

Rhythm from Art to Philosophy - Nietzsche (1867-1888) - part 1

Wednesday 1 June 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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If we leave aside Karl Marx's PhD dissertation on ancient materialism, whose rhythmological aspects should be studied one day for their own sake (*The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, 1841), Friedrich Nietzsche is the first philosopher to pay again attention to *rhuthmos* after its suppression at the beginning of the 19th century by metric, Idealist philosophies and science of the living. But, paradoxically, his contribution is nowadays very poorly known. The overwhelmingly famous *Birth of Tragedy* which gives primacy to music upon poetry, the entrenchment of ontological concerns by most philosophers and their common lack of interest for poetics, linguistics and philology, have jointly prevented to realize how important the concept of *rhuthmos* has been for Nietzsche and this during his whole career. But between 1867 and 1876, besides the *Birth of Tragedy*, he wrote long essays on pre-Platonic thinkers, especially Heraclitus and Democritus, and he researched intensively on poetic rhythm in Ancient Greece, themes to which he regularly came back until the end of his intellectual life in 1889. I will go from the best known part of his work to parts that we just start to understand thanks to recent and brilliant scholarship.

Balance between Harmony and Rhythm in Tragedy (1872)

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the very few remarks Nietzsche devotes to rhythm pertain to a dualistic view close to Wagner's. But while Wagner speaks as a composer, Nietzsche addresses the issue as a philologist and philosopher.

Instead of starting from harmony and rhythm as elements to be used in musical composition, he first distinguishes historically and philosophically between a "barbaric" "daemonic" Dionysian music, which he describes as

the ecstatic sound of the Dionysian celebration [ringing] out all around with a constantly more enticing magic [...] even in the most piercing scream. [...] The muses of the art of "illusion" withered away in the face of an art which spoke truth in its intoxicated state: the wisdom of Silenus cried out "Woe! Woe!" against the serene Olympians. (§ 4, trans. Ian Johnston)

and more measured Apollonian music:

Let us imagine what the psalm-chanting Apollonian artist, with his ghostly harp music could have

meant in comparison to this daemonic popular singing! (§ 4, trans. Ian Johnston)

Rhythm, which Nietzsche associates with “individuation,” “periodicity,” “architecture,” is put on the Apollonian side, while “melody,” and “harmony”, identified with “disturbance,” “aperiodicity,” and “flow”, are considered on the Dionysian’s.

If music was apparently already known as an Apollonian art, this music, strictly speaking, was a rhythmic pattern like the sound of waves, whose artistic power had been developed for presenting Apollonian states. The music of Apollo was Doric architecture expressed in sound, but only in intimate tones characteristic of the cithara. It kept at a careful distance, as something un-Apollonian, the particular element which constitutes the character of Dionysian music and, along with that, of music generally, the emotionally disturbing tonal power, the unified stream of melody, and the totally incomparable world of harmony. (§ 2, trans. Ian Johnston)

Thus while Wagner asserts the primacy of harmony upon rhythm but then considered the latter as a plastic and phenomenal aspect necessary to the expression of the former, Nietzsche is more interested in the historical but generalizable opposition between the “rhythmic pattern” distinctive of “Apollonian art” which “keeps at a careful distance the un-Apollonian,” and “the emotionally disturbing tonal power, the unified stream of melody, and the totally incomparable world of harmony” which constitute the “character of Dionysian music and, along with that, of music generally.” The supremacy of harmony upon rhythm in music crafting is replaced or more appropriately superseded by a metaphysical tension and intricacy between two ontological principles.

To rightly understand what is here at stake, we must recall the reflection on becoming and art that constitutes its larger frame. Nietzsche opposes both the ordinary mecanistic philosophy inherited from the 17th and 18th centuries and the more modern Idealist philosophies, especially Hegelian dialectic. He replaces the former as well as the latter by a worldview which ressembles in a way the Chinese yin yang Taoist conception, more surely the Heraclitean worldview based on eternal battle but also - which is not less interesting as we will see - Humboldt’s ideas concerning the “*Wechselwirkung*.”

