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Beyond the *Birth*: middle and late Nietzsche on the value of tragedy

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ABSTRACT

Nietzsche's interest in tragedy continues throughout his work. And yet scholarship on Nietzsche's account of tragedy has focused almost exclusively on his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* – a work which is in many ways discontinuous with his more mature philosophical views. In this paper, I aim to illuminate Nietzsche's post-*Birth of Tragedy* views on tragedy by setting them in the context of a particular historical conversation. Ever since Plato banished the tragic poets from the *kallipolis*, various philosophers have attempted to respond to his challenge to offer a 'defense of poetry'. What Nietzsche offers, I argue, is a distinctive form of response to Plato's challenge. I show how Nietzsche takes seriously Plato's worries, and even ends up in partial agreement with him: tragedy is *not* (unqualifiedly) valuable; it *can* be spiritually dangerous. Key to Nietzsche's account is a distinction he draws between two types of tragic audience. For the 'lower types', tragedy is – as Plato feared – dangerous. For the 'higher types', however, tragedy can act as a regenerative force. Finally, I discuss a distinctive form of value that tragedy makes available to a modern audience: tragedy can act as a stimulus towards the process of the revaluation of values.

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1. Introduction

In *Ecce Homo (EH)*, published in his final lucid year, Nietzsche characterizes tragedy as 'the highest art of saying yes to life',¹ and refers to himself as 'the first *tragic philosopher*'.² Prior to this, the theme of tragedy recurs

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¹*EH*, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 4. I use the following abbreviations for Nietzsche's texts: *The Birth of Tragedy* – BT; *Human, All Too Human* – HAH; *Daybreak* – D; *The Gay Science* – GS; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* – Z; *Beyond Good and Evil* – BGE; *On the Genealogy of Morality* – GM; *Twilight of the Idols* – TI; *The Antichrist* – A; *Ecce Homo* – EH. All translations are from the 'Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy' editions of Nietzsche's published works, with some minor adjustments. Quotations from Plato's *Republic* are from the Grube/Reeve translation.

²*Ibid.*, 3.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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regularly throughout Nietzsche's corpus.³ Despite this ongoing engagement with the topic in his middle and later work, the scholarship on Nietzsche's philosophy of tragedy has focused almost exclusively on his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*).⁴ This focus is understandable, for this is the text in which the topic is treated most comprehensively. But it is also unfortunate, because *BT* is – as many scholars have emphasized, with Nietzsche himself seemingly in agreement⁵ – discontinuous in many respects with Nietzsche's post-*BT* philosophy. As a result, we lack a robust understanding of Nietzsche's more mature understanding of tragedy. And given the continued significance of the notion of tragedy for Nietzsche's thought, this lack should concern us.⁶

What I would like to do in this paper is to consider Nietzsche's post-*BT* views on tragedy in the light of a particular historical conversation. Ever since Plato banished the tragic poets from the *kallipolis*, philosophers have attempted in various ways to answer his challenge, at *Republic* 607c–608a, to offer a defense of poetry, an account of its value. Indeed, many of the significant milestones in the history of the philosophy of art can be read as taking the form, directly or indirectly, of a response to Plato's worries. It is within the context of this millennia-spanning philosophical conversation that we will be able to gain a clearer sense of Nietzsche's mature philosophy of tragedy. For what Nietzsche offers in his post-*BT* work, I shall argue, is a distinctive and compelling form of response to Plato's challenge. When we understand this aspect of Nietzsche's thought, we will be able to see more clearly how the concept of tragedy fits into his broader philosophical project.

2. Plato's challenge, and the *Birth of Tragedy*

In Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates cites an 'ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy', and insists that the tragic poets be banished

³For example: *HAH* 1:166, 1:212; *D* 78, 172; *GS* 1, 23, 80, 135, 153, 342, 382; *Z* 'On Chastity', 'The Convalescent', 'On Reading and Writing', *BGE* 25, 30, 150, 229, 239; *A* 7; *TI* 'Reason in Philosophy', 'Skirmishes' 24, 'What I Owe the Ancients'.

⁴The extensive investigation in Silk and Stern's *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (1981), for instance, is focused entirely on *BT*.

⁵'An Attempt at Self-Criticism', added to *BT* in 1886.

⁶A few pieces of scholarship do buck the trend. I discuss Amy Price's (1998) in section 6. A further piece of interest is Aaron Ridley's (2019) (see also (Young 1992) for related discussion). Here, Ridley offers an analysis of a passage from *TI* in which Nietzsche discusses the psychology of the experience of tragedy, and its relationship to life-affirmation. Ridley's point, however, is that in this passage we see Nietzsche *returning*, regrettably, to metaphysical ideas reminiscent of his *BT*-era views – ideas that he ought, given some of his mature philosophical commitments, to have long since abandoned. The question I shall be considering, then, is whether the mature Nietzsche, when he is *not* being swept up in ill-advised flights of metaphysical fancy, has anything interesting to say to us about tragedy; I shall be arguing that he does.

from the *kallipolis* unless and until someone is able to offer a satisfying defense of the art form (607b-e). Here and elsewhere,⁷ Plato raises a series of interrelated concerns: poetry, and perhaps especially tragedy,⁸ appeals to and encourages the lowest part of the soul – it feeds the base appetites, allowing them to run rampant at the expense of the highest, reasoning, part of the soul. Poetry leads us away from knowledge of the Forms: like the painter's representation of the carpenter's bed, which is itself merely the earthly copy of the pure Form, poetry stands at 'three removes' from true reality. The poets speak without knowledge, yet the attractiveness of their language leads listeners to think that they are wise and speak the truth. And, in these various ways, poetry stands fundamentally in opposition to philosophy, for to practice philosophy is to follow the life of reason, to be guided by truth and not by appetite, and to seek to know the nature of that which is most real, namely the realm of the Forms. To come to possess this knowledge is, at the same time, to become virtuous. Poetry, then, is a psychologically, epistemically, and morally corrupting force – or at least, so we must suppose until someone is able to offer us compelling reason to think otherwise: if poetry 'has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least would be glad to admit it'; 'poetry should return from exile when it has successfully defended itself' (*Republic* 607c-d).

When we look at the history of the philosophy of art and aesthetics, we find many central figures offering accounts that can plausibly be read as attempts to respond to Plato's challenge. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle presents tragedy as rationally analyzable and cognitively structured; further, tragedy's characteristic aim of arousing emotions (especially pity and fear) is understood as being for the purpose of *katharsis*, the purifying, refining, or cleansing of those emotions.⁹ Tragedy, then, does engage

⁷See the *Ion* and the *Philebus*, for instance.

