

Tragic Metal

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Abstract: This paper will examine the relationship between Greek tragedies, the Dionysian and the genre of Heavy Metal music. Nietzsche praised the tragic poets for finding the perfect balance between the Dionysian and Apollonian. Apollo is god of the Sun, lightness, poetry and reason, Dionysius the god of wine, intoxication and ecstasy. Nietzsche argued the suppression or loss of the Dionysian dimension of being as a symptom of modernity. So where might one find infusion of the Dionysian in modern culture? Possibly in film or in video games, but these lack the attributes of lyrical recitation, live performance and large audiences, which are all important to the way Greek tragedy was expressed and experienced. Metal brings these attributes to popular culture in a way other artistic mediums and genres do not and with a strange resemblance to Greek tragedy. Further, when we consider the cathartic effects of art, Metal concerts arguably offer the audience a venue for the catharsis of erotic and violent drives suppressed by the norms of mainstream culture. They provide the space for the release and expression of the Dionysian as well as an opportunity for self-affirmation in a seemingly chaotic and unjust set of circumstances. One of the teachings of the Greek tragic poets is to accept one's fate, to lack freedom and still be responsible. Similarly, many metal artists lyrically portray strength and dignity in the face of suffering and despair. Metal pits the spirit of Prometheus and Antigone against the nihilism of late modernity and provides the working class the physical and psychological space to experience the Dionysian.

Key Words: Nietzsche, Heavy Metal, Greek Tragedy.

1. Nietzsche and the Dionysian Worldview

We waited impatiently for Slayer to take the stage of the fifty-year-old theater that was worn and dilapidated while a member of the stage crew shifted a spotlight to focus our voyeurism on those exposing themselves among the audience. Eventually the lights dimmed and our suspense expanded. Then with a pyrotechnic explosion of primordial fire Slayer opened their set with "Killing Fields" a blistering recollection and expression of the tragedies of mass murder. We stood in awe of the swirling attack of a discordant mix of instruments. Slowly the crowd began to shift from side to side with increasing intensity until ultimately we were no longer in control of ourselves and were given over to the demands of something greater than ourselves. Bodies hot and absorbed into collective motion the boundary of self began to disintegrate and the truth of being - the oneness with nature engulfed our consciousness. We had begun the process of forgetting - of surrender to the primal drive toward an erotic and intoxicating melding of flesh and consciousness.

This is a recollection of an aesthetic experience Nietzsche would call Dionysian and bears as least some qualities with Freud's discovery of a Death Drive under the Nirvana Principle. For both thinkers these were politically salient concepts that helped to explain the irrational or unconscious motivations beneath the rational and theoretical justifications for the violence, war, and the suffering inherent in the human condition.

Beginning with Plato there is the attempt to dispel from civilization the irrational and mad knowledge conveyed by the aesthetic experience. In Plato's *Republic* art and specifically lyrical poetry are identified as imitations of truth removed from the theoretical or intellectual realm of "true" reality. The distinction between the sensible and the intelligible is established and for Nietzsche this has significant cultural, psychological and political consequences. Most importantly the establishment of what Nietzsche calls the *pricipium individuations*, essentially the notion that we are all autonomous individuals permanently separate from one another. Contemporary political theory typically cites the invention or discovery of the autonomous subject as a consequence of modernity be it either material or ideological. For Nietzsche this is a lie and illusion and in fact we refer to Plato's myth of the metals as the Nobel Lie. Nietzsche finds the roots of the modern condition in the demise of a tragic worldview and the rise of otherworldly paradigms of being. Human beings now needed to find a reason to live; a way to give meaning to being and this was achieved by looking away from the suffering of existence to either some theological promise or some abstract theoretical truth. The consequence of this for modernity is that now the combination of the liberal and capitalist global ideology along side the technocratic regime of surveillance and rationalized bureaucratic states produces a system where human beings exist under extreme conditions of social and psychological alienation. The self becomes a prisoner and we are increasingly asked to sublimate or repress fundamental psychological and biological drives. By the dawning of the Twentieth Century Western culture was ripe for the reawaking of the tragic worldview. Nietzsche believed emancipation and, one could say, the overcoming of alienation was only achieved in the aesthetic experience. As Nietzsche eloquently states it in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man... Now the slave is a free man; now all the ridged barriers which necessity, caprice, or 'impudent convention' have fixed between man and man are broken.¹