Art cannot be derived from one single principle, neither can it be reduced to the ternary scheme of the Spirit development. Art - but this can be generalized to the whole reality - is dual. Two principles eternally battle against each other without never being able to settle their dispute.

In opposition to all those eager to derive art from a single principle as the necessary living origin of every work of art, I keep my eyes fixed on both those artistic divinities of the Greeks, Apollo and Dionysus, and recognize in them the living and clear representatives of *two* art worlds, different in their deepest being and their highest goals. (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

The first, Apollo, is the principle that ensures individuation, though it is mainly obtained through

deceit and illusion.

Apollo stands before me as the transfigured genius of the *principium individuationis*, through which release is only to be truly attained through illusion ; [...] (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

The second is Dionysus. It is the most profound principle of reality. It represents the endless Cosmic Will. It cannot express itself without being supported by a form, though it tends to blur its limits.

[...] whereas, under the mystical joyous cries of Dionysus, the spell of individuation is shattered, and the way lies open to the maternal source of being, to the innermost core of things. (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

Thus any individuation by the Apollonian principle ends up by being unsettled or destroyed by the Dionysian ever flowing principle.

Apollo wants to make individual beings tranquil precisely because he establishes border lines between them and, with his demands for self-knowledge and moderation, always reminds them once again of the most sacred laws of the world. However, to prevent this Apollonian tendency from freezing form into Egyptian stiffness and frigidity and to make sure the movement of the entire lake does not die away through the attempt of the Apollonian to prescribe to the individual waves their path and their extent, from time to time the high flood of the Dionysian once again destroys all those small circles in which the one-sided Apollonian "Will" seeks to confine the Greek spirit. (§ 9, trans. Ian Johnston)

But, reversely, the Dionysian Will cannot express itself without appearing under the guise of the dancing and chanting chorus but also of symbols, forms and individuals, i.e. of Apollonian appearances.

The Apollonian illusions, in which Dionysus objectifies himself, are no longer "an eternal sea, a changing weaving motion, a glowing life," as is the case with the music of the chorus, no longer those powers which are only felt and cannot be turned into poetic images, moments when the frenzied servant of Dionysus feels the approach of the god. Now, from the acting area the clarity and solemnity of the epic form speak to him; now Dionysus no longer speaks through forces but as an epic hero, almost with the language of Homer. (§ 8, trans. Ian Johnston)

The entire flow of art, which *represents* the flow of reality, is thus propelled and organized by these two forces.

We will have achieved much for scientific study of aesthetics when we come, not merely to a

logical understanding, but also to the certain and immediate apprehension of the fact that the further development of art is bound up with the duality of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*, just as reproduction similarly depends upon the duality of the sexes, their continuing strife and only periodically occurring reconciliation. (§ 1, trans. Ian Johnston)

The whole Greek art history can be accounted for by this overarching battle. Nietzsche sees it as a succession of conflicts and provisory settlements.

Up to this point I have set out at some length what I observed at the opening of this essay: how the Dionysian and the Apollonian ruled the Hellenic world in a constantly new sequence of births, one after the other, mutually intensifying each other; how, out of the “first” age, with its battles against the Titans and its austere popular philosophy, the Homeric world developed under the rule of the Apollonian drive for beauty; how this “naive” magnificence was swallowed up once more by the breaking out of the Dionysian torrent; and how, in opposition to this new power, the Apollonian erected the rigid majesty of Doric art and the Doric world view. (§ 4, trans. Ian Johnston)

This battle is eternal but this does not mean that the forces that participate in it are completely equivalent. Developing further Wagner’s sketches, Nietzsche takes over Schopenhauer’s view. The Dionysian forms of art, especially music, are closer to the inner core of Reality than the Apollonian. Music is indeed “an immediate portrayal of the Will itself,” whereas “plastic arts” or “fine arts” are on the Apollonian side of “phenomena”, “appearances” and “deceit.”