⁸The precise target of Plato's attacks is difficult to pin down clearly. This is in part because Plato's concept of 'poetry' is somewhat broader than ours, and takes as its primary instance not written pieces but rather works that were performed in public, including in the context of tragic (and comic) plays. Things are complicated further by the fact that the arguments posed at various places in the *Republic* and other texts seem to take aim at somewhat different objects. However, it seems to be the epic poets and the tragedians who stand as the main target of Plato's attacks. The most frequently named target is Homer, whom Socrates describes as 'the most poetic of the tragedians and the first among them' (*Republic* 607a).

⁹This is, I should acknowledge, a contentious reading of the *Poetics*. The notion of *katharsis* in particular has been the focus of much disagreement, with some authors claiming that the term itself is a result of a corruption of the text, and should be excised. See Halliwell (2009) for a survey of ways the notion has been interpreted, and Scott (2003), Veloso (2008) for considerations concerning the inclusion of the term in the text. What matters ultimately for my purposes will be how Nietzsche understands Aristotle's account of tragedy; I discuss this in section 4.

with the lower parts of the soul, but it does so for the purposes of aligning those parts with reason. Taking a rather different approach, Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* offers an account of the sublime and the beautiful that emphasizes the emotional disinterestedness of the properly aesthetic response; good art will not stir up the unruly passions but rather serve as a site for the ‘free play’ of the higher cognitive capacities. And in *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer adopts Kant’s account of aesthetic disinterestedness and then makes a further direct response to Plato’s challenge: the good artist, he insists, does not merely aim to produce a mere ‘copy of a copy’, but instead looks directly to the Form itself as his model.

These various responses to Plato’s challenge share in outline the same basic shape. It *would* be bad, they all agree, if art did indeed function as Plato supposed, stirring up and feeding the base appetites at the expense of the higher cognitive capacities. But in fact art is not like this – or anyway *good* art needn’t be like this. Instead, it can work in the service of these higher parts of the soul, either by not engaging with the lower parts at all (as in the ‘disinterested’ accounts) or by engaging with that part of the soul for the purposes of bringing it into line with reason (as in Aristotle’s *katharsis* account). The sort of defense of art given by these authors can be understood as dissolving the idea of a fundamental conflict between poetry and philosophy.

Seen in this context, Nietzsche’s *BT* constitutes a striking departure from the preceding tradition – even from Schopenhauer, despite the many aspects of his influence that can still be felt in this text. For Nietzsche, unlike these other authors, does not seek to downplay the idea of a conflict between poetry and philosophy. Instead, *BT*’s narrative arc is structured around this very conflict, with the two figures that represent the aesthetic forces at work in ancient Greek art, Apollo and Dionysus, set in opposition to a third figure, this time rationalistic and anti-aesthetic: Socrates. On Nietzsche’s picture, art is neither rational nor disinterested; rather, just as Plato said, it is a fundamentally non-rational (perhaps anti-rational) force, deeply connected to emotion and appetite. And that, thinks Nietzsche, is just what is so valuable about it. For Nietzsche, it is not art but philosophy, with its hypervaluation of reason, that should really be understood as corrupting, decadent, dangerous. Roughly speaking, while other authors accept Plato’s evaluative commitments and reject his picture of what (good) art is like, Nietzsche accepts (more or less) Plato’s picture of what art is like, and instead rejects Plato’s evaluative commitments. *BT*-era Nietzsche, then, embraces Plato’s idea of the ‘ancient quarrel’ between poetry and philosophy – he simply picks the opposite side in that quarrel.

3. Things become more complicated

At the time of writing *BT*, Nietzsche's allegiance is clear: the tragic culture of pre-Socratic Greece stands as his model for the ideal culture, and Socratic rationalism stands in stark opposition to this. After *BT*, however, things become rather more complicated.

It would be a mistake to suppose that there is one wholly coherent entity that is 'Nietzsche's post-*BT* philosophy'. Nonetheless, my strategy in what follows will be to see whether we cannot anyway find a more or less unified, if complex, account of tragedy and its value in these post-*BT* works, and I shall suggest that on investigation we do indeed find such a broadly unified story. Although Nietzsche emphasizes different aspects of his view at different times, and certain components undergo a process of development from the middle to later works, the overall message is largely a cohesive one. The most significant shift in Nietzsche's views on tragedy, on my account, is the initial break that happens following *BT*.

Much has been made of Nietzsche's rejection, in the post-*BT* works, of Schopenhauerian metaphysics – the idea of a deeper underlying reality consisting of undifferentiated 'will'. But of arguably even greater significance for Nietzsche's mature philosophical project is his vehement rejection of the central notion in Schopenhauer's moral philosophy: *Mitleid* ('pity' or 'compassion'). Nietzsche's attacks on pity, developed most extensively in *D*, serve as an initiating moment for his revaluation project. As he explains in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (*GM*):

This problem of the *value* of pity and of the morality of pity [...] seems at first to be only an isolated phenomenon, a lone question mark; but whoever pauses over the question and *learns* to ask, will find what I found: – that a vast new panorama opens up for him, a possibility makes him giddy, mistrust, suspicion, and fear of every kind spring up, belief in morality, all morality, wavers. (*GM*, Preface, 6)

Pity, however, is one of the two characteristic 'tragic emotions' identified by Aristotle in the *Poetics* (the other is fear); Nietzsche too seems to consider tragedy and pity to be intimately linked.¹⁰ Indeed, Nietzsche links some of his attacks on pity to less-than-flattering pictures of tragedy:

For human beings are the cruellest animal. Tragic plays, bullfights and crucifixions have always made them feel best on earth; and when they invented hell for themselves, see here – it was their heaven on earth. When a great human being

¹⁰In section 6, I introduce an important caveat to this point.

cries out – in a flash the little ones come running, and their tongues hang out with lasciviousness. But they call it their ‘pity’. (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z), ‘The Convalescent’, 2)

Nietzsche’s objections to pity seem to have complicated his assessment of the value of tragedy. Alongside these disparaging references to pity and tragedy, Nietzsche seems at times to align himself with a more Stoic worldview. In *Daybreak* (D), for instance, we hear: ‘You say that the morality of pity is a higher morality than that of Stoicism? Prove it!’ (D 139). In *GM*, in the context of attacks on ‘the morality of pity’, Nietzsche states that he is ‘opposed to the disgraceful modern softness of feeling’ (*GM*, Preface, 6). And in *Z*, he claims that ‘all creators are hard’ (*Z*, ‘On the Pitying’).¹¹ In this face of such remarks, one could be forgiven for supposing that Nietzsche has, after *BT*, simply reversed his allegiance between the evaluative systems he sees in pre- and post-Socratic Greece, now rejecting tragedy with its close ties to pity, and embracing the post-Socratic rationalists *par excellence*, the Stoics.¹²

I think this would be too quick. Certainly there are elements of Stoicism in Nietzsche’s thought, but there are plenty of points of opposition too. Nietzsche, unlike the Stoics, does not think that the only thing that can affect one’s wellbeing is one’s virtue, nor that one’s virtue (even if we understand this notion in Nietzschean terms) is always within one’s own control.¹³ What we should conclude instead is that the post-*BT* story about tragedy and its value is necessarily – given the shift in some of Nietzsche’s commitments – a more complex one. It is this more complex story that I shall try to elucidate.

