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# *Nietzsche on the Cross: The Defence of Personal Freedom in The Birth of Tragedy*

**Wayne A. Borody**

*Nipissing University*

## *Appropriating the Mask of Apostasy*

Every philosophy also conceals a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding place, every word a mask.

In his later writings, Friedrich Nietzsche often reflects on what he considers to be the significance of his philosophy, especially since it had not received serious academic interest at the time, except, that is, among a coterie of close friends and admirers. The quote above is just such a self-reflection, which comes near the end of *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). The quote appears in aphorism 289, in which Nietzsche, who at this time was fond of referring to himself as “the hermit of Sils Maria,” describes the *silently concealed* “philosophy” of the hermit as “more profound, deep and dangerous” than it appears on the surface: “his concepts themselves at last acquire a characteristic twilight colour, a smell of the depths and of must, something incommunicable and reluctant which blows cold on every passer-by.”<sup>1</sup> The one who “has sat alone with his soul day and night, year in year out, in confidential discord

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 197. (In this paper, all references to the German texts of Nietzsche’s writings are based on G. Colli’s and M. Montinari’s *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*.) Maxim 289, like so much of Nietzsche’s writing, is full of etymological connections linking specific terms in the passage, which then creates a second order of “connotative” meaning (and argument).

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and discourse” encounters the cold incommunicability of an abyss, “an abyss behind every ground, beneath every foundation.”<sup>2</sup> The act of representing this abyss in writing, claims Nietzsche, is an act of concealment: the thinker masks the abyss with *words*. As a lover of this mask, Nietzsche adopted a variety of mytho-philosophical personae during the fifteen-year period of his active writing life, beginning with his Dionysian self-personification in his earliest work, the *Birth of Tragedy*, to his Zarathustrian personification in his last works. Just prior to his total mental collapse, Nietzsche developed a penchant for describing his writings as “dynamite” (which had only recently been invented); looking back on his writings in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche quite literally believed that he had effectively demolished—at least as far as intellectual integrity is concerned—the ideological foundations of Christianity and Platonism—which he considered to be the primary forces of devolution in modern Western culture.

It goes without saying that Nietzsche’s use of the metaphor of *dynamite* to describe his writings was prescient. Whether it was with the sartorially plumed-out Nazi brass who milled around the porcine-figured Elizabeth at the Nietzsche Archives, or with all the Franz Kafkas of Europe writing through the silence of caffeinated nights, the “explosion” was a historical fact. It echoed, re-echoed, and continues to echo, even when only a faint or haunting ringing in the ears. Such is it heard, although, as it is generally acknowledged, something else occurred along with the echo: Nietzsche’s celebrated attack on the foundations and overall project of Western culture coterminously self-implodes into a morass of philosophical confusion and ineffectuality. *Quid pro quo*, Nietzsche, in his Herculean struggle against the myriad of cultural forces he considered harmful to the healthy human soul, adopts the same (albeit metamorphosed) ethical and philosophical strategies he so vehemently criticizes in his opponents. The unfortunately most telling example of this is his *de rigueur* ethic of resentfulness, an ethic that he himself so loathes in “*ressentiment* morality.” As a perceived *victim* of the moral and psychological abuses of nineteenth century Euro-Germanic Christian culture, Nietzsche, unfortunately, embraced *the Old Story*: “I was abused; ergo, I can abuse.”

*Attack on  
Western  
culture  
implodes into  
philosophical  
confusion.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 197.

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Denunciatory  
apostasy  
masked  
defence of  
personal  
freedom.

Thus began Nietzsche's philosophical development, which was largely shaped by this dialectic of the victim-turned-victimizer, masked as it was by the rhetoric of the apostate. This denunciatory apostasy was clearly at work in the *Birth of Tragedy*. In what follows, however, I will attempt to separate, within the confines of the *Birth of Tragedy*, this grotesquely convoluted mask of the denouncing apostate from the underlying argument in the book: a strong argument strongly in defence of personal freedom

The particular *genre* of Nietzsche's apostasy and the particular type of apostate that he was can best be described as a variation of the prototype "Christian, prophetic-messianic." In a déjà vu of heightened polemics, Nietzsche criticizes the institution of Christianity as tropologically as Christ had criticized the institution of Judaism.<sup>3</sup> In the *Birth of Tragedy*, the young Nietzsche messianically envisions a promised land aestheticized as a Euro-aboriginal, Dionysian *Kunst-Welt* of total individuality—in short, as a utopian cosmos woven out of the *Self qua Ur-Self* of the Romantic movement. In this context, as one of the essential "masking" or "concealing" strategies he employs in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche etiologically focuses on Hellenistic rationalistic optimism (idealized by the so-called Dionysian-destroying likes of Euripides and Socrates) in his attack on nineteenth century Euro-Germanic culture, when it is clear that the subtext and driving force behind this attack is Christianity. Although Nietzsche had once claimed that "Christianity is Platonism for the People," the fuel in his vitriolic attack on modern Western culture in the *Birth of Tragedy* evolves out of what he later came to call his "*Curse on Christianity*." Platonism is simply a footnote in his critique of Christianity, insofar as Christianity historically appropriated Greco/Platonic rationalism in its theological and philosophical self-articulation. Indeed, for the later Nietzsche, Plato is just "an antecedent Christian," a "Higher Swindler" who had studied with the Egyp-