This tremendous difference, which opens up a yawning gap between plastic art as the Apollonian and music as the Dionysian art, became obvious to only one of the great thinkers, to the extent that he, even without that prompting from the symbolism of the Greek gods, recognized for music a character and origin different from all the other arts, because music is not, like all those others, the image of appearance, but an immediate portrayal of the Will itself and also because it presents *the metaphysical as compared to all physical things in the world*, the thing-in-itself in comparison with all appearances (Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Idea*, I.1.3.52). (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

Nietzsche presents, in metaphysical vocabulary, a full fledged *rhuthmology*, a theory of the ways of flowing in Nature as well as in Art and History. But, unlike Diderot, most of the German Romantics and Humboldt, he doesn’t elaborate his own out of a reflection on Life paired with poetic practice and reflection on Language. On the contrary, following Schopenhauer, he develops – at least in *The Birth of Tragedy* – his aesthetics at the expense of poetry. According to him, only music is able to express the thing in itself, the Will, i.e. the dynamic of the inner reality of the world. Music has an “intimate relationship with the true essence of all things” while poetry is on the “phenomenal” and “symbolic” i.e. artificial side.

“For music is, as mentioned, different from all other arts in this sense: it is not a portrayal of appearances, or more correctly, the adequate objectification of the Will, but the immediate

portrayal of the Will itself, as well as the metaphysical complement of all physical things in the world and the thing-in-itself of all appearances." (*World as Will and Idea*, I, p. 309, quoted in § 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

But from this two very unfortunate results derive. First, as in the Ancient speculation on *Musica universalis* or "music of the spheres", music is not primarily a human and historical activity. It is directly, immediatly cosmic.

"We could, therefore, call the world the embodiment of music just as much as the embodiment of the Will." (*World as Will and Idea*, I, p. 309, quoted in § 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

Second, what was considered by Diderot, most of the German Romantics and Humboldt as a poetic human endeavor and resulted in a historical anthropology is now - as in Novalis or in Schelling - believed to be an "expression" of the cosmos itself. Language is taken as a sheer metaphor.

"As a result of all this, we can look upon the world of appearance, or nature, and music as two different expressions of the same thing, which itself is thus the only mediating factor in the analogy between the two of them; thus, an insight into this mediating factor is required in order to understand that analogy. According to this, music, when considered as an expression of the world, is to the highest degree a universal language." (*World as Will and Idea*, I, p. 309, quoted in § 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

Moreover, language is reduced to ideas or concepts and the latter to defective instruments.

"Ideas consist only of forms abstracted first of all from perception, the stripped-away outer skin of things, so to speak, and are thus really and entirely *abstracta* [abstractions]; music, by contrast, gives the heart of the thing, the innermost core, which comes before all particular forms." (*World as Will and Idea*, I, p. 309, quoted in § 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

Nietzsche concludes that poetry, myth, and tragedy are only second to music and draw their significance from it.

Thus, Dionysian art customarily works in two ways on Apollonian artistic potential: music stimulates us to the *metaphorical viewing* of the Dionysian universality, and music then permits that metaphorical image to come forward with *the highest significance*. From this inherently intelligible observation and without any deeper considerations of unapproachable things, I conclude that music is capable of generating *myth*, that is, the most meaningful example, and of giving birth in particular to the *tragic myth*, the myth which speaks in metaphors of the Dionysian insight. (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

When poetry is given primacy over music, for instance in 17th century opera, it means that art has lost its connection with the living Dionysian Will and that the dry “theoretical man”, the “Socratic culture” have overcome.

Opera is the offspring of the theoretical man, of the critical layman, not of the artist [...] For the words, they claimed, are much nobler than the accompanying harmonic system, just as the soul is much nobler than the body. In the beginning of opera, the union of music, image, and word was treated according to the amateurish, unmusical crudity of these views. (§ 19, trans. Ian Johnston)

Nevertheless, there were some rare moments in the history of the West when both forces have been reconciled or more accurately, if I may say so, “checked and balanced”. The first one was Greek tragedy.