¹¹Martha Nussbaum highlights the Stoics’ fondness for metaphors of ‘hardness’ and ‘softness’ (Nussbaum 1994, 146).

¹²Nussbaum (1994) interprets Nietzsche’s attacks on pity as resurrecting Stoic objections. (She is not here directly concerned with the role of tragedy in Nietzsche’s work – and of course the Stoic relationship to tragedy is itself complex.)

¹³In fact, Nussbaum appears to acknowledge something close to this (Nussbaum 1994, 158). She concludes, however, that there is a deep tension within Nietzsche’s thought, between what she sees as his strongly Stoic commitments to self-sufficiency and the unimportance of external goods, on the one hand, and his emphasis on the fact that human beings are ultimately bodily creatures (thus, she notes, subject to all kinds of misfortune that lie beyond our control) on the other. But I think Nussbaum is mistaken to see a tension here, for the latter commitments are, I think, sufficient to undermine the strongly Stoic reading she offers in the first place. The textual evidence that she raises shows that Nietzsche shares many of the Stoic’s *conclusions* about pity – that it can involve contempt, that it is an expression of weakness, that it is egoistic, and that it is connected to revenge. She then infers that Nietzsche’s reasons for viewing pity in these ways must be the same as those of the Stoics – centrally, the idea that pity rests on false beliefs that accord a high value to external goods, when in fact the only way a person can genuinely suffer harm is through her own choices. But there is no need to think that Nietzsche’s Stoic-sounding conclusions rest on such underlying Stoic commitments, and overwhelming reason to think that he rejects such commitments. Thus, the reading of Nietzsche as offering straightforwardly Stoic objections to pity cannot be supported.

4. Nietzsche on pity and *katharsis*

Nietzsche's objections to pity take several different forms. He objects to the way that pity's worldview conceives of suffering as the worst evil and thus focuses all its energy towards its eradication. For suffering, Nietzsche thinks, need not be bad and can instead be a stimulus to life; he therefore fears that the evaluative stance that pity embodies will eventually lead to wide-scale nihilism. Nietzsche also seems concerned with the way in pity seems to constitute a sort of voyeuristic response to the suffering of another.¹⁴ More generally, he is interested in the way in which we tend to misunderstand and mischaracterize the pitying response: what presents itself as selfless concern with the wellbeing of another is often merely a disguise for something much darker and more self-serving.

I shall have more to say about Nietzsche's objections to pity in section 6, though I will not be able to do justice to the topic here.¹⁵ What matters for now is the way that the concerns about pity that animate Nietzsche's post-*BT* work give him cause to reassess his stance in relation to Plato's worries about art. In *GM*, Nietzsche cites Plato (along with Spinoza, La Rochefoucauld, and Kant – a motley crew, as he acknowledges) as a surprising ally of sorts, at least in terms of his 'low opinion of pity' (*GM* Preface 5). Earlier, in a section in *Human, all too Human* (*HAH*) entitled 'Old doubts over the effect of art', Nietzsche explicitly raises the question of Plato's worries about art, and questions whether Aristotle's *katharsis*-based response is satisfactory:

Are fear and pity really discharged by tragedy, as Aristotle has it, so that the auditor goes home colder and more placid? [...] in the long run a drive is, through practice in satisfying it, *intensified*, its periodical alleviation notwithstanding. It is possible that in each individual instance fear and pity are mitigated and discharged: they could nonetheless grow greater as a whole through the tragic effect in general, and Plato could still be right when he says that through tragedy one becomes generally more fearful and emotional. (*HAH* 1:212)

Has Nietzsche now come to accept Plato's own anti-tragedy position? He puts his point here in uncharacteristically hesitant language (Plato *could* be right), and we shall see later on how he ultimately resolves the line of thought begun in this passage. But certainly what we see here is

¹⁴This part of the attacks on pity has been largely overlooked, but it appears as a recurring theme in *Z*, for instance.

¹⁵See (Von Tevenar 2007) for some interesting discussion.

Nietzsche, like Plato, concerned about the potential psychological effects of tragedy on its audience, and seriously doubting whether the Aristotelian response (as Nietzsche understands it) is adequate to allay these worries.

Nietzsche returns to the Aristotelian concept of *katharsis* several times in different works. In *D*, in the context of an extended critique of pity, he contrasts the dangerous modern approval of pity with the more sensible Greek view, on which pity 'counts as [...] a morbid recurring affect the perilousness of which can be removed by periodical deliberate discharge' (*D* 134). Here, Nietzsche references the notion of *katharsis* without raising doubts about its effectiveness; whether or not he still harbors such doubts, he anyway does not feel the need to bring them up in this context.

In *The Gay Science* (*GS*), we are given a still different take on the matter. The Greeks, says Nietzsche,

have done everything to counteract the elemental effect of images that arouse fear and pity – *for fear and pity were precisely what they did not want*. With all due respect to Aristotle, he certainly didn't hit the nail, let alone on the head when he discussed the final purpose of Greek tragedy. Just consider the Greek tragic poets and what most stimulated their industriousness, their sensitivity, their competitiveness – certainly not the aim of overwhelming the spectator with emotions. The Athenians went to the theatre *to hear pleasing speech!* (*GS* 80)

And finally, in *The Antichrist* (*A*), Nietzsche says:

Aristotle famously saw pity as a dangerous pathology that should be purged from the system every once in a while: he thought of tragedy as a purgative. In fact, the instincts of life should lead people to try to find a remedy for the sort of pathological and dangerous accumulation of pity you see in the case of Schopenhauer [...], to prick it and make it *burst*. (*A* 7)

These various passages can seem to push in different directions. Sometimes, Nietzsche appears to accept Aristotle's *katharsis* account of tragedy, and perhaps even to agree that this is what explains tragedy's value, since in this way tragedy can serve as a 'remedy' for a tendency towards excess pity (*D* 134, *A* 7). At other times, he appears doubtful that such a strategy would really work, and thus shares Plato's worries about tragedy (*HAH* 1:212). And at still other times, he seems to deny that Greek tragedy aims at arousing emotions of pity and fear at all, thus rejecting a basic premise of the *katharsis* account (*GS* 80).

