

NIETZSCHE'S FINAL THOUGHTS ON ART AND EXISTENCE: A REPLY TO JULIAN YOUNG

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The last year of Nietzsche's sane life proved to be incredibly productive. During this year alone he produced five complete works and much of the material later published as *The Will to Power*. The year of 1888 also proved to be one of extreme aesthetic contemplation. Not since his early work in *The Birth of Tragedy* had Nietzsche spoken so fervently about the relationship between art, as a work of art, and human existence. Put simply, his view of art in this final year is as that which makes life worth living, and the way by which we affirm our individual lives. He regards art as possessing that quality which helps us to live *with* the horror and absurdity we face.

In his book, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*, Julian Young undertakes a comprehensive examination of the Nietzschean aesthetic from his early work in *The Birth of Tragedy* through his last writings. Young divides the writings of Nietzsche into four periods. The first is characterized by his relationship with Richard Wagner and the pessimistic influence of Arthur Schopenhauer. The works of this first period include *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Untimely Meditations*. Nietzsche's second period is defined by his break with Wagner which resulted in the works *Human-All-Too-Human* and *The Dawn*. These two lesser known works of Nietzsche make up what is known as his positivistic period, marked by a purging of his previous romantic excesses and a reverence for clear, scientific thought. Nietzsche's third period produced the works which are most commonly associated with him, *Beyond Good and Evil* and the epic *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. During this third period, Nietzsche considers life itself to be an aesthetic phenomenon. In essence,

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the life of a person becomes the canvas on which one creates his own existence. Nietzsche's forth and final period, which I will be focusing on, is characterized by Young as a time of frenzy before Nietzsche himself collapsed into insanity. He concludes that the pessimism inherent in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is virtually absent in Nietzsche's middle periods, returns in the final writings of 1888.¹ In addition, Young finds that this return of Nietzsche to an earlier pessimistic stance, is disguised by his putting forth of life-affirming rhetoric. Yet, says Young, that which is being affirmed is not the truth, but merely a facade. Regarding this claim of Nietzsche's cyclical return to the thought of his earlier works, Young's most controversial in the book, he does make a persuasive argument, but in the process he ignores much material which would say otherwise.

In assessing Nietzsche's final works I agree with Young that they contain both a recognition of the absurdity of human existence and a discussion focusing on the role of art and its relation to that existence. However, where I disagree with Young concerns the mood of those last works. He finds that these works return to the pessimism of Nietzsche's first writings, whereas I believe that Young overlooks much of the positive, life-affirming stance inherent in these last works. I therefore posit that Nietzsche's final writings contain *both* a recognition of the ultimate meaninglessness of existence *and* a means of living *with* such knowledge and affirming it.

Young additionally makes the claim that the will-to-power is all but lacking in Nietzsche's late aesthetic thought. Regarding this claim I find that Young is completely mistaken. Nietzsche *breathes* the will-to-power, it permeates his thought. Particularly within his aesthetic considerations, Nietzsche uses the will-to-power as *the* determinant of beautiful art. A work is evaluated, for him, on the basis of how it relates to human existence. That art which Nietzsche deems as good is so because it increases our feeling of power. Moreover, art is viewed as bad when it stimulates an unhealthy feeling of decadence and degeneration.² In this paper I hope to show that Young is mistaken with regards to Nietzsche's final year and

that such a return to his earlier thought is not as clearly apparent as Young presents it.

I shall begin my discussion of Nietzsche's final thoughts on art by considering his idea of the "beautiful illusion." An illusion conventionally is thought to be a presentation of a false reality, something which hides or diverts our attention from that which is the case. Nietzsche uses the conception of an illusion in his discussion of art; albeit that this discussion centers on Apollinian art, the idea of which I will develop later in this section of the paper. Nevertheless, in his late works Nietzsche will sometimes state that art, without mentioning the stipulation of Apollinian art, functions as that which hides from us the harsh reality of our existence with all of its absurdity, pettiness, and terror. Consider one such passage from *The Will to Power*:

For a philosopher to say, "the good and beautiful are one," is infamy; if he goes on to add, "also the true," one ought to trash him. Truth is ugly.