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<sup>3</sup> The much quoted passage in the synoptic gospel *Matthew* (5.17) records Christ as claiming that he has not come to abolish (*katalusai*) the "Law or Prophets," but to "fulfill" (*plērōsai*) them. Nevertheless, in his denunciation of those faithful followers of the Law and Prophets who do not accept his Messiahship, and in his claim, for example, to have brought a sword, and not peace, when it comes to those who are either for him, or against him (10.34), his conciliatory voice is overshadowed by denunciation.

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tian priests (“or with the Jews in Egypt?”).<sup>4</sup> Socrates and Plato, Nietzsche claims, simply offer “the bridge to the cross,” a bridge Nietzsche set out to destroy and a cross he chose both to denounce and, ironically, to bear.

### *The “Curse on Christianity” Prefigured in the Birth of Tragedy*

In his apostatizing role in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche is, however, very careful how he masks his anti-Christian sentiments and his vision of a de-Christianized European culture. Clearly, in this work, he was not ready to “come out of the closet” with what he later declaimed as his *Curse*. In a “Critical Backward Glimpse,” Nietzsche’s preface to the second edition of the *Birth of Tragedy*, written some fourteen years after the first edition, Nietzsche self-deprecatingly criticizes the *Birth of Tragedy* for containing all the faults of a first book “in the worst sense of that term as badly written, clumsy, embarrassing.”<sup>5</sup> However, of most interest in this preface is Nietzsche’s acknowledgement that the *Birth of Tragedy* harbours a “consistently cautious and hostile silence about Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> He acknowledges that “the purely aesthetic exegesis and justification of the world”<sup>7</sup> propounded in the *Birth of Tragedy* was meant to serve as a counter-doctrine to Christianity: “my instinct turned against morality at the time I wrote this questionable book; as an advocate of life my instinct invented for itself a fundamentally opposed doctrine and counter-evaluation of life, a purely artistic one, an anti-Christian one.”<sup>8</sup> However, in this second preface, Nietzsche does not explain *why* he chose to remain silent about the anti-Christian subtext of the *Birth of Tragedy*.<sup>9</sup> Nor, years later, in *Ecce Homo*, does he address this central question regarding the *motivations* behind the silence of the anti-Christian subtext

“Hostile  
silence about  
Christianity”  
maintained in  
Birth of  
Tragedy.

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 117.

<sup>5</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, ed. R. Geuss and R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, no doubt, was being cautious, perhaps because he had already been warned by both Cosima and Richard Wagner to be careful about the “boldness” of his ideas; see, *Nietzsche und Wagner: Stationen einer epochalen Begegnung*, ed. D. Borchmeyer and J. Salaquarda (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1994) I, 50 and 52.

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of the *Birth of Tragedy*, except to reiterate his earlier observation concerning the “profound and hostile silence with regard to Christianity throughout the book.”<sup>10</sup> However, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche now claims to offer some proof of the anti-Christian subtext of the *Birth of Tragedy*: “In one place the Christian priests are alluded to as a ‘malicious species of dwarfs,’ as ‘subterraneans’. . . .”<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche is here referring to section 24, near the end of the *Birth of Tragedy*, which does in fact appear to be a cryptic reference to Christianity. More telling than this reference, however, would have been Nietzsche’s framing of the Aryan consciousness in opposition to the Semitic, when he discusses the difference between the Aryan and Semitic myths of the Fall. While he claims that the two myths function as “brother and sister,” he clearly aligns his own Dionysian philosophy with the Aryan. We know that, as early as 1865, six years before the publication of the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had already openly renounced his Christian faith. Although he had enrolled in the University of Bonn as a student of theology, he quickly abandoned his theological studies. In 1865, at the age of 21, Nietzsche writes to his sister Elizabeth (who at the time was pleading with him to abandon his newly found apostasy), and bluntly says:

Is it the most important thing to arrive at that particular view of God, world and reconciliation that makes us feel most comfortable? Is not the true inquirer totally indifferent to what the result of his inquiries may be? For, when we inquire, are we seeking for rest, peace, happiness? No, only for truth, even though it be in the highest degree ugly and repellent. Here the ways of men divide: if you want to strive for peace of soul and happiness, then believe; if you wish to be a disciple of truth, then inquire.<sup>12</sup>

Attack on  
Christianity  
disguised as  
attack on  
Hellenistic  
rationalism.