But who was the mythological Dionysius? Dionysius is the god of violence, ecstasy and intoxication. The cult of Dionysius has its roots in differing myths and interpretations of those myths regarding the god. Yet many compare the myth of Dionysius with the Christ story. In one version of the myth Dionysius is the progeny of an incestuous relationship between Zeus and Persephone queen of the underworld. Hera attempts to destroy the child by sending him to the Titans who would dismember and devour him. Zeus fends off the Titans with lightning bolts and saves the heart of the child. The heart is then fed to Semele the mortal princess of Thebes as a means to impregnate her. In another version Zeus impregnates Semele and again Hera out of jealousy attempts to destroy the child by rising doubt in Semele's mind as to who is the true father. Semele demands Zeus to come to her and show himself. He does however no mortal can look on the god and survive. Again Zeus saves his son this time by sewing fetus into his thigh till he is born.

Contemporary conceptions of the god focus either on the violent bloodlust and cannibalism or the life giving forces symbolized by wine and the phallus.² Nietzsche is

one of the few modern thinkers to give Dionysius a fair shake. Though for sure he is more attracted to the suffering and overcoming of Dionysius than to the violence and ecstasy of the group; he still places great significance on the primal experience of the loss of subjectivity in the aesthetic experience of Greek Tragedy.

For Nietzsche Greek tragedy was the zenith of civilization. He argued rightly that the Greek experience was one of life on the edge. There was an intense awareness of the finitude of the individual life and the ever-present reality of suffering and death. Tragic poetry provided an aesthetic experience and world-view allowing the individual to lose their identity briefly and experience the eternal oneness and power of life. Let there be no mistake Nietzsche recognized the danger in the Dionysian experience as leading to revolution and loss of political stability.³ But he believed tragic music to balance the Dionysian force with the Apollonian force of image and illusion. In fact, he believed in tragedy, Dionysius speaks the language of Apollo and Apollo the language of Dionysius. While some scholars argue it is the Apollonian Nietzsche intends to elevate⁴ in the following passage he ultimately seems to suggest in tragic music it is Dionysius who triumphs over Apollo.

In the total effect of tragedy, the Dionysian predominates once again. Tragedy closes with a sound which could never come from the realm of Apollinian art. And thus the Apollinian illusion reveals itself as what it really is – the veiling during the performance of the tragedy of the real Dionysian effect; but the latter is so powerful that it ends by forcing the Apollinian dream itself into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysian wisdom and even denies itself and its Apollinian visibility. Thus the intricate relation of the Apollinian and Dionysian in tragedy may really be symbolized by a fraternal union of the two deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and all art is attained.⁵

What Nietzsche calls Dionysian wisdom is lost or at least reduced to unrecognizable form by the Socratic or Plutonic invention of theory, which is ultimately the germ seed of Christianity and the Enlightenment faith in science. All of these worldviews Nietzsche suggests have reduced life to some otherworldly possibility. This is to say in modernity humans are unable to look into the abyss and go on living. Life becomes meaningless and painful and the individual settles for mediocrity and turns away from life rather than embrace it.

Nietzsche sets out as a sort of cultural and political psychologist determined to cure the deepening alienation of modern experience. One reading of Nietzsche's cure is the recreation of a tragic culture or of aesthetic experience where the extreme subjectivating forces of modernity can be tempered. Heavy Metal is one example of such a force though surely on a subaltern level. In the next section we will examine some of the common themes among this reading of Nietzsche, the tragic worldview and the genre of Heavy Metal music.