We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.³

If we take the quotation above to be indicative of Nietzsche's overall view of art, it appears that he unequivocally holds it to be for the purpose of sheltering ourselves from truth. That is, art, through its beauty and eloquence, provides us with a soothing balm to divert our thoughts from the harsh reality of our human situation. Art no longer is the means to affirming truth, but it is itself what shelters us from the truth. And furthermore, we *need* that sheltering. The harshness of the truth is no longer something to be affirmed, for it will break us. What we need is a "beautiful illusion" to make our existence tolerable. It is from this perspective that Young understands Nietzsche's final thoughts on art and existence.⁴

For one to hold this view, that the late work of Nietzsche understands the role of art to be a "beautiful illusion," is entirely justified. He does makes frequent reference to the

illusory quality of art, particularly in the *Will to Power*. However, to maintain that this is the *only* way in which Nietzsche perceives art in his final works is much too one-sided. As I have stated earlier, the role of art as an illusion applies only to the distinction of Apollinian art. In addition to this, Nietzsche discusses the relevance of what he calls Dionysian art and a union of these two forms in Tragic art. Let us now turn our attention to the origin of these distinctions in *The Birth of Tragedy*, so as to better understand the specific roles which art fulfills and to become clear on the reasons why Young concludes that Nietzsche returns to the pessimism of *The Birth* in his final works.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche focuses his sight on the ancient Greeks. In them he sees a people who faced the extreme harshness of life and, in spite of this, lived to affirm their existence. Nietzsche relates a story in Greek folklore of how King Midas hunted in the forest to find the wise Silenus. When Silenus was eventually found, the king asked him what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. After a long pause Silenus answered Midas. He told the king that, "What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon."⁵ With such a pessimistic wisdom permeating the cultural web of Greece, Nietzsche comes to ask the question of how it is that the creation of the Olympians, essentially an affirmation of human life and human potential, came to be.

To answer this question Nietzsche turns to an examination of the Grecian artistic tendencies. He recognizes there to exist two such artistic forces which he identifies with the gods Apollo and the Dionysus. These forces, "which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*," provide man with two polarities intrinsic in art.⁶ On the one hand, the Apollinian element is equated with order and measure, indeed the whole idea of technique and craftsmanship in art. Nietzsche uses the metaphor of a dream to speak of the unique quality of the Apollinian, for it is within a dream-state that we create visual images. Such a state produces an aesthetic

experience of the type one encounters in painting or sculpture, that of imagery. Although, while we must recognize the Apollinian as a mere illusion, there also results an immense joy and beauty from its veiling of reality. Through this profound veiling Nietzsche senses a healthy creative spirit, as he speaks of, "The beautiful illusion of the dream worlds, in the creation of which every man is truly an artist."⁷

The sense that life is made bearable through art runs throughout Nietzsche's discussion in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is highly tempting for him to envision the idea of veiling life through Apollinian illusion. However, there is something deeper in man which strives not for the separated individuation of the Apollinian dream-state, but for a union with his primal nature. Nietzsche identifies the primal aspect of man with the god Dionysus.

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man.⁸

Indeed it is here, where man yearns to rekindle his union with all that is primal and natural in existence, that the Dionysian spirit makes its appearance.

The Dionysian element of art involves chaos, emotion, and contradiction. Nietzsche sees the Dionysian as representing the spiritual domain and uses the metaphor of intoxication to illustrate this tendency. While associated with the feeling of intoxication, the Dionysian permeates the human soul with a spirit that, unlike the Apollinian, does not simply shadow the truth and pain of life. Instead, the Dionysian revels in all that is harsh and contradictory, affirming not only joy but also suffering. Nietzsche says that in the Dionysian, "Excess revealed itself as truth. Contradiction, the bliss born of pain, spoke out from the very heart of nature."⁹ Whenever the Dionysian consumes man, all of his carnal instincts are re-

leased. Nietzsche illustrates the mood of the Dionysian tendencies by speaking of the festivals held in honor of Dionysus.