And *inquire* the young Nietzsche did, masking his attack on Christianity in the later-to-be-written *Birth of Tragedy* as a “scholarly” attack on Hellenistic rationalism and optimism. At the same time, working beneath the surface, so to speak, he was attempting to “unmask” the very nature of what he considered to be the truth of Being itself. For the young Nietzsche such an insight could only be had in a particular *experience*, a pleasurable ecstatic experience

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<sup>10</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 79.

<sup>11</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>12</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, 219. Much to his mother’s dismay and anger, Nietzsche stopped taking communion during this period.

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of "Primordial-Oneness," of "*das Ur-Eine*." While the basic thrust of this *Ur-Eine* experience was, in one way or another, part and parcel of the Romantic era, much as the "altered state of consciousness" was of the 1960's, it was, in Nietzsche's case, philosophically framed by a Kantian/Schopenhauerean aporetic metaphysic. Although Kant had claimed that the *noumenon* "was not an object of our sensible intuition," he did argue that it was "an object of non-sensible intuition,"<sup>13</sup> i.e., ideation, an ideation that Schopenhauer then personalized, so to speak, as an object of sensible intuition, i.e., as the creative and destructive power of the cosmic and amorphous Will. When Kant metaphorically said that the "rainbow in a sunny shower may be called a mere appearance, and the rain the thing in itself,"<sup>14</sup> he left the rain in his philosophy up to the Unknown, the *noumenon*. Schopenhauer, on the other hand (and to extend the metaphor further), believed the rain to be experienceable, thus adding an emotive, intuitive component to the cosmic Unknown. Influenced more by Schopenhauer than by Kant, Nietzsche took great stock in the belief that one can enter into the experience of this cosmic Unknown qua Will, although in the *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche romanticizes (although the critics might say *fetishizes*) the Will as the "*Ur-Eine*," which is experienced through a form of pleasure, i.e., through ecstasy, and which is brought about either through the orgasmic consummation of sexual pleasure, or the rapturous enthrallment induced by drug or alcohol intoxication, *Rausch*. According to the argument in the *Birth of Tragedy*, pleasure, in its most heightened form as ecstasy, is a celebration of life and existence, and however temporary, the most fitting response to the pain and suffering of existence. The human is called upon to interpret this celebratory experience, although both the *expression* and *representation* of it can only properly be carried out through the medium of Art, most notably music, and especially the type of music that brings with it the most ecstatic pleasure. Paraphrasing Wagner on this point, Nietzsche claims that "the civilized human being is absorbed, elevated and extinguished (*aufgehoben*) by music, just as lamplight is superseded by sunlight."<sup>15</sup> As a form of *mimesis*, music can faithfully replicate

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<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (London: the Macmillan Press Ltd.), 268.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, 39.

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the sexual and Rauschean experience of the reality of *das Ur-Eine*.

The human experience of ecstasy as both an ultimate and, at the same time, ultimately intimate experience is self-empowering and self-affirming, which explains, no doubt, why the human so seeks ecstatic pleasure. Nietzsche makes it clear that this experience, in itself, was enough of a panacea to palliate the pain and suffering that he had lived with throughout his own tortured life. Christianity certainly had not palliated this pain for Nietzsche; by his own account, Christianity simply made it worse, turning it into a lurid mix of guilt and duplicity, a *Weltschmerz* that only he himself could properly diagnose, prognosticate and, finally, cure—through the homeopathic medium of his own aesthetic and intellectual pleasures. For Nietzsche, *pleasure itself, qua ecstasy* was enough of a basis on which to attack, *in toto*, the underpinnings and framework of the nineteenth century, Christian-based morality that controlled the expression and limits of personal pleasure. On the one hand, while so much of Nietzsche's construal of the *Ur-eine* experience is overlaid by the discourse of the Romantic movement, along with its philosophical appropriation of Eastern, especially Indian thought (e.g., in the nineteenth century appropriation of the concept of "*maya*"), it remains, on the other hand, within the sphere of traditional Western metaphysics as circumscribed, for example, by Aristotle. Nietzsche's construal of the *Ur-Eine* is akin to Aristotle's understanding of "*being qua being*" construed as the highest form of knowledge, i.e., as the *epistēmē epistēmōn*, insofar as "*being qua being*" represents an *Ur-Sein* of sorts. However, nowhere in his writings does Aristotle speak of a sensual experience, a *pathos*, of "*being qua being*." For Aristotle, the apprehension of "*being qua being*" is solely a result of *theoria*, contemplative reflection. Unlike Aristotle's *Ur-Sein*, Nietzsche's *Ur-Eine* involves both *theoria* and *pathos*, and continues, through accretion, the traditional Western debate over the possibility of a *prōtē philosophia*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In this context, however, it should be noted that in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle links the *theoria* of "*being qua being*" to a *pathos* of sorts, given that *theoria* is considered to be an intellectual *aretē*, and as such involves *desire*, in this case, the desire for truth.

