for laughter is given in an admonition a few sections later when Zarathustra says to the higher men:

How much is still possible! So *learn* to laugh over and past yourselves [lernt *doch über euch hinweg lachen*]! Lift up your hearts, you good dancers, high! Higher! And don't forget good laughter [*Lachen*] either. This crown of the laughing one [*Krone des Lachenden*], this rose-wreathed crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown! I pronounced laughter [*Lachen*] holy; you higher men, *learn*—to laugh! [lernt *mire—lachen*].<sup>376</sup>

Thus it is clear that Nietzsche sees laughter and its role of affirmation as *the* critical element that, in a word, lightens the mood, and the body in order to prepare it for dancing and graceful movement. Just as great comedy harbors its own serious, philosophical moments, Nietzsche with his Zarathustra is attempting to retrieve the lost playfulness he believes ought to be intrinsic to life. Thus his Zarathustra helps link philosophy and the philosopher back to buffoonery and laughter. Parody itself helps achieve a cheerfulness that erupts from the text into life so as to bring back gaiety to the brooding thus helping to pave the way for the overman.

The passage above from “On the Higher Man” is also echoed in the second edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1886). The preface utilizes a long quote from this same section in which laughter abounds. But for Nietzsche, laughter in the mouth of Zarathustra is no ordinary laughter. It takes on the overtones of one who prepares the way, giving hints of what is to come: “Zarathustra who speaks the truth [Zarathustra der

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 240/“On the Higher Man.”

Wahrsager], who laughs the truth [Zarathustra der Wahrlacher], not impatient, not unconditional, one who loves leaps and deviations: I myself set this crown on my head!”<sup>377</sup> As the translator (Ronald Speirs) makes clear, Nietzsche is playing on the German word *wahrsagen* which means “to prophesy” by creating neologisms such as *Wahrlacher* or one who “laugh’s the truth.” Hence the will of Nietzsche’s “Dionysiac monster”<sup>378</sup> is always future directed, as opposed to a return to an origin, and is manifested as such by laughter. In the last analysis laughter essentially acts as the force of a new beginning.

The gravity and weight that Nietzsche lends to laughter and cheerfulness is perhaps best illustrated in the very last section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. “The Sign” occurs after the Roundelay refrain and, much in the manner of a musical score, is itself a refrain of the beginning of the work where we find Zarathustra high up in his cave, to which the sun must climb. While the higher men are asleep in Zarathustra’s cave he is awake with his eagle and snake above. But he muses, “I still lack the proper human beings!” It is at this point that a sign is revealed to him in the form of being descended upon and surrounded by countless doves. As he reaches around him to ward away “the affectionate birds” he also “reached unwittingly into a thick, warm tangle of hair, and at the same time a roar sounded around him—a soft, long lion’s roar.”<sup>379</sup>

The laughing lion is not only a sign, that is its own semiotic play of signs, but also an indicator of things to come. As the lion lies at Zarathustra’s feet Zarathustra declares, “*The sign is coming*” and “*My children are near, my children.*” Akin to the lion and child in “The Three Metamorphoses,” this last section links the lion and his pivotal laughter—a

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<sup>377</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 12/ Section 7 of the preface to the second edition.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 265/“The Sign.”

laughter that frees thinking for the future—to the child-philosopher who commences his play.

But Nietzsche also links this final image of Zarathustra and the laughing lion with the elemental earth and the vaulting trajectory of the sun. In the final lines of the work Nietzsche's Zarathustra says:

Well then! The lion came, my children are near, Zarathustra became ripe [*Zarathustra ward reif*], my hour came—'This is *my* morning, *my* day is beginning: *up now, up, you great noon!* [herauf nun, herauf, du grosser Mittag]'—Thus spoke Zarathustra and he left his cave, glowing and strong, like a morning sun that emerges from dark mountains.<sup>380</sup>

Just as the last section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a refrain of the first section with Zarathustra back at his cave and the sun rising to him, it is also a foreshadowing of one of the most well known passages Nietzsche will use later in 1888 in "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" in *Twilight of the Idols*. When we put this crucial piece of Nietzsche's thinking in its perspective we can begin to see that "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" is being enacted by Zarathustra in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Because this enigmatic work by Nietzsche is itself an eruption into history, a laughing eruption into history, attuned ears that hear its message can turn out of the text into their time and hopefully to a new beginning, just as Zarathustra is poised to do with his lion at the close of the text.