These two very different drives go hand in hand, for the most part in open conflict with each other and simultaneously provoking each other all the time to new and more powerful offspring, in order to perpetuate in them the contest of that opposition, which the common word “Art” only seems to bridge, until at last, through a marvelous metaphysical act of the Greek “Will,” they appear paired up with each other and, as this pair, finally produce Attic tragedy, as much a Dionysian as an Apollonian work of art. (§ 1, trans. Ian Johnston)

Nietzsche considers that there was before the time of classical tragedy (5th c. BC) a sharp divide between the arts and therefore between Apollonian and Dionysian principles.

Before the tragedy, there was an era of static, idealized plastic art in the form of sculpture that represented the Apollonian view of the world. The Dionysian element was to be found in the wild revelry of festivals and drunkenness, but, most importantly, in music. The combination of these elements in one art form gave birth to tragedy. Nietzsche theorizes that the chorus was originally always satyrs, goat-men. (This is speculative, although the word “tragedy” τραγωδία is contracted from trag(o)-aoidiā = “goat song” from *tragos* = “goat” and *aeidein* = “to sing.”) (Wikipedia, “The Birth of Tragedy”)

But the 5th century brought them together in a new culture experiment that lasted until it collapsed a few decades later.

Nietzsche argues that the tragedy of Ancient Greece was the highest form of art due to its mixture of both Apollonian and Dionysian elements into one seamless whole, allowing the spectator to experience the full spectrum of the human condition. The Dionysian element was to be found in the music of the chorus, while the Apollonian element was found in the dialogue which gave a concrete symbolism that balanced the Dionysian revelry. Basically, the Apollonian spirit was able to give form to the abstract Dionysian. (Wikipedia, “The Birth of Tragedy”)

After the time of Aeschylus and Sophocles, there was an age when tragedy died.

Nietzsche ties this to the influence of writers like Euripides and the coming of rationality, represented by Socrates. Euripides reduced the use of the chorus and was more naturalistic in his representation of human drama, making it more reflective of the realities of daily life. Socrates emphasized reason to such a degree that he diffused the value of myth and suffering to human knowledge. For Nietzsche, these two intellectuals helped drain the ability of the individual to participate in forms of art, because they saw things too soberly and rationally. The *participation mystique* aspect of art and myth was lost, and along with it, much of man's ability to live creatively in optimistic harmony with the sufferings of life. (Wikipedia, "The Birth of Tragedy")

The second moment is still in process. It stems out of German music "from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner" and it is embodied in Wagnerian drama.

The surest favorable signs bring us the guarantee of *the reverse process, of the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit* in our contemporary world! [...] Out of the Dionysian foundation of the German spirit a power has arisen which has nothing in common with the most fundamental assumptions of Socratic culture, something which those assumptions can neither explain nor excuse, but which instead is experienced by this culture as something frightening, inexplicable, as overpowering and hostile—that is, *German music*, above all as we must understand it in its mighty solar orbit from Bach to Beethoven, from Beethoven to Wagner. (§ 19, trans. Ian Johnston)

This remark enables Nietzsche to partly overcome his own dualistic prejudices concerning being and language. He analyses these two art forms as successful syntheses of Dionysian vitality and Apollonian formalism, that is to say as art forms in which the "wild" or "barbaric" aspects of Dionysian Will are integrated into the "measured" and "civilized" aspects of Apollonian plastic, without yet to be completely wiped out - but also in which music and language are reconciled.

The analysis goes through a cycle starting from the Dionysian "World's Will", the "raging desire for existence" that is perceivable if we consider each piece of drama as "as an immense symphonic movement, getting no help from words and images."

Can they imagine a person capable of perceiving the third act of *Tristan and Isolde* purely as an immense symphonic movement, getting no help from words and images, without suffocating from a convulsive spreading of all the wings of the soul? A man who, as in this case, has set his ear, so to speak, on the heart chambers of the World's Will, who feels in himself the raging desire for existence pouring forth into all the veins of the world as a thundering rainstorm or as the most delicately spraying brook—would such a man not fall apart on the spot? (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

Nietzsche's analysis then develops through the Apollonian plastic and poetic forms of myth and tragedy, which make both cosmic life and personal existence sustainable.