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### *Sexuality and Rausch: Twin Avenues to the Ur-Eine Experience*

Although Nietzsche is oblique and understandably taciturn in his description of the sexual avenue to the *Ur-Eine* experience, he does weave together three “facts” in the *Birth of Tragedy* to justify his assertion that, as a form of emancipatory consciousness, sexual/orgasmic pleasure is one of the two avenues to the *Ur-Eine* experience. First, he cites a *biological* fact: he describes the intrinsically sexual and self-replicating *impulse* in the very nature of things as a “*Zeugenslust*,” a procreative Joy/Lust, which is a manifestation of a *primordial* Joy/Lust—an *Urlust*.<sup>17</sup> (Here, the German term “*Lust*” must be understood in English as both “Lust” and “Joy.”<sup>18</sup>) This *Urlust* is a coexistent dimension of the *Ur-Eine*, adding a vibratory, kinetic dimension to what is otherwise the static, self-replicating structure of the *Ur-Eine*. Through sexuality, one can experience this vibratory, kinetic aspect of the *Ur-Eine*, and thus come to understand both its pleasures and pains, its Joy and its Suffering, insofar as it is both a creative and destructive force, as it both generates life and the annihilation of life. Furthermore, and even more significantly for the argument in the *Birth of Tragedy*, this experience of the *Urlust* is not mediated or controlled by social forces external to the human being; it emerges through the fabric of human experience itself, in this case, through the body. Secondly, Nietzsche cites a *psychological* fact: he refers, euphemis-

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<sup>17</sup> Other than Wagner’s influence on Nietzsche’s early views of sexuality, Schopenhauer may have been of seminal importance, insofar as Schopenhauer considers sexuality as one of the essential means of entering “that real inner nature of things” (*selbst-eigenen und inneren Wesen der Dinge*): “Our own consciousness, the intensity of the impulse, teaches us that in this act is expressed the most decided *affirmation of the will-to-live* [*Wille zum Leben*], pure and without further addition.” See *The World as Will and Representation*, trans., E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), I, 328. See also the chapter on “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love,” II, 531-560.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding Nietzsche’s use of the term *Lust*, the translator Ronald Speirs offers some instructive observations (*Birth of Tragedy*, 154):

By settling, eventually, on ‘The Birth of Tragedy’ as the title of his first book, Nietzsche drew attention to the imagery of sexuality and reproduction which pervades it, in elaboration of Schopenhauer’s assertion that sex encompasses both the orgiastic rites of Dionysos and ‘sublimated,’ intellectual, and artistic expressions of the *Trieb* (‘drive’); thus such terms as *Befriedigung*, *brünstig*, *entladen*, *Erguß*, *Zeugung* appear in contexts which are not obviously sexual. The central term in this complex is *Lust*, which is much broader than modern English ‘lust’ but which, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, still connotes this kind of desire even referring to the highest forms of delight.



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tically, to the sexual act itself (i.e., “the urges of spring”) as a compelling force behind the self-actualizing and self-empowering experience of the *Ur-Eine*. In the face of what Nietzsche no doubt suspected would have been the ridicule of academic officialdom, he was willing to argue that the *significance* of sexuality can exist outside of the zone of the family and social responsibility: it can exist in its own right, as a form of pure pleasure, pure ecstasy, and thus, as a revelatory epistemic connection to the primordially of life, to the *Ur-Eine* qua *Urlust*. Finally, Nietzsche cites a *historical* fact: Dionysian Greek and other Dionysian-like cultures reveled in celebrating wildly orgiastic (“*panheterist*”), state-sponsored festivals, which allowed the temporary loosening of social and sexual mores, and thus allowed the citizenry to experience and acknowledge publicly the type of epistemic freedom that Nietzsche claims sexuality facilitates. These three “facts” that Nietzsche cites regarding the role that non-tabooized sexuality plays in the “epistemology of pleasure” bring sexuality in line with the role of *Rausch*, as sexuality can facilitate an epistemologically “altered state” of insight, in this case, mediated by the body.

When it comes to *Rausch*, Nietzsche is much more expansive and direct (although it should be noted that at times Nietzsche uses the term “*Rausch*” simply as a synonym for ecstasy, whereby he is referring to both sexuality and *Rausch*.) In *The Dionysiac World View*, an essay that Nietzsche wrote in honour of Cosima Wagner’s birthday on 25 December 1870 (an essay that then became the basis for the thesis developed in the *Birth of Tragedy*), Nietzsche describes *Rausch* as a “state of ecstasy.”<sup>19</sup> He describes the *Rausch* experience as the result of a psychoactive drug rather than alcohol, which would have been either opium, hashish or the narcotic chloral hydrate, important nineteenth century drugs of choice for intellectuals and artists (and, it appears, for Nietzsche himself).<sup>20</sup> Sounding as if he is paraphrasing a line from *Les Paradis*

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche’s use and abuse of both opium and chloral hydrate is well documented, as is his mother’s disdain of his drug habit; indeed, Frau Nietzsche once complained that her son bought chloral hydrate “by the bucketful,” and she also claimed that his dementia was brought on by seizures from an overdose of chloral hydrate. As for Nietzsche’s apparent hashish use, see E. F. Podach, *The Madness of Nietzsche*, trans. F. A. Voigt (London: Putnam, 1931), 54-58, and Pia Daniela Volz, *Nietzsche im Labyrinth seiner Krankheit: eine medizinisch-biographische Untersuchung* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990), 168-169.