The laughing lion is Zarathustra's sign that his teaching is ripe and that his morning and day are just beginning. He exclaims, "*up now, up, you great noon!*" But this is more than an exclamation, it is an *affirmation* that looks towards the future, that is,

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 266/"The Sign."

towards the overman to come. It is also an affirmation that even the future type “overman” will itself sink into the horizon from its great noon when and if it has exhausted its greatness. Thus it is an affirmation of a new time—one of the eternal return. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and lion are there, as laughing witnesses to the irreducibility of the world and life to any system or synthesis. They are there as witnesses to the tragic view of the world, to the aesthetic shining of appearance and the elemental earth assisting in the transition from nihilism to the overman—INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.

#### IV. Conclusion: Resenting Seriousness, Laughing at Ressentiment

What does laughter disclose in this most enigmatic work of Nietzsche’s? Why is laughter for Nietzsche so significant? Laughter abounds so much in this work that to address its every occurrence would be a work in its own right. This chapter however distills a few crucial insights.

The first is that when reading *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we must be vigilant about who is laughing and why they are laughing. This is because Zarathustra is not the only character who wields the power of laughter. As we saw, laughter is even directed at him. We saw this phenomenon in Zarathustra’s initial descent from his cave when the people focused their laughter on him, thus presenting Zarathustra with his first obstacle to the overman. Moreover, we saw the many forms that laughter takes in this work as well. Thus the laughter of the townspeople is best characterized as scornful laughter that at one

time wills the last man and at the same time resists Zarathustra's call to overcome themselves and move from human to the overman.

In addition to the many forms of laughter, we saw how laughter intersected with the eternal return and the will to power, the two overarching themes of this work. For Nietzsche, the will to power's importance is always connected to the enhancement or furtherance of the subject's affirmation of life. Thus the will to power serves the subject by enhancing the feeling of power it feels in its creative deeds. Hence, the poet's will to power is enhanced by creatively disclosing the world through his or her particular voice. The phenomenon of laughter as well can act as an enhancement of one's will to power through its simultaneous "yes saying" and "no saying." Zarathustra knows his task is an arduous one. He is asking people to reorient themselves with the world that they think they know; a world whose values have been handed down to them for millennia. Better still, we might say that Zarathustra is asking them to reorient themselves in the world of becoming as opposed to some posited, supersensible criteria. However, freeing others (as well as himself) from illusions and falsehoods is no easy task. Thus he is often times told, for example by the saint in the first part, that his task is a hopeless one. Yet Zarathustra sees this task as the very enhancement of his will to power and so he laughs, affirming it.

Another key issue is that Nietzsche must not allow his Zarathustra to fall prey to the kind of *ressentiment* he conceived in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. *Ressentiment* is a reactive, value creating force that says "No!" to everything that is outside and different from it. Instead of affirming multiplicity, *ressentiment* wants the same, that is, it wants assimilation. Although in *On the Genealogy of Morality* it was the priestly class who Nietzsche characterized as the prime example of *ressentiment*, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

the last human being appears faithfully to fulfill this less than honorable role. Rejecting Zarathustra's call that the "overman is the meaning of the earth," the last human being desires comfort and the will to nothingness and so it is an image of homogeneity, dilution, and leveling down. Zarathustra implores them that the chaos of a dancing star is much more preferable than the so-called happiness of the last human being. But Zarathustra's admonition to the people goes unheeded.

Yet, Zarathustra refused to succumb to *ressentiment*, that is, he refuses to blame the blamers as seen in the phenomena of scornful laughter expressed by the people who cried out for the last human being and happiness. In essence, this laughter, although an obstacle that Zarathustra subsequently strove to overcome throughout the rest of his journey, also played the role of a provocation in the deepest sense of the word. Laughter, as we have seen, is a physiological phenomenon and a gesture. The provocative laughter of the people who prefer the last human being is surely one that "calls forth" and "challenges" Zarathustra.

Zarathustra's refusal of the model of *ressentiment* showcases itself through the fact that he never once refers to the townspeople as "evil," as the priestly class did to those not in their image in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Whereas the priestly class sought a target outward, turning good and bad to good and evil, Zarathustra sees his goal as a herald to a new way of life that is oriented to value creating as well as the gathering of the earth and its people. It is a *noble* goal and to work toward it requires an effort that sees all others as potentially worthy of its message. Zarathustra's goal of a reevaluation of all values is not easily achievable because ears are still lacking to hear it. Still, for Zarathustra their skepticism is not a substitute for evil. Furthermore laughter,

whether directed at him or from him (and on occasion Zarathustra even laughs at himself), plays a significant role. Nietzsche knows that his Zarathustra attempts to disclose the “eternal comedy of existence” to those who do not yet recognize that they are its leading players. In this sense, Zarathustra like Nietzsche, is an untimely figure not just as he appears to others within the text itself, but as an eruption within the history of philosophy. It is from this perch in his thinking that he finds humor and laughter to play a significant role, one that keeps him from reacting towards others in the form of *ressentiment*.