The work of the plastic artist has an entirely different purpose: here Apollo overcomes the suffering of the individual through the bright exaltation in the *eternity of the illusion*. Here beauty

is victorious over the suffering inherent in life. The pain is, in a certain sense, brushed away from the face of nature. (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

Tragedy places between the universal validity of its music and the listener sensitive to the Dionysian an awe-inspiring parable—the myth—and with that awakens an illusion, as if the music is only the production’s highest device for bringing life to the plastic world of the myth. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

Owing to the “illusion,” the “marvelous appearance,” the “marvelous Apollonian deception” that are brought about by the “symbolic picture[s],” “the idea[s] and the word[s]” of myth and tragedy, spectators are endowed with the capacity to face the “surge and excess” of life and existence.

We could just as surely claim about this depiction of the action that it is only a marvelous appearance, i.e., that previously mentioned Apollonian *illusion*, through whose effect we are to be relieved of the Dionysian surge and excess. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

The symbolic picture of the myth saves us from the immediate look at the highest world idea, just as the idea and the word save us from the unrestrained outpouring of the unconscious Will. Because of that marvelous Apollonian deception it seems to us as if the empire of music itself confronted us as a plastic world, as if in it only Tristan’s and Isolde’s destiny had been formed and stamped out in pictures, as in the most delicate and expressive of all material. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

The Apollonian principle allows to overcome the violence of the Dionysian and to transform it into individuals, symbols, words, and aesthetic artifacts.

Thus the Apollonian rescues us from Dionysian universality and delights us with individuals. It attaches our aroused feelings of sympathy to them, and with them it satisfies our sense of beauty. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

[...] the Apollonian in tragedy, thanks to its deception, emerges completely victorious over the Dionysian primordial element of music and makes use of this for its own purposes, that is, for the highest dramatic clarity, a very important reservation would naturally follow: at the most essential point that Apollonian deception is broken up and destroyed. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

Then Nietzsche finally comes back to the Dionysian that still remains “in its omnipotence” “behind” any artistic form or individual as a principle of “eternal life,” “eternally creative primordial mother,” “primordial essence itself.”

For in particular examples of such a destruction [of heroes] is made clear to us the eternal

phenomenon of Dionysian art, which brings into expression the Will in its omnipotence out from behind, so to speak, the *principium individuationis*, the eternal life beyond all appearances and in spite of all destruction. (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

In Dionysian art and in its tragic symbolism this same nature speaks to us with its true, undisguised voice: “Be as I am! Under the incessant changes in phenomena, the eternally creative primordial mother, eternally forcing things into existence, eternally satisfied with the changing nature of appearances!” (§ 16, trans. Ian Johnston)

Dionysian art thus wishes to convince us of the eternal delight in existence: only we are to seek this delight, not in appearances, but behind them; we are to recognize how everything which comes into being must be ready for painful destruction [...] a metaphysical consolation tears us momentarily out of the hustle and bustle of changing forms. For a short time we really are the primordial essence itself and feel its unbridled lust for and joy in existence. [...] In spite of fear and pity, we are fortunate vital beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose procreative joy we have been fused. (§ 17, trans. Ian Johnston)

While tragedy gives forms to that which has no form, makes individuals out of pure energy and gives to us the strength to overcome our suffering, it also represents in the end the Dionysian dynamic and rhythmic of the world itself “as if we were seeing the fabric on the loom while the shuttle moves back and forth.”