In nearly every case these festivals centered in extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions; the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty which has always seemed to me to be the real "witches' brew."¹⁰

The Greeks, attending such festivals, became enraptured in a spirit of oneness, losing all sense of individual identity. The ecstasies of the dithyramb whirled man into a deeper realm of awareness such that,

In song and dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing . . . He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity.¹¹

Owing itself to the deeper awareness of the Dionysian ecstasies is, however, not *only* the recognition of a primal unifying oneness. There is, in addition, a revealing of the harsh reality of our existence. If not able to deal with, and affirm, this pain, one must turn to something which helps make life bearable. This is the domain of Nietzsche's conception of the "beautiful illusion."

Nietzsche regards the Grecian yearning for a more beautiful and ideal existence as a quite "profound need." While suffering is integral to Nietzsche's thought, one may not be able to tolerate an extreme degree. Hence, if one's will comes to be in danger of willing a *negation* of life, a healing balm must

substitute for a complete affirmation. It is here that,

Art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live: these are the *sublime* as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the *comic* as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity.¹²

Here, at the fringes of Dionysian ecstasies, the Apollinian rescues man from the terror of existence. Apollinian art provides the beautiful illusion which man can affirm, and thereby bear the harsh and indifferent world in which he lives. Thus, in Nietzsche's early aesthetic we find that illusion is more profound than truth.

Let us now examine the case which Young makes, that in his final works Nietzsche makes a marked return to the pessimism inherent in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Young maintains that this return to pessimism once again assigns the role of art to be that of veiling the truth, a position which Nietzsche clearly departs from during his positivistic period and in the works surrounding *Zarathustra*. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Young states that Nietzsche has, "a renewed sense of the ultimate importance of the artist and of art: the 'works of art,' as much as that which has one's life as its product."¹³ Moreover, Young states that, "the 'Dionysian' attitude to life . . . is viewed in 1888 as achievable, indeed achieved, by at least the artist."¹⁴ With each of these claims I agree entirely. However, that with which I disagree is Young's thesis that,

. . . this apparently optimistic turn in Nietzsche's thought is an illusion; for . . . the only reason the Dionysian condition is viewed as achievable is that, without Nietzsche properly noticing it, the concept of what constitutes it has altered.¹⁵

The shift which Young perceives to have happened since *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra* is that instead of offering an honest confrontation with the horrors of life, Nietzsche offers us a choice of illusions. Young states that,

...on the one hand, we are offered the redemptive power of Apollinian illusion – profound superficiality, in other words; on the other, the redemptive power of Dionysian sublimity. But the latter too is, as he points out in *The Birth* (BT 18), a species of illusion, an evasion of the actual human existence. What we are offered, therefore, is a choice between two forms of dishonesty: human life is to be made bearable either by telling ourselves beautiful lies about it or else pretending to belong to an order of being other than that of human individuality.¹⁶

Moreover, Young claims that because we are offered a choice between two forms of dishonesty, the implication is clear: Nietzsche no longer holds that life can be affirmed.

I agree with Young regarding the altered sense of the Dionysian in Nietzsche's final works; however, that with which I disagree is the manner of its evolution. Young claims that the redemptive power of Dionysian sublimity relies on the illusion of believing that one is part of a trans-individual unity, a primordial one.¹⁷ In part, his interpretation is correct, that is if one is speaking about the role of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Notice also that the reference to the Dionysian in the quotation above relies on what Nietzsche said in *The Birth*. Therefore, Young is relying on information about the Dionysian which does not accurately reflect Nietzsche's own view of it during his last works.