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*artificiels* (1860) or *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), Nietzsche describes the experience of *Rausch* as a typically altered state of consciousness based on what earlier cultures would describe as a visionary experience and what modern psychologists would describe as an experience of derealization: "If one has not experienced it for oneself this state can only be understood by analogy; it is rather like dreaming and at the same time being aware that the dream is a dream."<sup>21</sup> It is this metaphor of the dream-experience that comes to define the Rauschean dimension of the *Ur-Eine* experience: the *Ur-Eine* manifests itself in day-to-day consciousness as an Illusion, as pure particularity, as the *principium individuationis*; however, through the *Rausch* experience, one can unmask the Illusion of individual particularity and at the same time experience this Illusion for what it is, i.e., the *Ur-eine/Urlust* as pure "Will," which lies at the root of existence as a cosmic "drive to exist and at the same time the perpetual death of everything that comes into existence."<sup>22</sup> Epistemologically, this experience of the Cosmic Will qua *Ur-Eine* which is brought about through *Rausch* is structurally bifurcated into a double Illusion (*Schein*): on the one hand, this experience pierces through, so to speak, the mundane, habitual experience of the world as *personalized*, as a "construct" existing independently among other independent, personal entities, and on the other, it offers a "re-presentation" of itself through ideation, ideally through Art.

*Rausch*  
experience like  
dreaming  
while "aware  
that the dream  
is a dream."

In framing the representation of the *Ur-eine* experience solely in aesthetic terms, Nietzsche put into practice the aesthetic ideas found in Wagner's essay on Beethoven (1870), an essay that had a profound influence on Nietzsche's own thinking about the connection between aesthetics and the *Ur-Eine* experience. While Wagner speaks in generalities of how Art "transports us to the highest ecstasy of consciousness of our infinitude" and thus "brings to our consciousness the inmost essence of Religion free of all dogmatic fictions,"<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche actually provides a blueprint for the establishment of a new religion, but in his case, "free of all dogmatic fictions" clearly means *free of Christianity*. In the soteriology set out in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claims that one can be saved, and

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<sup>21</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Wagner, *Beethoven*, trans. William Ashton Williams ([wysiwyg://11http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0133.htm](http://wysiwyg://11http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wlpr0133.htm)), 16.

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only saved by Art, and only the kind of Art that has penetrated the Illusion of the *principium individuationis* by the giving over of oneself to the *Ur-Eine*,<sup>24</sup> on the basis of which one enters into a soteriological “festival of reconciliation” (*Versöhnungsfest*): “Not only is the bond [covenant] between human beings renewed by the magic of the Dionysiac, but nature, alienated, inimical, or subjugated, celebrates once more her festival of reconciliation with her lost son, humankind.”<sup>25</sup> In such an experience, the “Illusion” obfuscating the reality of the *Ur-Eine* is shattered, “as if the veil of maya had been torn apart. . . .”<sup>26</sup>

***The Satyr and the Monkey: Science as  
“the Seed of Our Society’s Extermination”***

On the basis of the epistemology and soteriology of the *Ur-eine* experience in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche overlays the subtext of his anti-Christian polemic with an attack on the nineteenth century practice and ideology of science. Nietzsche dismisses, *out of hand*, Science as anti-Dionysian, as a mere product of *Socratismus*—of the glorification of rationality and concomitantly, optimism. Nietzsche brings in the figure of Kant in defence of his anti-scientific, Dionysian based argument, claiming that Kant (along with Schopenhauer) had already proven that “these things [i.e., scientific insights] actually only served to raise mere appearance, the work of maya, to the status of the sole and supreme reality and to put this in the place of the innermost and true essence of things, thereby making it impossible really to understand this essence. . . .”<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Nietzsche’s attack on science in the *Birth of Tragedy* is best illustrated when he praises the Dionysian Greeks for portraying the human as a Satyr, rather than confounding him “with the Monkey.” For Nietzsche, a metaphorical, aesthetic depiction of the human being has “more truth” than any possible literal, scientific depiction: “the Dionysian Greek wants truth and nature at full strength—and sees himself transformed by magic into a satyr.”<sup>28</sup> The “Monkey,” in Nietzsche’s metaphorical thinking, represents the scientific project itself and as such is “an enemy of the tragic view.” Unwilling to accept any compromise between the

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<sup>24</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

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metaphorical and literal ways of knowing, Nietzsche is as unrelentingly dismissive when it comes to his view of science as he is with his apostatizing attack on Christianity: the scientific account of the human being, in this case represented by the theory of evolution, is not just criticized, but *denounced* in the *Birth of Tragedy* as both duplicitous and dangerous.