With all of this said, especially concerning the post-reception of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn is precisely the *lack of conclusion* that Nietzsche’s work in general, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in particular, engenders. This was shown in the way that Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking is born out in large part by *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Whether it is the meeting of the arborescent assemblage of the people with the rhizomatic assemblage of Zarathustra and his teaching, or the power of dispersion found in the laugh of the lion, in the end the heterogenetic elements of multiplicity—the infinite masks and drives that are us—are always affirmed.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, with its dramatic structure, poetic texture, and provocative laughter at its core, is a work that exists on the periphery of the dominant arborescent structures that have constituted philosophy for so long. It is a work that, like guerilla fighters who are always outnumbered and under-resourced, raids these structures. Zarathustra’s weapons are neither conventional, in the sense that he uses their same modes of expression and content, nor unconventional as to not be recognizable that he would be rendered a recluse only at home within his cave. Zarathustra, through his

laughter and comedic parody, reflects the expression and content of the arborescent structures back at it so that we can begin to laugh at ourselves. Instead of appearing before a transcendent God or appearing as a dim copy compared to a perfect original, we appear to ourselves as we are in all of our greatness and folly.

## CONCLUSION: The Eternal Return of the Eternal Comedy of Existence

“The day we can say, with conviction: ‘Forwards! Even our old morality would make a *comedy!*’ we shall have discovered a new twist and possible outcome for the Dionysian drama of the ‘fate of the soul’—: and he’ll make good use of it, we can bet, he, the grand old eternal writer of the comedy of our existence!...”

~Nietzsche, Preface to *On the Genealogy of Morality*~

A conclusion is a time to reflect on what has been said. What can be said about Nietzsche, comedy and laughter? Foremost is the close kinship that Nietzsche’s thought has to these phenomena. Whether one agrees or disagrees about any particular point that has been made, I hope above all that the reader is able to see, as I do, the levity that resonates in Nietzsche’s work. If for no other reason, the levity inherent in his thought is there to help compensate for the tragic knowledge that is unfolding. This notion of the tragic as it relates to comedy and laughter have been paramount in this study. The tragic limit of our knowledge and the resulting tragic wisdom are the necessary backdrop to the eruption of comedy and laughter in Nietzsche’s thought, otherwise a study of these phenomena would be merely anecdotal or incidental and thus never point to anything deeper outside of the aphorism or section of Nietzsche’s work that contained them. The importance of this cannot be overstated because if his thinking aims to achieve anything, then it is to peel back, layer by layer, the motivation and illusions that human beings employ in their existence. Illusions that are no doubt necessary although we have forgotten that they are, indeed, fictions. And his sights are set on all of the areas that provide the breath and scope of our being here—epistemology, morality, science,

religion, culture are just a few of his philosophical targets. The exposing of illusions at the heart of the most vital spheres that tell us who we are is, to many, unbearable let alone never a reason to be even remotely cheerful. Yet, this is how Nietzsche, contra Schopenhauer, asks us to comport ourselves in the face of this “knowledge” as we pursue a meaningful existence justified “only as an aesthetic phenomenon.” The limits that we are all given over to by virtue of the fact that we are only human, all too human are not reasons for despair but present to us opportunities of affirmation that allow us to say “yes” to life so that we may transfigure our state into joy.

Moreover we saw that for Nietzsche if truth means anything in the philosopher’s quest one of its greatest allies is honesty (*Redlichkeit*). A young Nietzsche says as much in a letter to his sister in 1865:

Is it then a matter of acquiring the view of God, world, and atonement in which one can feel most comfortable? Is it not, rather, true that for the true researcher the result of his research is of no account at all? Do we, in our investigations, search for tranquility, peace, happiness? No—only for the truth, even if it were to be frightening and ugly.<sup>381</sup>

He goes on to say that his quest, regardless if the outcome is monstrous, will nonetheless be cheerful: “On this earnest foundation I shall now build—and the building will be all the jollier.”<sup>382</sup> Nietzsche’s foundation is not a set of metaphysical principles, at least not the kind of principles he inherited in his time from the Western philosophical tradition. It is honesty in terms of how we *understand* metaphysical principles. Is this not exactly what the philosophical enterprise demands of us? And more often than not for Nietzsche,

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<sup>381</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans by Christopher Middleton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 7. Letter to Elisabeth Nietzsche, June 1865.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

honesty and dishonesty are the coordinates from which his provocative laughter erupts. Those philosophers who fail to exercise intellectual honesty are guilty of the deepest transgression and Nietzsche singles them out for ridicule and playacting in a comedy.