Despite these differences, there are points of commonality between Nietzsche's various statements. Throughout, he presents the Greeks as properly concerned with the negative effects of pity. Whether or not

they aimed to avoid the dangers of pity through the process of *katharsis* during tragedy, and whether or not any such attempt was really successful, the Greeks are on Nietzsche's account at least acutely aware of these dangers. And in this sense, according to Nietzsche, they see things aright, in a way in which Nietzsche's contemporary society – committed as it is to the value of pity – has gotten something deeply and dangerously wrong. Despite his ambivalence towards the idea of tragic *katharsis* as a remedy for pity, Nietzsche remains clear on one point: Plato was right to be worried about pity, and right at least to raise the question of whether tragedy might not therefore be dangerous.

More generally, we can see how Nietzsche shares Plato's interest in assessing the value of tragedy in terms of the psychological-ethical effects on its audience. This feature of his approach belies a certain familiar reading of Nietzsche as a sort of aestheticist, who takes the only authoritative values to be aesthetic ones. Perhaps something like this is true of *BT*-era Nietzsche (it is in this work that we find the famous claim that 'only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified', *BT* 5, referenced again at *BT* 24). But in the later works, the value of art, and in particular tragedy, is typically assessed by Nietzsche in terms that are (broadly speaking) ethical in nature.¹⁶ In this respect, Nietzsche's engagement with the question of the value of tragedy accords much more with the ancient approach to this question¹⁷ than with more modern aestheticist approaches.

The nature of Nietzsche's interest in the psychological-ethical effects of tragedy on its audience separates him not only from strongly aestheticist approaches. It also separates him from those approaches that seek to delineate a particular sort of response to an artwork as the proper or true aesthetic response, and then to treat that response as the only relevant one for the purposes of assessing the value of art. We see a version of such an approach in Hume, who marks out the responses of the 'true judges' as the relevant ones, and in Kant, who characterizes the properly aesthetic response as 'disinterested'.¹⁸ For this sort of approach, very many *actual* responses to an artwork (and the

¹⁶See also Nietzsche's explicit rejection of an 'art pour l'art' philosophy at *TI*, Skirmishes, 24.

¹⁷And with that of someone like Tolstoy, who in *What Is Art?* similarly appears to take it for granted that the relevant terms of assessment for artistic works are ethical ones.

¹⁸More recently, Malcolm Budd (1997) argues in a similar spirit that the value of a work of art (or anyway its value 'as a work of art') is not a matter of its *effects*, including psychological-moral effects on the viewer, but is rather a matter of the intrinsic value of the aesthetic experience that the work offers when it is experienced correctly. Budd's work was published during the beginnings of a resurgence of interest, a few decades ago, in the question of art's value. From around the same period, see (Walton 1993) and (Goldman 1995).

psychological-moral outcome of these responses) are treated as irrelevant to a proper understanding of the value of art. What matters for our philosophical understanding and our evaluation of art and aesthetic experience is the *correct*, the proper form of aesthetic response. Nietzsche, by contrast, *is* genuinely interested in the reality of people's actual responses to tragedy – whether these are the 'proper' responses or not – and the effects of these actual responses on audiences and their surrounding culture.

Furthermore, he turns out to be interested in the *variety* of responses we see to tragedy. Understanding this last point will help us to begin to get a clearer grip on Nietzsche's overall position on the value of tragedy.

5. Different types of audience

Nietzsche's seeming ambivalence about tragedy's connection to pity (and likewise about Aristotle's *katharsis* account) begins to make more sense when we consider a further crucial component of his account: tragedy has different effects on different sorts of audience. Consider the following passage from *D*:

Tragedy and music. – Men whose disposition is fundamentally warlike, as for example the Greeks of the age of Aeschylus, are *hard to move*, and when pity does for once overbear their severity it seizes them like a frenzy and as though a 'demonic force' – they then feel themselves under constraint and are excited by a shudder of religious awe. Afterwards they have their doubts about this condition; but for as long as they are in it they enjoy the delight of the miraculous and of being outside themselves, mixed with the bitterest wormwood of suffering; it is a draught appropriate to warriors, something rare, dangerous and bitter-sweet that does not easily fall to one's lot. – It is to souls which experience pity like this that tragedy appeals, to hard and warlike souls which are difficult to conquer, whether with fear or with pity, but which find it useful to grow soft from time to time (*D* 172)

Here we have a description of the response to tragedy experienced by a 'hard soul'. Such a person is not normally prone to pity, but can be swept up in it temporarily in the context of tragedy. And this, Nietzsche seems to think, can be good for such a person; it can act as a sort of restorative tonic. Nonetheless, this 'draught appropriate to warriors' is *not* appropriate for everyone – indeed, it is 'dangerous and bittersweet'. And so Nietzsche goes on to contrast the value of tragedy for 'hard souls' with the situation in relation to another sort of audience: 'but of what use is tragedy to those who are as open to the 'sympathetic affections' as

sails to the winds!’ If one is *not* a ‘hard soul’, but rather overemotional and easily prone to pity, tragedy is not a valuable tonic but is instead harmful. Nietzsche continues:

When the Athenians has grown softer and more sensitive, in the age of Plato – ah, but how far they still were from the emotionality of our urban dwellers! – the philosophers were already complaining of the harmfulness of tragedy. An age full of danger such as is even now commencing, in which bravery and manliness become more valuable, will perhaps again gradually make souls so hard they will have need of tragic poets: in the meantime, these would be a little *superfluous* – to put it as mildly as possible. – For music too, there may perhaps again come a better time [...] when artists have to make it appeal to men strong in themselves [...]: but of what use is music to the little souls of this vanishing age, souls too easily moved, undeveloped, half-selves, inquisitive, lusting after everything! (*D* 172)

I take it that Nietzsche’s remark that tragic poets are, for his current society, ‘a little *superfluous* – to put it as mildly as possible’ is intended to indicate that they would in fact be not *merely* superfluous but instead actively harmful. That this is so is indicated by his reference to Plato’s concerns about tragedy as harmful, which are presented here as legitimate, as well as the previous remark that the experience of pity during tragedy is ‘dangerous’ and ‘appropriate to warriors’. When it comes to ‘little souls’, such as those Nietzsche sees in his contemporary society, tragedy is not valuable but instead dangerous.