Nietzsche takes his anti-scientific attack back to Socrates, “the turning-point and vortex of so-called ‘world history’,”<sup>29</sup> “the archetype of *theoretical man*,”<sup>30</sup> and, finally, “the mystagogue of science.”<sup>31</sup> Science, claims Nietzsche, always knocks up against the “outer limits” where its logic no longer holds, and is forced to accept the truth of the Dionysian insight: “tragic knowledge, which, simply to be endured, needs art for protection and as medicine.”<sup>32</sup> Offering, according to Nietzsche, an opposing epistemological model, Science remains “the seed of our society’s extermination.”<sup>33</sup> Science, “the optimism that imagines itself to be infinite,”<sup>34</sup> is simply the fly in the ointment of Nietzsche’s account of the Dionysian. By destroying the Socratism of Science, with its *sub specie saeculi* ideology of anti-mythic, anti-Dionysian optimism, Nietzsche feels that he is a part of a movement (consisting of the likes of Goethe, Schiller, Winkelmann, Kant, Schopenhauer and Wagner) that will bring about a new “dawn” in German culture: “the return of the German spirit to itself, a blissful reunion with its own being after the German spirit, which had been living in hopeless formal barbarism, had been tyrannized for too long by forms introduced from outside by a vast invading force.”<sup>35</sup> The battle for a Dionysian utopia cannot be fought without first purging both Christianity and Science from modern culture. By the time Nietzsche comes to treat science in the *Birth of Tragedy*, he has already subtextually dismissed “Christ” in place of the “Satyr” as his anthropomorphization of *das Ur-Eine*: the Monkey represents

*Both Christianity and Science viewed as obstacles to Dionysian utopia.*

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<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Nietzsche Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montanari, III,1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1972), 96.

<sup>30</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, 72.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

<sup>33</sup> *Die Geburt*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, 86.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

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much more than simply a transmogrified version of “the mystagogue of Science.”<sup>36</sup>

Nietzsche did not completely give up his anti-Scientific sentiment in his later works; indeed, even in the preface to the second edition of the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche maintained his radical anti-scientific attitude:

And science itself, our science—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—against truth? Or, to put it in moral terms, is it something like cowardice and insincerity? To put it immorally, is it a form of cunning?<sup>37</sup>

### *Nietzsche and the Defence of Personal Freedom in the Twenty-first Century*

The *Birth of Tragedy* is a sustained defence of personal freedom overlaid by an apostate rhetoric that is personally directed against Christianity, but masked as a scholarly attack on the Hellenistic-based idealization of rationality embraced by much of nineteenth century academic and scientific discourse. As a product, so to speak, of Romanticism, Nietzsche upped the ante of the Enlightenment’s focus on personal freedom in terms of *Reason*: Nietzsche, unabashedly, stressed the emancipatory significance of personal freedom in terms of *Pleasure*, both sexual and intellectual. However, as Nietzsche developed his argument in his writings that followed the *Birth of Tragedy*, the apostate masking of his argument became even more labyrinthine. The concepts of the *Will to Power* and *Übermensch* (and the cluster of concepts surrounding

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<sup>36</sup> In this regard, it is telling that in the original manuscript of his public lecture “*Socrates and Tragedy*” (1870), which came to form a substantial aspect of the argument in the later to be written *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche, sounding more like Cosima Wagner, concludes the essay by identifying *Sokratismus* with the “Jewish press.” By extension, “Jewish” in this context would also imply “Christian,” given the argument in the essay. See: *Nietzsche Werke*, 14, 101. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, for example, immediately after having derided *Sokratismus*, Nietzsche proceeds to denounce Christianity (in the section of the *Birth of Tragedy* that Nietzsche later claimed was a direct reference to Christianity: “But for all of us the most painful thing is that long period of indignity when the German genius lived in the service of treacherous dwarfs, estranged from hearth and home. You understand what my words mean—just as you will understand, finally, my hopes” (115).

<sup>37</sup> *Birth of Tragedy*, 4.

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these) both intensify and obfuscate, in almost equal degrees, his plea for personal freedom. Be that as it may, as a form of philosophical and cultural anthropology, it is most appropriate to reflect on Nietzsche's argument in this age that is so dominated by *the discourse of control* under the aegis of "safety" and "security." In many respects, Nietzsche has more relevance in the twenty-first century than he did in the nineteenth, or the twentieth. As we are now well into having entered the twenty-first century, we are only too aware of the ways the phrase "personal freedom" can so easily be legislated away as oxymoronic. While still so identified with *the ambiguity of the two Nietzsches*, i.e., with the jackbooted Brownshirt and the flea-inquiring Joseph K., Nietzsche is, more than anything in the twenty-first century, significant because of his philosophically sustained analysis of the darker sides of the way humans are controlled by their own creations of control—whether they be religious, political or ethical. In light of the significance of this analysis, however conflicted, let us now take up the three most central themes forming the basis of the analysis as addressed in the *Birth of Tragedy*: ecstasy, science and religion.