I find the identity that Dionysian consciousness assumes in the *Twilight of the Idols* is one of personal power. The true Dionysian individual is one who is able to organize and channel the chaotic absurdity of life into a creative phenom-

enon. This quality Nietzsche finds in the Greeks. He suggests that the Greeks gave such structure to their existence through the creation of the Olympian gods. For the Olympians,

there is nothing here that suggests asceticism, spirituality or duty. We hear nothing but the accents of an exuberant, triumphant life in which all things, whether good or evil, are deified.¹⁸

All things, whether considered good or evil, are *deified*. Not simply are the harsh moments in life accepted as a means of suffering between those of joy, but they are exalted, affirmed, and *deified*. So awestruck was Nietzsche by the Grecian will-to-life that well into his final year of production the idea of affirming life, both its good aspects and bad, permeated his thought. In the *Twilight of the Idols* this affirmation is equated with the Dionysian sensuality of the Hellenic Greeks. Within the orgiastic frenzy of the dithyramb Nietzsche finds the eternal affirmation of life. Consider the passage,

For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian state (that of frenzy), that the *basic fact* of the Hellenic instinct finds expression—its "will to life." What was it that the Hellene guaranteed himself by means of these mysteries? *Eternal* life, the eternal return of life; the future promised and hallowed in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond all death and change; *true* life as the over-all continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality.

Nietzsche continues,

For the Greeks the *sexual* symbol was therefore the venerable symbol par excellence, the real profundity in the whole ancient piety. Every

single element in the act of procreation, of pregnancy, and of birth aroused the highest and most solemn feelings. In the doctrine of the mysteries, *pain* is pronounced holy: the pangs of the woman giving birth hallow all pain; all becoming and growing – all that guaranties a future -- involves pain. That there may be eternal joy of creating, that the will to life may eternally affirm itself, the agony of the woman giving birth *must* also be there eternally.¹⁹

All joy, all pleasure, all profundity is coupled with pain. And pain, for Nietzsche, is a necessary element of existence. Seen here in the paradigm of sexuality, pain is viewed as an element integral to the act of creation. Art therefore, resulting from an act of creation, is intrinsically linked to pain. Thus, the creation of art becomes a necessary element of human existence.

During Nietzsche's final year of production he focuses his attention vigorously on the relationship between art and existence. We know that the role of art was of central importance to Nietzsche during 1888 because of his many references to it. In fact not since his work in *The Birth of Tragedy* had art (in the literal sense) occupied such a significant position in Nietzsche's writing.

Young recognizes this return of Nietzsche's admiration for art. In fact, Young feels that the reemergence of aesthetic concerns in Nietzsche's work was only one aspect of a more significant return to the overall pessimism inherent in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Moreover, Young declares that Nietzsche's doctrine of the will-to-power, which continuously runs throughout his final thoughts, plays little, if any, role in Nietzsche's late philosophy of art. He goes on to add that, "it has always seemed to me, [that the will-to-power] is a notion which figures much more prominently in commentaries than in the texts themselves."²⁰ In this section of the paper I plan to show not only that Young has overlooked a significant segment of the

Nietzschean aesthetic, but that Nietzsche no less than *breathes* the will-to-power. Particularly in his last works Nietzsche's thought is permeated by, and always returns to this doctrine. Let us turn our attention to the *Twilight of the Idols*.

Nietzsche's discussion of art in *Twilight* explores the genesis of the creative process. He claims that at the heart of artistic creativity lies a certain psychological disposition of frenzy. Consider the passage,

Toward a psychology of the artist. If there is to be art, if there is to be any aesthetic doing and seeing, one physiological condition is indispensable: frenzy.

Nietzsche continues,

What is essential in such frenzy is the feeling of increased strength and fullness. Out of this feeling one lends to things, one *forces* them to accept from us, one violates them - this process is called *idealizing*.²¹

As one can see the sense of power is deeply imbedded in the passage above. The artist does not merely present us with images to be done with as we please, but he forces his vision upon us. Since, as Nietzsche states, without the condition of frenzy there can be no art, and the essential element in such a state is the feeling of increased strength and fullness, then the whole creative process may be seen as an act of power. For such frenzy to be attained, one must aim to increase his own feeling of power. Once realized, this personal power is to be exercised as to, "bring out the main features so that the others disappear in the process."²² Hence, that which the creative process aims toward is a sense of the *transformation* or *transfiguration* of things into perfection.