The drama, which, with the help of music, spreads out in front of us with such inwardly illuminated clarity in all its movements and forms, as if we were seeing the fabric on the loom while the shuttle moves back and forth, achieves its effect as a totality which lies *beyond all the artistic workings of the Apollonian*. In the total effect of tragedy the Dionysian regains its superiority once more. Tragedy ends with a tone which never could resound from the realm of Apollonian art. And as that happens, the Apollonian illusion reveals itself for what it is, as the veil which, so long as the tragedy is going on, has covered the essentially Dionysian effect. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

Nietzsche’s aesthetic conclusion is often considered as endowed with a certain Hegelian flavor (Deleuze, 1962, p. 12) or sometimes, on the contrary, as a mere metaphysical Schopenhaurian claim for the primacy of the Dionysian principle. But I think both interpretations are wrong because Nietzsche explicitly insists for considering both principles as eternal and equally important – and not only in the successful syntheses that were mentioned. As soon as *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche rids himself of Hegelian dialectic of Spirit but he does not indulge either in Schopenhauerian metaphysics of the Will. I agree on this with Michel Haar – at least as far as Nietzsche’s ultimate conclusion is concerned – who defended already some years ago the case of an “initial break with Schopenhauer” (Haar, 1993; yet for a different view of the early relation to Schopenhauer see Dufour, 2005, p. 51-71). Although he heavily relies on Schopenhauerian premises, Nietzsche finally chooses a strict Heraclitean perspective that claims that both principles “display their powers in a strictly mutual proportion.”

So we could truly symbolize the complex relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in tragedy with the fraternal bond between both divinities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, but Apollo finally speaks the language of Dionysus, and with that the highest goal of tragedy and art in general is attained. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

If we always sense in every remarkable Dionysian arousal which takes hold of its surroundings how Dionysian release from the shackles of individuality registers at first as a heightened restriction of the political instinct, all the way to indifference and even hostility, it is also true that, on the other hand, Apollo, the nation builder, is also the genius of the *principium individuationis* and that a sense of state and homeland cannot survive without an affirmation of the individual personality. (§ 21, trans. Ian Johnston)

This is the true artistic purpose of Apollo, in whose name we put together all those countless illusions of beautiful appearances which render existence at every moment generally worth living and push us to experience the next moment. But in this process, from that basis for all existence, from the Dionysian bed rock of the world, only as much can come into the consciousness of the human individual as can be overcome once more by that Apollonian power of transfiguration, so that both of these artistic drives are compelled to display their powers in a strictly mutual proportion, in accordance with the law of eternal justice. (§ 25, trans. Ian Johnston)

In the end, the Apollonian element of rhythm and poetry seems as important as the Dionysian element of harmony and music, both being equally necessary to the well balanced development of any art and not only Greek tragedy and German drama. Indeed the overplay of harmony and the necessity to arrange it through rhythm will be among the arguments used a few years later against the same Wagner he will accuse of lacking organization and form.

The universe in which we live is the product of great interacting forces; but we neither observe nor know these as such. Our conceptions of the world never actually addresses the underlying realities. It is human destiny to be controlled by the darkest universal realities and, at the same time, to live life in a human-dreamt world of illusions.

The issue, then, is how to experience and understand the Dionysian side of life without destroying the obvious values of the Apollonian side. It is not healthy for an individual, or for a whole society, to become entirely absorbed in the rule of one or the other. The soundest (healthiest) foothold is in both. Nietzsche's theory of Athenian tragic drama suggests exactly how, before Euripides and Socrates, the Dionysian and Apollonian elements of life were artistically woven together. The Greek spectator became healthy through direct experience of the Dionysian within the protective spirit-of-tragedy on the Apollonian stage. (Wikipedia, "The Birth of Tragedy")

Although in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the young Nietzsche tends to consider rhythm chiefly in the light of music, and music mainly in the light of harmony, although he seems to abandon the poetics of his predecessors and regard language as reduced to ideas, without paying much attention to its sound aspect, he must be considered as an important contributor to the theory of rhythm in the 19th century. His aesthetics is certainly infused with Romantic spirit, primacy of music upon poetry,

primacy of harmony upon rhythm, a kind of mystic drive to get in touch with Nature “despite the deceit of language,” but his metaphysics as well as his poetics of drama, their common radically Heraclitean conclusions, in short Nietzsche’s perfectly balanced yet dynamic view of Nature, Art and History, make it closer to Diderot’s, Schiller’s, Goethe’s and Humboldt’s *rhuthmologies* than to Hegel’s philosophy of Spirit in History and Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of the Will in Nature.

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