We find further elaboration of this distinction between two types of tragic audience in *Beyond Good and Evil* (*BGE*):

There are heights of the soul from whose vantage point even tragedy stops having tragic effects; and who would dare to decide whether the collective sight of the world’s many woes would *necessarily* compel and seduce us into a feeling of pity, a feeling that would only serve to double these woes? ... What helps feed or nourish the higher type of man must be almost poisonous to a very different and lesser type. [...] There are books that have inverse values for soul and for health, depending on whether they are used by the lower souls and lowlier life-forces, or by the higher and more powerful ones. In the first case, these books are dangerous and cause deterioration and dissolution; in the second case, they are the heralds’ calls that summon the most courageous to *their* courage. (*BGE* 30)

Again, Nietzsche suggests that the value of tragedy depends on the nature of its audience. For the ‘higher’ type, tragedy (and, in the final part of the passage, certain books – including, one is tempted to suppose, Nietzsche’s own writings) can ‘feed and nourish’ the soul, can

‘summon the most courageous to *their* courage’. But these very same artworks are ‘poisonous’ for the ‘lesser’ types; they are ‘dangerous’ and lead to ‘deterioration and dissolution’.¹⁹

In fact, when we return to the discussion of *katharsis* in *HAH* and consider how Nietzsche ends this passage, his ambivalent feelings about tragedy and about Aristotle’s response to Plato begin to make much more sense. After his suggestion that ‘Plato could still be right’ about the dangers of tragedy, Nietzsche says:

But what right has our age to offer an answer to Plato’s great question concerning the moral influence of art at all? Even if we possessed art – what influence of *any kind* does art exercise among us? (*HAH* 1:212)

Nietzsche leaves this final question unanswered, and the implication may be that in his contemporary culture art simply leaves people unmoved, and thus has no effects at all, whether good or bad. But the more general point that seems to be expressed here does accord with the themes we’ve seen developed in other later works: the question of the effects of tragedy on its audience, and therefore of its value, does not admit of one straightforward answer. The effect of tragedy on a Greek audience of ‘higher types’ is one thing; its effect on ‘the little souls of this vanishing age’ (*D* 172) – i.e. Nietzsche’s contemporaries – is quite another.²⁰

6. The value of tragedy and the paradox of tragic pleasure

So far, we have in view the outlines of Nietzsche’s response to Plato’s challenge about the value of tragedy: importantly, Nietzsche seems to agree with Plato that tragedy *can* be dangerous. It is dangerous, in particular, for audiences of ‘lesser types’. But for ‘higher types’, tragedy can act as a stimulus to spiritual growth.²¹ To fill out the picture, we will need to consider in more detail the nature of the response to tragedy experienced by these two different audiences.

¹⁹The idea that Nietzsche thinks that there are different psycho-physical ‘types’ of individual, and in particular the distinction between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ types, is a familiar one (see for instance (Leiter 2015)).

²⁰This passage also introduces another important theme – that of taking a *historical* perspective on tragedy, and considering the question of its value in light of our own historically situated moment. I shall return to this theme in the final section.

²¹There is some reason to think that Plato might actually agree with this (although ultimately of course the details of the two accounts will have to diverge). For what Socrates says that tragedy is able to corrupt even decent people, ‘with a few rare exceptions’ (*Republic* 605c). In fact I think Plato’s stance towards art must be significantly more complicated than I have portrayed it here, though this is not the place to develop that thought (see (Murdoch 1977) for some interesting, though at times rather opaque, discussion).

We can usefully approach this question by considering the response Nietzsche offers to a familiar puzzle about tragedy. The puzzle is this: why do we take pleasure in watching terrible things happen in tragedy? Indeed, why do we experience pleasure seeing such things on the stage when we would not do so if the same events played out in real life? After all, as Aristotle characterizes pity in the *Rhetoric*, it is ‘a painful emotion’, not a pleasurable one, and this characterization has generally been embraced in the ensuing conversation.²²

As part of his arguments against tragedy, Plato presents us with what appears at first glance to be the same puzzle. Here is the relevant exchange between Socrates and Glaucon:

When even the best of us hear Homer or some other tragedian imitating one of the heroes sorrowing and making a long lamenting speech or singing and beating his breast, you know that we enjoy it, give ourselves up to following it, sympathize with the hero, take his sufferings seriously, and praise as a good poet the one who affects us most in this way.

Of course we do.

But when one of us suffers a private loss, you realize that the opposite happens. We pride ourselves if we are able to keep quiet and master our grief, for we think that this is the manly thing to do and that the behavior we praised before is womanish.

I do realize that.

Then are we right to praise it? Is it right to look at someone behaving in a way that we would consider unworthy and shameful and to enjoy and praise it rather than being disgusted by it?

No, by god, that doesn’t seem reasonable. (*Republic*, 605c–e)

But Plato’s point here is not quite the same as the ‘paradox of tragic pleasure’ sketched above. Socrates is not asking why we enjoy tragic events when seen on the stage but do not enjoy them when seen in real life. Rather, he is asking why we *allow* ourselves to indulge in the pleasures of emotion (including pity) in the theater, but seek to restrain ourselves from doing so when faced with similar events in real life. The implication is that if we were not to restrain ourselves in this way, we could also find pleasure in the real-life experience of pity. (That this is Plato’s view appears to be borne out in the *Philebus*’s discussion of the mixture of

²²Arguably, Aristotle’s own account of the pleasure of tragedy appeals again to *katharsis*: tragic pleasure is pleasurable feeling of release of these painful emotions. But see caveats in footnote 8.

pleasure and pain involved in various emotions, which Plato connects again to the pleasures of tragedy, 47d–48a.)

On this point, Nietzsche agrees wholeheartedly. Aristotle was wrong, and pity is not *just* a painful emotion: it also involves pleasure. In pitying, Nietzsche claims, ‘we give way to an *impulse to pleasure*’ (D 133); we ‘discover[...] a *source of pleasure* in it’(D 134); in particular cases we have the ‘*enjoyment of active gratitude*’, for there is ‘something elevating and productive of superiority in pitying’ (D 138). Further, Zarathustra expresses his distaste towards ‘the merciful who are blissful in their pitying’ (Z, ‘On the Pitying’) and describes the glee with which we can respond to suffering under the guise of pity: ‘in a flash the little ones come running, and their tongues hang out with lasciviousness. But they call it their “pity”’ (Z, ‘The Convalescent’, 2). If the real crux of the paradox of tragic pleasure is supposed to be the difference between our reactions to terrible events on stage and in real life, Nietzsche’s response is straightforward: we feel pleasure in the latter case too, even if we do not want to admit as much, not even to ourselves.