Ecstasy as a human experience has always been micro-managed by the powers that be, whether by the Alpha males of primitive hunter-gatherer tribes or the bureaucratic power-functionaries of the Modern State. Indeed, even the human body has a self-regulatory, micro-managed control over the amount and type of pleasure the human can extract from life: over-indulgence has its price, and the price is usually steep, paid for by one pound of flesh or another, as, for example, in the gruelling constipation and grovelling lifestyle of heroin addicts. Reality as it plays itself out in human existence is clearly not designed for pure pleasure, *ad infinitum*. Trench wisdom in this regard is unanimous: pure ecstasy is part of the fabric of life as an epiphanous and singularly unique event. Other than that, pleasure is sustained, in most cases, not as ecstasy, but as a generalized *joie de vivre* based on the *simple* pleasures of life. In the *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche is neither advocating a philosophy of pure *ad infinitum* nor pure solipsistic pleasure, but a politics of pleasure: he is arguing the case for a concretely attainable experience of redemptive freedom generated out of a celebratory form of *individual* pleasure. In the sphere of human pleasure, Nietzsche traced out the almost invisible line separating the space inhabited by the Individual, and the space inhabited by

*Human existence not designed for unbounded pleasure.*

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the Body Politic. Nietzsche's defence of pleasure through sexual and Rauschean means inaugurated a "paradigm shift" in the domain of human pleasure, and the *Birth of Tragedy* marks a specific, historical event in the liberalization of personal pleasure and personal freedom (contrary to Nietzsche's own critique of liberalism). Outside of the framework in which Nietzsche discussed pleasure, i.e., outside of his "Christian, messianic-prophetic" apostate model that was awash in the sentimentality of Romanticism, his argument in defence of the Individual's right to a sphere of pleasure existing outside of the body of the Body Politic, retains its resiliency in the twenty-first century.

Traditional  
Euro-  
Germanic  
Christian  
culture had  
its own  
Rauschean  
dimension.

On the other hand, Nietzsche did not take into consideration that the Euro-Germanic culture in which he lived already had an established culture of ecstatic pleasure, not so much in the sphere of celebratory sexual experience, but in the Rauschean sphere. Europeans had a very ancient tradition of the appreciation of alcohol and other intoxicants, a tradition that had its origin in the settlements dating back at least ten thousand years. Among Nietzsche's Celtic/Druid ancestors, a Dionysian appreciation of life was already very much entrenched. Given that early Christianity was not inimical to alcohol, it was not difficult for the Christian and Celtic traditions to share in the Rauschean dimension of the Dionysian appreciation of life. Although chloral hydrate, opium and hashish were all ways the tea-toting Nietzsche had, no doubt, employed to enter the Dionysian spirit, beer and wine cannot be overlooked as the most significant instruments of Rauschean pleasure in the Dionysian spirit in traditional Euro-Germanic Christian culture. In his denunciation of Euro-Germanic Christian authoritarianism, Nietzsche overlooked a very fundamental truth about the culture he so decried. Germans in the nineteenth century did not need "*a bringing back of all things German!*" They already had a tradition that celebrated the beauty and pleasure of fine beer and wine, although their genitals, Nietzsche was only too correct, called out for some much needed fresh air and sunlight.

Nietzsche's attack on science in the *Birth of Tragedy* is the weakest aspect of the book, given that Hellenistic rationalism and optimism were part and parcel of Dionysian/Apollonian Hellenistic culture (if indeed one chooses to frame Hellenistic culture in terms of the Dionysian/Apollonian dichotomy). Socrates was not *the* "theoretical man" who was responsible for the idealization of the scientific spirit—he (or better yet, Plato) was merely an expression

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of it, an expression of the essentially aporetic/apodictic culture of *logos* celebrated by the ancient Greeks. Without even mentioning the likes of Hippocrates, Callicrates or Euclid, it goes without saying that the pursuit of science (*epistēmē*) was as intrinsic to the Hellenistic sensibility as the Dionysian theatre and was considered to be as emancipatory as the pursuit of *Rausch* and sexuality. While the Dionysian theatre as embodied by the figures of Aeschylus and Sophocles focused on the breakdown of *logos* in the face of *moira*, and while the likes of Aristophanes mocked the airs of any *logos* exuding hubris, *logos* itself, both as *mimēsis* and *epistēmē*, was praised by the ancient Greeks. Nietzsche's argument concerning science in the *Birth of Tragedy* would have been as distasteful to Socrates and Plato as it would have been to the *logos*-loving Aeschylus, Sophocles and Aristophanes. Indeed, even Heraclitus, whom Nietzsche praises as the ideal model of a philosopher from the assumed Dionysian Golden Age, celebrates the kind of *epistēmē* brought about through *logos*. Unfortunately, Nietzsche obfuscates the Greek appreciation of *logos qua epistēmē* in his attempt to dismiss and undermine nineteenth century Euro-Germanic Christian moral authoritarianism.

Greek appreciation of *logos* obfuscated to undermine Christianity.