The idea of the artist transforming things into perfection is quite compelling for Nietzsche. While the process of trans-

formation is not by any means explicitly wrought out, he does speak of it as resulting from one's own fullness. What Nietzsche is trying to suggest by "one's own fullness" is not entirely clear, but he seems to equate it with the combined feeling of frenzy and one's sense of personal strength and power. Consider the passage,

A man in this state [of frenzy] transforms things until they mirror his power – until they are reflections of his perfection. This *having to* transform into perfection is – art; . . . in art man enjoys himself as perfection.²³

One's power in organizing the chaos and absurdity of life is seen as equivalent to this *having to* transform that Nietzsche calls art. I therefore suggest that the act of artistic creation and the will-to-power are, for Nietzsche, one-and-the-same.

It is here that we touch on the true meaning of art for Nietzsche during his final year of sanity. The will-to-power holds the answer of how one is to approach life. It is a doctrine that does not simply allow one to endure the absurdity of existence, but rather to live *with* that absurdity and affirm it as a necessary element of existence. Life itself comes to be viewed, by Nietzsche, as an aesthetic phenomenon, whereby existence is justified through artistic creation.

As I come to the end of my examination of Nietzsche's final thoughts on art and existence, I hope I have made it clear that his aesthetic contemplation is multi-tiered, incorporating several different roles that he feels art plays. Additionally, I hope that I have emphasized the point that all aesthetic examination which Nietzsche undertakes is done in relation to human existence. The work of art is not merely an object which we view and appreciate in a manner by which we identify ourselves as autonomous from the work. Rather, for Nietzsche, the work of art takes on an organic quality which only realizes its full relevance in relation to human existence. For art, in the realization of its potential, may take the form of several differ-

ent roles along a spectrum.

One polarity of this spectrum is the role of Apollinian art. By providing us with an illusion of image and form in perfection, the work of art shelters us from the absurdity of existence. As I have indicated, it is this view of art that Young takes to be Nietzsche's final word on the subject. With respect to his claims regarding Apollinian art, I do agree with Young that this is *an* aspect of the final Nietzschean aesthetic; however, I think that Young is being too one-sided on the issue and ignoring much of what Nietzsche says in addition to his discussion regarding the role of Apollinian art. I furthermore think that Young too hastily disregards passages which point toward the more frenzied and chaotic aspects of Dionysian art. He maintains that such passages are merely the result of Nietzsche's mental deterioration. Yet, if we fall to reducing certain passages of Nietzsche's final work to being the result solely of his deteriorating mental condition, then we must condemn the entirety of his last work to this fate as well. For, how are we to tell if one passage is the work of a philosophically sound individual and the next is mere babble. On the other hand, if we look at the beauty in form and structure, the wit, and the often piercing insight which runs throughout these last works, it seems that we *are* justified in taking them *in toto* to represent Nietzsche's final thoughts. If we are then to accept Nietzsche's last works in full, we shall find that art does not simply occupy the role of a soothing balm saving us from the harsh reality of existence, but rather that it also allows us to live *with* that very absurdity and to affirm it as our own. Art thereby strengthens our will-to-power, adding health and intensity to our lives.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Young, Julian. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. p. 117
- 2 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. IX, 20.
- 3 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*. 822.
- 4 Young, Julian. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. p. 148-152.
- 5 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. p. 42.
- 6 *Ibid.* p. 38.
- 7 *Ibid.* p. 34.

- 8 Ibid. p. 37.
- 9 Ibid. p. 46-47.
- 10 Ibid. p. 39.
- 11 Ibid. p. 37.
- 12 Ibid. p. 60.
- 13 Young, Julian. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. p. 117.
- 14 Ibid. p. 118.
- 15 Ibid. p. 118.
- 16 Ibid. p. 139.
- 17 Ibid. p. 136.
- 18 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. p. 41.
- 19 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. X, 4.
- 20 Young, Julian. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*. p. 1-2
- 21 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. IX, 8.
- 22 Ibid. IX, 8.
- 23 Ibid. IX, 9.