Nietzsche and Plato, then, are basically in agreement here. Nietzsche’s story about the nature of that pleasure, however, adds a distinctive twist. As suggested by several of the preceding quotations, the pleasure of pity and thus of the experience of tragedy is, for Nietzsche, intimately bound up with feelings of superiority, and with cruelty, including cruelty towards oneself:

[Tragedy and] almost everything we call ‘higher culture’ is based on the spiritualization and deepening of *cruelty*. [...] Cruelty is what constitutes the painful sensuality of tragedy. And what pleases us in so-called tragic pity [...] derives its sweetness exclusively from the intervening component of cruelty. [...] We clearly need to drive out the silly psychology of the past; the only thing this psychology was able to teach about cruelty was that it originated from the sight of *another’s* suffering. But there is abundant, overabundant pleasure in your own suffering too, in making yourself suffer (BGE 229)

Amy Price (1998) draws on this passage to offer an account of Nietzsche’s solution to the paradox of tragic pleasure. She claims that the crucial insight that this passage gives us is that ‘our pleasure in feeling pain [...] is a second-order response, and as such is not actually a component of the experience of the play but a response to our experience of the play’; this pleasure ‘does not have the drama as its object: pleasure in experiencing the emotions aroused by tragedy is not pleasure in the tragedy. This pleasure, when appearing as such a second-order response, is not a necessary part of the experience of tragic drama, but an expression of the attitude of the sufferer to his pain’ (Price 1998, 386).

On Price's reading, what Nietzsche is doing here is to carefully separate out two feelings – one pleasurable, one painful, and each with different objects. It is this *separation* that is supposed to resolve the paradox, preventing us from having to say that the viewer has two contradictory reactions to the same thing. But this reading, though it may indeed offer us a resolution of (certain conceptions of) the paradox, does not seem quite in the spirit of what Nietzsche is doing in this passage. Far from separating out the painful and pleasurable components, Nietzsche seems to want to bind them more closely together through the notion of cruelty, especially self-directed cruelty.

Price's reading makes sense if we want to keep intact the key assumptions built into the paradox of tragic pleasure – that pity is straightforwardly painful, and (therefore) that we don't react with pleasure when we witness terrible events in real life. But I take it that Nietzsche's account of pity, and thus of tragic pleasure, amounts to a rejection of these very assumptions. For Nietzsche, the pleasurable and painful feeling associated with tragedy are inextricably intertwined: 'Cruelty is what constitutes the *painful sensuality* of tragedy' (*BGE* 229, emphasis mine). More generally, we find that Nietzsche's approach to human psychology rejects the simplistic idea of a hedonic scale, with pleasure treated as an opposed or inherently contradictory sort of experience to pain. Instead, we see a prominent place in Nietzsche's psychological model for sadism, and its internalized form, masochism; for Nietzsche, pleasure and pain are not opposed experiences but rather inextricably linked. In this sense, Nietzsche's response to the paradox of tragic pleasure is not so much a resolution as a dissolution.

But there is more to Nietzsche's account of the pleasures of tragedy than this. First, notice that when Nietzsche describes the tragic audience experiencing pleasure through cruelty, it is not generally in very flattering terms. For example, in *Z*, 'When a great human being cries out – in a flash the little ones come running, and their tongues hang out with lasciviousness. But they call it their "pity"; it is the *little ones* who respond to suffering with lascivious pleasure. Here we seem to meet again the 'little souls [...] inquisitive, lusting after everything' from *D* 172 for whom, as we saw, tragedy is not suitable. It is for *this* sort of audience that tragedy offers the distinctive pleasures of impotent cruelty, in the form of (so-called) pity. The psychological model at work here is eventually developed in much more detail in *GM*, a central theme of which is that it is a characteristic response of a weak individual to take pleasure in the idea (even if not the reality) of others suffering, and furthermore to

take pleasure in self-directed cruelty as the only sort of assertion of power that one can, given one's powerlessness, reliably achieve.

Pity, with the sadistic and masochistic thrills it offers to the spiritually weak, is thus one source of tragic pleasure. And the nature of tragedy is such that it will indeed tend to offer plenty of opportunities for audiences of lower types to indulge in this sort of pleasure. We know already that Nietzsche is deeply concerned about the spiritual dangers of pity, and so it is clear that this sort of response to tragedy is, for Nietzsche, corrupt and corrupting. There remains, however, a question about for whom, exactly, it is bad, and how. So far, I have spoken, following Nietzsche's own phrasing, of tragedy as being dangerous 'for' the lower types. But it is probably a mistake to see this as Nietzsche expressing an uncharacteristic concern for the wellbeing of those lower types themselves. Rather, I think, Nietzsche's concern is probably with the harmful effects of tragedy on culture more broadly – the more the lower types are exposed to tragedy, the more they will indulge in the spiritually corrupting pleasures of pity, and the more the tendencies towards pity will grow within a society. This sort of cultural decline will inevitably have a negative impact even on the 'higher types' who are – at least in Nietzsche's mature work – the main focus of his ethical concern.²³

If pity is the main source of tragic pleasure for the audiences of 'lower types', does Nietzsche have a story about the tragic pleasure experienced by the 'higher types'? I think he does. But I will suggest that his understanding of this other form of pleasure undergoes a process of development over the course of his post-*BT* work.

In *HAH*, Nietzsche marks the distinction between the two types of audience, and their respective forms of tragic pleasure, as follows:

The people really demand of tragedy no more than to be thoroughly moved so as for once to have a good cry; the artist who sees a new tragedy, on the other hand, takes pleasure in the ingenious technical inventions and artifices, in the handling and apportionment of the material, in the new application of old motifs and old ideas. – His attitude is the aesthetic attitude to the work of art, that of the creator (*HAH* 1:166)

Here, the 'higher type' is represented by the figure of the artist – a theme that we will see continue through to Nietzsche's late works. His pleasure, in contrast with that of 'the people', is pleasure taken in the artistry, in the technical aesthetic achievements of the play. A similar sort of idea occurs

²³For opposing views on the question whether Nietzsche is interested in the flourishing of culture in its own right, independent of its effects on the higher types, see (Leiter 2015) and (Huddleston 2019).

in *GS*, with Nietzsche's insistence (as we saw above) that tragedy is not, for the Greeks, about arousing emotions of pity and fear at all, but rather about 'pleasing speeches' – the Greek audience, Nietzsche says 'submitted with delight to the unnaturalness of dramatic verse' (*GS* 80). Here, the Greek audience is understood to be made up of higher types, and they too are interested in tragedy from an 'artistic' perspective.

In these relatively early works, Nietzsche's understanding of the 'artistic' perspective focuses primarily on matters of technical skill and artifice. In later works, however, Nietzsche develops this theme in a new direction. The perspective of the artist is no longer simply a matter of the appreciation of technical skill and impressive aesthetic achievement. Instead, at the heart of this perspective lies life-affirmation. In *Twilight of the Idols (TI)*, Nietzsche says:

The fact that artists have valued appearance more highly than reality is not an objection to this proposition. Because 'appearance' here means reality *once again*, only selected, strengthened, corrected ... The tragic artist is *not* a pessimist, – he says *yes* to the very things that are questionable and terrible, he is *Dionysian* ...