If Nietzsche had wanted to return to a pre-Christian, "aboriginal" Euro-Germanic cultural experience, he would have had to return to his Celtic roots, roots seeped in the authority of the Druid priests. Indeed, in a way, he did return to his Celtic roots when he took up residence in the Swiss Alps, in Sils-Maria, which had been an important centre of Celtism since the end of the last ice age. This area of Europe is still populated by womblike dolmens, sacred Celtic triadic rock formations (whether naturally occurring or constructed) used for Druid vision-quests and, in some cases, burial tombs. In fact, the rock site at the tip of the Chaste Peninsula where Nietzsche would go to reflect when in Sils-Maria, and where he apparently wrote *Noch Einmal* (the final song-poem in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), is a large, naturally occurring dolmen, with an opening facing eastward over the spectacular mountainous valley of the Chaste Peninsula.<sup>38</sup> However, if Nietzsche had

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<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche was unaware of the Celtic/Druid ruins in the St. Moritz area. Archeological work in this area did not begin until the turn of the twentieth century. The most famous, and most impressive, dolmen in the St. Moritz area of the Engadine valley is perched on the top of a hill facing eastward, overlooking St. Moritz. The eastern-facing dolmen at the tip of the Chaste Peninsula is much larger. Unfortunately, however, the capstone has been defaced with an embedded, tombstone-like engraving of *Noch Einmal*.



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*Emancipatory  
elements of  
Christianity  
ignored.*

been able to trade in his Christian culture for one dominated by Druidism, however Dionysian, he simply would have been trading in one authority structure for another. Celtic or Christian: both extract a price for personal freedom. Human culture exists and has evolved both because of and in spite of the power structures controlling social relations and individual pleasures: "religion" has always been a voice for both emancipation and oppression. In his later writings, and prefigured in the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche saw Christianity solely as an instrument of oppression, which, as an instrument of oppression, he exposed only too well. Unfortunately, however, he never appreciated the nuances of the legacy of Christianity, nor any other religious tradition, other than his own self-constructed Dionysianism. Nietzsche's Germany and Nietzsche's Europe in the nineteenth century was a product of both the oppressive and emancipatory elements within Christianity and Platonism. Although Nietzsche struggled as he denounced this oppressiveness, he lacked an appreciation of its emancipatory dimension—and hence is explained his outright dismissal of science and his inability to appreciate the degree to which his Christian culture was already shot through and through with the Dionysian.

***Conclusion: the Joy of Life is Deeper than its Pain***

In Zarathustra's song-poem "*Noch Einmal*," Nietzsche reiterates the theme of life's primordial Lust/Joy that he first articulated in the *Birth of Tragedy*:

*Noch Einmal*

*O Mensch! Gib acht!  
Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht*

*"Ich schlief, ich schlief—,  
Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht:—  
Die Welt ist tief,  
Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.*

*Tief ist ihr Weh—  
Lust—tiefer noch als Herzeleid:  
Weh spricht: Vergeh!  
Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit  
—will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!"*

*Once Again*

O Human Beings! Pay Attention!  
What does the depth of Midnight  
have to say?

"I slept, I slept—,  
I awoke from a deep dream:—  
The world is deep,  
and deeper than the Day has  
thought.

deep is its Suffering—,  
but Joy—is deeper than any Grief:  
Suffering says: Go Away!  
but all Joy desires Eternity  
—desires deep, deep Eternity!"

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In this song-poem, Nietzsche is expressing a perspective on life that resonates with his early Christian upbringing. At the conclusion of his writing career, Nietzsche ironically and unintentionally ends up affirming a perspective on life that resonates with what can be termed a “Christianity of Joy”: in this song-poem Nietzsche taps into what can best be described as the underlying voice in Christianity, i.e., the voice of Judaism, which in its very core affirms that Joy is deeper than Suffering. In deference to Nietzsche, one can entertain the possibility that the Christian “libel on life” is true, but then, if this is true, this is indeed only *half the truth*. The other half is reconfirmed in *Noch Einmal*. And for all the faults of nineteenth century Euro-Germanic Christian culture, this culture’s underlying teaching of Joy over Suffering also cultivated an appreciation of both Science and *Rausch*. Nietzsche simply took his role as a “victim” far too seriously, mainly because it was self-empowering in relation to his creativity. It helped facilitate him in his “dirty work”: someone had to try and clean up the mess left by the quagmire of the moral and sexual authoritarianism of the oppressive aspect of nineteenth century Euro-Christian culture. Nietzsche had to put on a mask in order to do such work, and, for this, he paid the price in *more* than a pound of flesh. However, thanks to Nietzsche, we moderns in the twenty-first century are left with a collective caveat inscribed in all our intellectuality, spirituality, and morality: beware the ways your Freedom and Joy are duplicitously manipulated and, as a result, surreptitiously obliterated by the very voices bespeaking that Freedom and that Joy.

*“Christianity  
of Joy”  
ironically  
affirmed.*