Further reflection hopefully yields for the reader of Nietzsche the insight that laughter is not something frivolous or superficial. Whether it be his use of the laughing wood god Silenus (a profound symbol of pessimism) in *The Birth of Tragedy* or the laughing Zarathustra (a profound symbol of affirmation) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, when laughter occurs it is almost always done under the pretext of illuminating a crucial philosophical point. Hence one should not conclude that the levity found in Nietzsche's writings and thought efface all of the serious issues he tackles. Indeed comedy and laughter are coupled with the most serious issues in a way that disclose these issues so that the urgency that calls for their thinking is not diminished but enhanced. It is our task to think them in their coupling, that is, in their play.

Additionally we have seen that laughter works bi-directionally in his works. It is easy to simply focus one's laughter on others, that is, to make a spectacle of the other. But to be honest, indeed to be authentic, one must also focus it on oneself and Nietzsche does just that. As well as targeting others for laughter, Nietzsche often has laughter directed *at him*. Perhaps best expressed in his character Zarathustra, the laughter directed at him is something that illuminates a shortfall in his teaching and thus requires a "going under" and an overcoming, a signal to take up a new perspective. What we find then under this rubric is that Nietzsche never advocates that we act out of *ressentiment*, that is, act in a way that simply gathers ourselves into the flip-side of the same coin in terms of

those we disagree with. To be sure, laughter helps ensure that we never deny our own action through the inaction of others.

There is a second reason Nietzsche levels laughter at himself. Nietzsche is keenly aware that those “who have ears for his writings” are, for the most part, *of the future* and not his contemporaries. In other words he is aware of his untimeliness. Thus he thinks and writes in his time for the future, that is, for us today at this crucial time in history as heirs of a modern-technical-scientific nihilism which he discerns, quite correctly, is dawning on humankind.<sup>383</sup> Nietzsche is aware that much of his thought, because it is “dynamite,”<sup>384</sup> will incite the sort of derisive laughter that one might resent to the point of inaction, which is the same kind of ridicule leveled at Zarathustra who transfigures it into his own laughing affirmation. Hence the laughter that resonates in his texts provokes us to forego *ressentiment* and its crippling internalization. Indeed laughter can be seen as the lion-willed gesture that says, “I am no longer impressed!” This shifting of perspective often results in gaiety, allowing us to constantly refamiliarize ourselves—*vis-à-vis* the footwork of dancing—within the great stream of becoming instead of the immobilization that occurs within the rigidity of a singular stance, anchored in an unchanging, transcendent principle that demands our allegiance.

There is also the constellation of the three characteristics that help define comedy and its attendant laughter: measure, transgression, and self-forgetting. These three criteria that more often than not work in tandem are always at work providing the threads that weave an image of who we are not only within the domain of comedy but also within the

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<sup>383</sup> Considering the events that were about to unfold in the 20<sup>th</sup> century after his death in 1900, Nietzsche’s writings and thinking prefigure the monstrous nihilism emerging and yet harbor the saving possibility of a transfiguration of this fateful comportment to the world.

<sup>384</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, 144/Section 1 of “Why I Am A Destiny,” in *Ecce Homo*. Also see section 44 of *Twilight of the Idols*.

philosophical enterprise. This is why comedy and laughter present such a potent and disclosive force in Nietzsche's thought. In terms of measure, no one has emphasized its role more than Bernard Freydberg who states in the conclusion to *Philosophy and Comedy*, "In their own ways, the comedies, tragedies, and dialogues serve to draw human beings vicariously into the most human of endeavors, namely *raising the question* of measure, making the attempt to determine proper measure."<sup>385</sup> Measure invokes limit. A limit provides a horizon in which things stand in relation to that horizon as well as to each other. In all inspired comedy the generation of laughter almost always involves the transgression of limit so that measure is exceeded. This is often done through the self-forgetting of great comic characters whether it be Aristophanes' Strepsiades seeking the "wisdom" of Socrates in order to shirk his debts in *Clouds* or Woody Allen's Alvy (played by Allen himself) in *Annie Hall* in which Alvy attempts to find love's measure as if love of all phenomena could ever be measured. Whatever the attempt, nothing but the absurd was disclosed but an absurdity that profoundly shows us who we are. These same themes are at play in Nietzsche's thought as well, although here these elements occur at the intersection of philosophy and philosophers and not necessarily on a formal stage or screen unless one considers life itself a stage with us as characters as Nietzsche often does.