The tragic artist is not only someone who creates technically impressive 'appearances'. Rather, he is fundamentally someone who 'says yes' in the face of the horrors of existence. This theme recurs several times throughout this text:

Schopenhauer taught that the overall aim of art was 'to free yourself from the will', and he admired the great utility of tragedy in 'teaching resignation'. – But this [...] is a pessimist's optic, his 'evil eye' –: you need to ask artists themselves. *What is it about himself that the tragic artist communicates?* Doesn't he show his *fearlessness* in the face of the fearful and questionable? [...] – this *victorious* state is what the tragic artist selects, what he glorifies. The martial aspects of our soul celebrate their saturnalia in the face of tragedy (*TI*, 'Skirmishes of an Untimely Man', 24)

Nietzsche's earlier characterization of the artist as unmoved by emotion (as not there to 'have a good cry'), interested only in the technical features of the tragic performance, has resonances with the Kantian/Schopenhauerian account of aesthetic pleasure as dispassionate and disinterested. But Nietzsche eventually comes to a vehement rejection of that picture, so that by the time of *GM* he is able to say, faced with Kant and Schopenhauer's claims about artistic disinterestedness, that 'we are entitled to laugh a little at their expense'. For 'the fact of the matter is precisely the *excitement of the will* ('of interest') through beauty' (*GM* III:6).

The artistic perspective, Nietzsche now claims, is deeply interested, engaged, and – most importantly – affirmative. In a series of passages in *TI* entitled *Towards a psychology of the artist*, we are told that the artistic state is one of ‘intoxication’ (*Rausch*), characterized by a ‘feeling of fullness and increasing strength’; in such a state, we ‘release ourselves onto things, we *force* them to accept us, we violate them’. And ‘[s]omeone in this state has enough fullness to enrich everything: everything he sees, everything he wants, he sees swollen, driven, robust, overloaded with strength’. (*TI*, ‘Skirmishes of an Untimely Man’, 8–9). The pleasures of tragedy, from the point of view of *this* sort of artistic perspective, are very far removed from the impotent pleasures of the audience of ‘lower types’, who wallow in the sadistic-masochistic joys of pity. This, then, gives us Nietzsche’s mature account the pleasure experienced by the ‘higher type’ of human being in the face of tragedy:

Saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems; the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types²⁴ – that is what I called Dionysian, that is the bridge I found to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. (*TI*, ‘What I Owe the Ancients’, 5)

The pleasure that the ‘higher types’ take in tragedy is thus expressive of a fundamentally affirmative stance towards life. It is this that explains the value that tragedy has for this sort of person. First, it is a particularly suitable locus for the expression of that valuable mode of being – the person who affirms life will value tragedy (and will be right to do so) because it offers him the opportunity to say yes to life ‘even in its strangest and harshest problems’. And second, precisely because of this it can act as a stimulus towards further growth and flourishing for the sort of person who is capable of this valuable mode of existence – it can ‘help [to] feed and nourish the higher type of man’, to ‘summon the most courageous to *their* courage’ (*BGE* 30).

7. Tragedy’s transformative possibilities

I have said (section 4) that Nietzsche does not mark out one ‘ideal’ mode of aesthetic response as the only one which is relevant to an assessment of tragedy’s value. He is at least as interested, I have suggested, in characterizing ‘non-ideal’ responses – the pitying pleasures that tragedy inspires in the ‘lower types’ – and his overall assessment of tragedy’s

²⁴I take this to refer to the destruction of the tragic hero within the context of the tragedy.

value takes these non-ideal responses into account as well. These various responses to tragedy are, of course, not all normatively on a par (I have characterized them as 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' after all, and the former contributes to an assessment of tragedy as valuable, while the latter qualifies that assessment). But nothing in Nietzsche's account so far relies on the idea that the ideal responses are ideal because and insofar as they are appropriate to, or warranted by, the tragedy itself, nor that the non-ideal responses are non-ideal because and insofar as they are not so appropriate or warranted.

There is, however, at least one sense in which Nietzsche wants to characterize some responses to tragedy as non-ideal insofar as they are not warranted by the tragedy itself. For Nietzsche suggests that audiences often *misunderstand* tragedies. In a section in *Daybreak* entitled 'On the morality of the stage', Nietzsche says:

Whoever thinks that Shakespeare's theatre has a moral effect, and that the sight of Macbeth irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition, is in error: and he is again in error if he thinks Shakespeare himself felt as he feels. [...] Do you suppose that Tristan and Isolde are preaching *against* adultery when they both perish by it? This would be to stand the poets on their head [...]. It is not the guilt and its evil outcome they have at heart, Shakespeare as little as Sophocles (in Ajax, Philoctetes, Oedipus): as easy as it would have been in these instances to make guilt the lever of the drama, just as surely has this been avoided. [...] [The tragic poet] speaks [...] out of a wickeder age than ours is: which is why we need first to *adjust* and *justify* the goal of a Shakespearean drama, that is to say, not to understand it. (D 240)

We misunderstand Shakespeare, Nietzsche says, if we interpret the work in this moralized way. Macbeth is not a cautionary tale about the evils of ambition: for '[h]ow royally, and not at all like a rogue, does [Shakespeare's] ambitious man pursue his course from the moment of his great crime!' Indeed, the viewer who is himself 'really possessed by raging ambition beholds this its image with *joy*; and if the hero perishes by his passion this precisely is the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy' (D 240).²⁵ This is the proper response to the tragedy – the one the tragedy itself warrants. And yet we tend to want to interpret the tragedy differently, to import moralized meanings that the play itself does not support, to *adjust* and *justify* it – to fail to understand it. Why?

²⁵ Compare the 'sharpest spice in the hot draught' to D 172's 'draught appropriate to warriors, something rare, dangerous and bittersweet', discussed in section 5.