2. Metal as Tragic Art

Nietzsche's praise of Wagner's music as the modern rebirth of the tragic paradigm hints at the tragic character of Heavy Metal, though this is a praise he ultimately revokes. Most popular genres of music are founded on African American blues; largely constructed in a 4/4 time signature and following a 1-3-5 or 1-4-5 pattern. Metal, however, and particularly the sub-genres of progressive and thrash metal were willing to explore more complex time signatures and rhythmic progressions. Yet, the central restatement of late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century concert giants like Wagner, Holst and Stravinsky is the awesome darkness and loudness of the music. In no way is the intent here to suggest Heavy Metal is the heir of classical or concert music rather the claim is heavy Metal shares some of the aesthetic qualities of this era of classical music and that quality is plausibly that of the Dionysian experience. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* is perhaps the best example of Classical music's influence on Heavy Metal. Not only the huge aura of chest pounding sound but the political and social psychological effects of the piece. There was much anxiety among the establishment powers that the performance of Stravinsky's piece would lead to certain riot. The passion and ecstasy of spring evoked by the thunderous cacophony of the orchestra as the horror and rapture of a tale of human sacrifice is portrayed produces the primal Dionysian truth birthed out of a culturally decadent consciousness. Certainly the establishment was not incorrect in the belief that the circumstance would be ripe for the disintegration of civility and the rise of violence. And, in deed, fights broke out in the audience minutes into the performance.

Nietzsche cites spring as one of the two principle forces that bring "natural man to the self-oblivion of intense intoxication,"⁶ the other being narcotic drink. But for Nietzsche the aesthetic experience of tragic art is not the actual performance of the Dionysian desires and pleasures but their symbolization. It is in this way that Dionysius comes to speak the language of Apollo.

For sure the event does contain the Aristotelian notion of a cathartic effect in the experience of tragic art but it is more. Not only are potentially anti-social emotions exhausted but, the edges of the self dissolved and the hierarchy of the socio-political system shattered. "The dithyrambic chorus is a chorus of transformed beings who have completely forgotten their civic place and their social position; they have become timeless servants of their god, living outside every social sphere."⁷ Charles Taylor argues such experience is similar to that of Carnival and calls these, "forms of 'horizontal' social imaginary."⁸ But for Taylor these experiences produce a collective conscious in a way that seems incompatible with the Dionysian experience of Heavy Metal. Taylor and Nietzsche as well are concerned with the potentially violent, nationalist or revolutionary effects of such experience. But Taylor's identification of such events and experience as inversions of social and political hierarchy misses the greater political and psychological import of the tragic character of Heavy Metal. Beyond the leveling of social hierarchy experienced by the audience in a live performance an identification with the lyrical narratives and representations as a universal state of the human condition provides the psychological space for a sort of group pity and acceptance of the unjust and horrifying state of being. "Dionysiac excitement is able to transmit to an entire mass of people this artistic gift of seeing themselves surrounded by ... a crowd of spirits with which they know themselves to be inwardly at one."⁹ This is a striking description of the transfiguration of the individual in aesthetic experience of Heavy Metal. The audience shares in the suffering of Dionysius as and expression of the primal and fundamental

drives of nature or Nietzsche would say the Will to Power. This is why the working class is so well fitted to Heavy Metal and the Dionysian experience - they are nearest to the Dionysius "a copy of nature and its strongest impulses, indeed a symbol of them, and at the same time the proclaimer of her wisdom and art; musician, poet, dancer, seer of spirits, all in one person."¹⁰ Modernity finds little or no space in civil society for such impulsive primal truths about the dark underbelly of being as it is absorbed in its life denying mass of automatons blind to suffering that abounds.