Furthermore, Nietzsche shows the exceeding of measure most often happens in light of the very phenomenon that is supposed to give to thinking the very measure for its practice— *ground*. Nietzsche argues that the ground we often suppose our knowledge rests on is less a firm metaphysical foundation and more of a "metaphysical faith" built

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<sup>385</sup> Freydberg, *Philosophy and Comedy*, 200. Although in this particular analysis Freydberg focuses on the works of Aristophanes and their relationship to the Platonic dialogues, many of the same concerns arise within Nietzsche's thought as it relates to history, philosophy and its practitioners.

on the constructs of grammar (“metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms” as he says in “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense”), which when employed have always already become distanced from any essence. The very enacting of ground as a measure, as limit, as that which would supply a firm foundation ends up exceeding its own function in its very positing. Nietzsche does not point this out because he is against philosophy, science and logic and their practice, nor because he wants to eliminate those endeavors but conversely; if science is to be viable it must recognize its limits, which is to say that science must recognize the fact that the regulative fictions it employs are just that, fictions. Science must come to grips with science.

Additionally, we must also content ourselves with the fact that science and knowledge as a product of human beings can only work within the framework in which they are situated, namely history and the stream of becoming. They must perpetually reacquaint themselves within becoming using only what is manifest in this world, much in the spirit of Otto Neurath’s boat metaphor where he asserts, “We are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry-dock and reconstruct it from its best components.”<sup>386</sup> If the philosopher’s epistemology or the scientist’s method (and the two should not be separable) are to serve life nobly, they ought never to forget the world to which they belong—that of change and becoming—lest they become actors in the greatest of comedic transgressions. Nietzsche argues that denying or ignoring these elements is not only a philosophical *faux pas* concerning the most serious issues, it is also the justification for the kind of provocative laughter he hopes will “reground” this sort of hubris or thinking run amok. It is the definitive kind of comic self-forgetting. Nietzsche, the philosopher of Dionysian wisdom, invites us to shift

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<sup>386</sup> From Neurath’s *Anti-Spengler* (1921).

our perspective away from supposed eternal, unchanging principles and instead celebrate our bodies, sensate experience, chaos, art, madness, the earth, and all of the things that constitute our *being here*.

For fear of pessimism, science post-Heraclitus has had the opiate-like effect of all but vanquishing the chaos from which it arises. Philosophers and scientists have either forgotten this chaos or, if they have not, have used illusions to protect a certain kind of life, one of life descending values Nietzsche believes are the genesis of nihilism. In light of this, Nietzsche's provocative laughter is first directed at the knowers, that is, the ones who ought to *know better*. Hence he wants to educate the educators first, showing them that science and knowledge not only arise out of this chaotic element—often referred to as the Dionysian *abgrund*—but that science itself cannot account for this element because what is abysmal exceeds all measure. But Nietzsche's claim reaches even farther. Not only is science incapable of fully accounting for the chaos of becoming, direct apprehension of its *own ground* remains veiled, even though it privileges this supposed ground as the Archimedean point of all knowledge. This is precisely why, in the spirit of the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Nietzsche asserts that science can never get to the thing-in-itself (*Ding-an-sich*); ground always betrays something unaccounted for, something that cannot be delimited and something requiring the palliative affects of art to which we can say “yes!”

In an ironic sense then, this is what measure, transgression and self-forgetting mean in Nietzsche's thought. On one hand, proper measure demands that science and philosophy think their own ground—even if that “ground” be abysmal—and be mindful of it in terms of truth claims. Anything in excess of this ground can only be dogma. On

the other hand, Nietzsche is claiming that science, similar to the Ouroboros image in *The Birth of Tragedy*,<sup>387</sup> in its attempts to establish a foundation, reaches its own limit and can go no farther. Scientific truth in search of measure can, in the end, only meet the measureless. The “knowledge” that manifests itself, at the limit where measure and the measureless appear to mix as opposites, is not the kind of proper knowledge grounded in metaphysical principles, it is tragic knowledge. It is here, at the limit, that tragic wisdom and art are necessary so that we can behold ourselves before ourselves in our true depth. And this is exactly Nietzsche’s project, to reintroduce this depth that only the early Greeks knew: “Nobody had ever turned the Dionysian into a philosophical pathos before: *tragic wisdom* was missing.”<sup>388</sup>