The answer seems to be that these moralized ideas, and in particular ideas about ‘guilt and its evil outcome’, are so deeply ingrained in our structures of thought that we struggle to see the tragedy except through their lens. This seems to be a distinctively *modern* problem: in particular, it seems to be the imprint that the Judeo-Christian evaluative worldview has left on our ways of thinking that causes us to interpret tragedy incorrectly and thus to respond in ways that are not appropriate to the work itself. (It is interesting that Nietzsche seems to see Shakespeare as unscathed by these modes of thought, as embodying a quite different worldview, one that aligns him with Greek tragedians.) The idea that it is the Judeo-Christian worldview that distorts our view in this way is made explicit in another passage from *D*:

Misfortune and guilt – Christianity has placed these two things on a balance: so that, when misfortune consequent on guilt is great, even now the greatness of the guilt itself is involuntarily measured by it. But this is not *antique*, and that is why the Greek tragedy, which speaks so much yet in so different a sense of misfortune and guilt, is a great liberator of the spirit in a way in which the ancients themselves could not feel it. They were still so innocent as not to have established an ‘adequate relationship’ between guilt and misfortune. The guilt of their tragic heroes is, indeed, the little stone over which they stumble and perhaps break an arm or put out an eye: antique sensibility commented: ‘Yes, he should have gone on his way a little more cautiously and with less haughtiness!’ But it was reserved for Christianity to say: ‘Here is a great misfortune and behind it there *must* lie hidden a great, *equally great* guilt, even though it may not be clearly visible! [...] Moreover, in antiquity there still existed actual misfortune, pure innocent misfortune; only in Christendom did everything become punishment, well deserved punishment (*D* 78)

(Compare also *GS* 135.) The modern audience comes to tragedy – especially Greek tragedy, but also those works (like Shakespeare) that embody the ‘Greek’ worldview – with the wrong conceptual machinery. Our Christian inheritance means that we interpret the events on the stage through a certain understanding of the concepts of guilt, blame, responsibility, and desert, and the particular constellation that these notions form for us is, Nietzsche suggests, alien to tragedy. This sort of complaint about the modern audience’s tendency to read tragedy through the lens of anachronously modern conceptions of responsibility is, by now, a familiar one (E. R. Dodd’s ‘On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*’ (Dodds 1973) is the *locus classicus* here).

It can be tempting to oversimplify this point. It would be a mistake to think that Greek tragedy operates with its own fixed and unquestioned conceptions of responsibility, blame, and so on (only ones that are

different to our own). For in many tragedies it is precisely these topics that are problematized within the drama.²⁶ Nonetheless, that there are deep and intractable differences between the Greek understanding of these themes and that of the modern post-Christian worldview seems undeniable.

In the latter passage, however, Nietzsche is doing more than simply complaining that modern audiences will tend to misunderstand tragedy. For the distance between the conceptual-evaluative schemes of audience and tragedy – the very thing that gives rise to misunderstandings – is also singled out as the potential source of a new and distinctive mode of value that tragedy can have for a modern audience. Tragedy, says Nietzsche, can be ‘a great liberator of the spirit in a way in which the ancients themselves could not feel it’. The idea, I take it, is this: tragedy embodies systems of values that are radically different to those that structure our own post-Christian evaluative worldview. This is why we find it hard to understand. But if we *were* to come to understand it – to view the play as it really is, with its portrayal not of ‘an “adequate relationship” between guilt and misfortune’, of the hero’s downfall as ‘punishment, well deserved punishment’, but rather of ‘actual misfortune, pure innocent misfortune’ – then perhaps this experience could begin to unsettle our own evaluative worldview. For the sensitive viewer of tragedy must, if she is to properly understand the play, think and feel her way into this new and alien worldview – even if only for the duration of the performance. In doing so, her own evaluative worldview is shown to be not immutable and unquestionable; she has learned that there are other possible ways of seeing and feeling and valuing. Perhaps she is even in a position to see the ways in which her own modes of evaluation might be inferior to these. In this way, tragedy has the potential to act as a powerful intellectual-emotional stimulus towards the revaluation of one’s current values, and perhaps, eventually, the shaking off of the life-denying ascetic ideals that Nietzsche sees dominating his contemporary society.²⁷

Nietzsche likely thinks that this would not be possible for most modern viewers of tragedy. But he does seem to think that it *is* possible for some

²⁶Consider, as just one example among many, Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis*, which raises questions about whether and to what extent the spectator ought to pity Deianeira and Heracles, both of whom suffer and eventually die, and neither of whom are entirely without blame for their own or each other’s suffering.

²⁷It is in the spirit of this idea that Bernard Williams, in his *Shame and Necessity* (2008), picks up the torch from Nietzsche to offer his own account of Greek tragedy, exploring the strange sort of mirror it can hold up to us and our own moral self-understanding.

people – presumably those who have the capacity for a more affirmatory mode of existence, but who are currently infected, held down, by Judeo-Christian values. For such people, tragedy could be the spark that will trigger a better, more flourishing mode of existence. (Perhaps Nietzsche's own remarks about how to properly view Macbeth are intended to guide his readers towards the right sort of experience of the play.) Tragedy thus has a distinctive transformative value: it can be a 'great liberator of the spirit'. But, interestingly, this form of value that tragedy possesses is necessarily a *historical* development: it is something that 'the ancients themselves could not feel'. It is a mode of value that can only exist within this particular historical context.

After *BT* – with its 'profound, hostile silence towards Christianity' (*EH*, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 1) – Nietzsche begins to reflect more deeply on the effects of history, and of two thousand years of Christianity in particular, on modern man. Prior to these reflections, for *BT*-era Nietzsche the solution to the modern cultural malaise he sees around him is simple: we need, he thinks, a rebirth of the spirit of tragedy, which he sees offered in the work of Wagner. The more mature Nietzsche becomes acutely aware of the sense in which this simple solution is, in a very deep sense, impossible. We are no longer Greek; we *cannot* erase history and go back to that mode of existence. Instead, we must acknowledge where we are, and move forward from this point, in a way that takes into the effects of the last two thousand years – even on those of us who are 'higher types'. We cannot become again the Greek tragic audience. But perhaps we – or anyway some of us – can go onwards to something else; and perhaps, thinks Nietzsche, tragedy can help us to do so.

Conclusion

Throughout Nietzsche's post-*BT* works, we have seen him taking seriously Plato's concerns about tragedy, and offering a distinctive of form response to Plato's challenge. It is distinctive in part because of the extent to which Nietzsche – unlike other responses seen in the history of the philosophy of art – seems to agree that Plato might have had a point all along. Tragedy *can* be dangerous, both for certain individual viewers (the 'lower types') and, more importantly, for whole cultures. For this sort of audience, tragedy feeds into a tendency to wallow and indulge in the toxic emotion of pity, understood as an expression of the sort of sadism and masochism that is characteristic of the spiritually impotent. But tragedy can also, Nietzsche thinks, be expressive of, and

a catalyst towards, something great – namely, a fundamentally affirmative mode of existence for the higher types. Of course, this account of the value of tragedy rests on underlying evaluative commitments that are distinctively Nietzschean. And the final form of value that I have identified in Nietzsche’s account – the transformative possibilities that tragedy offers a modern audience – is even more radically removed from any story that Plato could accept as a viable response to his challenge, for it relies on a historical perspective that is necessarily unavailable from Plato’s own vantage point. Nietzsche’s account of the value of tragedy is thus not offered as an account that would satisfy Plato himself. But it is, I think, Nietzsche’s response to a question that he considers worthy of a serious answer.²⁸

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