Only with the recognition, indeed celebration, of tragic wisdom can we practice what Nietzsche means by *fröhlich Wissenschaft* or “La gaya scienza,” that is, *cheerful science* that does not seek to betray its abysmal origins. This is precisely why he seeks an “alliance” between tragic wisdom and laughter:

Perhaps even laughter still has a future....Perhaps laughter will then form an alliance with wisdom; perhaps only ‘gay science’ will remain. At present, things are still quite different; at present, the comedy of existence has not yet ‘become conscious’ of itself; at present we still live in an age of tragedy, in the age of moralities and religions.<sup>389</sup>

This point provides an apt time to conclude our reflection. We have seen comedy and laughter’s relevance embedded deep within Nietzsche’s thought in light of the three

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<sup>387</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 75/Section 15.

<sup>388</sup> Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, 110/Section 3 of *The Birth of Tragedy* in *Ecce Homo*.

<sup>389</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 27-28/Aphorism 1.

texts I examined. In addition to tragedy, *The Birth of Tragedy* clearly delineated the role that comedy can play as a counterforce to pessimism. Indeed comedy must be included within the very art that Nietzsche proclaims is “the highest task and the true metaphysical activity of this life.”<sup>390</sup> The aim of *The Gay Science* was to introduce the kind of levity into the search for knowledge in all the fields that constitute *Wissenschaft*. The fruitfulness or not of levity for Nietzsche is always coupled to *Redlichkeit* (intellectual honesty). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* showcased comedy and laughter’s apex in Nietzsche’s thought. These phenomena exhibited through Nietzsche’s Zarathustra are the fulcrum between past and future. They provided a provocative challenge to all absolute “meta” positions and the chance instead to tip the balance towards the kind of laughter and affirmation that reorients us back to the earth.

In the last analysis the comedy and laughter in Nietzsche’s writings and thought are there as provocations to rethink our relationship to each other and the philosophical endeavors that bestow value and meaning to existence that is, at times, both tragic and absurd. Until we come to grips with our science, moralities, and religion in terms of their reach and measure, we will remain mired in the eternal comedy of existence, and the joyful laughter of affirmation will remain a “not yet” and only a hope for the future. In this scenario where the “comedy of existence has not yet ‘become conscious’ of itself,” there is a one-sided spectacle<sup>391</sup> in which Nietzsche and other free spirits observe the appearances of humankind at play in their own unconscious comedy rooted in nihilistic

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<sup>390</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 14/Preface to the first edition.

<sup>391</sup> Although coming from the perspective of Marxist critique, Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* examines this kind of spectacle in which we have become alienated from one another, and from an authentic existence, through commoditization and the modern means of production: “The spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation.” *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 23/Thesis 32.

practices. Yet this one-sided spectacle is exactly what Nietzsche hopes to overcome, what Zarathustra in his “going under” hopes to transfigure with his bestowing virtue: “You compel all things to and into yourselves,” says Zarathustra “so that they may gush back from your well as the gifts of your love.”<sup>392</sup> If, as Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy*, life is justified “only as an aesthetic phenomenon” with art as humankind’s “highest metaphysical activity” then we, one and all, are subject to and held forth into this abysmal “ground” but one that also constitutes the very space where our inspired artistic creations avow saying “yes!” to it. And in this space all voices may bestow their “own gifts of love” as the “sparks of images” that burst forth from it. In this sense then the aesthetic phenomenon that is now a one-sided spectacle has the potential to gather *all of us* into this “highest metaphysical activity” where each unique voice that resonates with all others can then constitute a great carnival of laughter where we become artworks and each another’s audience. Art then, at the limit, calls us to witness. And what we witness in all of our tragedy and comic absurdity is the sum of our shining—*we are witnesses of ourselves*. Only when we learn the lion-willed laughter that affirms being here will we laugh the Zarathustrian laughter of love. A laughter that roars beyond good and evil.

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<sup>392</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 56/“On the Bestowing Virtue.” Fred Evans also cites this passage in *The Multivoiced Body* to convey the dynamic hearing of other voices that in part constitutes our own voice that then flows back into the community as our gift (*The Multivoiced Body*, 197-98).

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