Many Metal compositions take as subject matter this suffering, war and atrocity. Yet the performance of Black Sabbath's *War Pigs* or Iron Maiden's *The Trooper* do not evoke a depressed affect. Quite the opposite, one is enthralled and enraptured in the sublime aesthetic experience and is able to momentarily leave their temporal individuated subject position and become part of the sublime quality of life. What Nietzsche might call the great yes saying to life. More, the working class may identify and recognize the effects of greed and hubris in ambitious political leadership. Though contested most critics and metal heads agree Black Sabbath was the first Heavy Metal band and in the context of tragic Metal they surely are its first great voice. *War Pigs* is now thirty-eight years old and there must be but few metal bands that have not made the effort to cover the piece. The claim in this piece is, of course, in reflecting on the experience of the US in Vietnam and the seemingly endless revolutions of war and peace that the "Politicians hide themselves away / They only started the war / Why should they go out to fight? / They leave that all to the poor." We, the audience, may all identify with the soldiers plight not unlike the ancient Greeks would identify the politically salient lyrics of the chorus in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* considering the suffering of their soldiers and enemies as well "for one woman's promiscuous sake / the struggling masses, legs tired, / knees grinding in dust, / spears broken in the onset. / Danaans and Trojans / they have it alike."¹¹ The citizens in their experience of Attic Tragedy must have understood and felt the meaningless of war and suffering; the war in their eyes being fought for the honor of a whore. How could one go on living in a world of such senseless violence and carnage? Well, one way is to turn away from life. On an individual level this may be achieved through drug and alcohol abuse or other sense numbing ascetic practices like yoga or meditation.¹² Or the liberal model might suggest retreating into our personal private spheres and immersing ourselves in fetishistic practices of various forms of consumption. On the social and cultural level groups may turn to other worldly promises or religion or similarly to faith in the power of abstract scientific and theoretical knowledge. However, by the late Nineteenth early Twentieth Century thinkers like Nietzsche and Freud recognize the weakening of both the theological and rational worldviews to make life worth living. Theological claims and comforts are being continually disproved by science and the utopian of vision of Enlightenment thought is far being established. The tragic worldview is, unlike theological and Enlightenment models, one that is in and of this world full of the contingency and awfulness of being.

Modernity finds itself in a condition like that of the Ancient Greeks when the gods of Olympia become reified and static. Modernity has no source of inspiration or enchantment the theoretical rational cultural consciousness has made the promise of truth an historical and theoretical project. The modern subject has no venue through which it might glimpse at Dionysian wisdom. Tragic music saves the mythical status of being from grounding itself in historical foundations as Aeschylus does with Prometheus by

bringing the Titans back into the narrative. “What power was this, that could free Prometheus from his vultures and transform myth into a vehicle of Dionysiac wisdom?”¹³ Nietzsche argues only the “...Herculean strength of music.”¹⁴

The chorus of Greek tragedy is echoed in the voice of modernity’s working class. The chorus in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* rings an ancient bell Heavy Metal brings back to human consciousness, “Zeus, who guided meant to think, / who has laid it down that wisdom / comes alone through suffering. / Still there drips in sleep against the heart / grief of memory; against / our pleasure we are temperate / From the gods who sit in grandeur / grace comes somehow violent.”¹⁵ There are few voices, few aesthetic projects that posit the human imperial hubris against the backdrop of the abyss, as does Greek tragedy and yes Heavy Metal. For sure film and video games both bring violence and ecstasy to the subject as an aesthetic experience but fail to have the Dionysian effect argued above. These mediums do serves as an escape from the pain of living and often do thematically deal with the darker side of the human condition, however they are ultimately mostly illusion and image. These mediums fail to evoke the primal violent ecstasy of the Dionysian experience. Few persons sitting in the movie theater are moved to dance or chanting; they will not delight in vile narratives of horror or suffering like the members in the audience of a King Diamond or Pantera performance. Nor are many able to stare into the abyss of being and return to the secular world of everyday life without being severely repulsed. Most of us would prefer to retreat into the utopian vision of some theological or ideological promise of liberty and equality rather than face the reality that “I’ve been pissed on, spit on, shit on, fucked with and pointed at by lesser man.”¹⁶ Or recognize and relive the fact the “The world today is such a wicked thing / Fighting going on between the human race / People give good wishes to all their friends / While people just across the sea are counting the dead.”¹⁷ When one returns from the Dionysian ecstasy the real world seems unbearable and the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus weighs heavy on one’s conscious mind; that knowledge that “The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon.”¹⁸

3. Metal and Political Life

Nietzsche writes:

“Knowledge kills action; action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion – this is the lesson of Hamlet, not that cheap wisdom about Jack the Dreamer who does not get around to acting because he reflects too much, out of an excess of possibilities, as it were. No, it is not reflection, it is true knowledge, insight into the terrible truth, which outweighs every motive for action...”¹⁹

Heavy Metal provides that thin veil of illusion from the political truth - the truth that our utopian religions and political ideologies deny the primordial suffering and self-contradiction of becoming. There is no need for nihilism for Nietzsche nor for those who have experienced the sublime knowledge felt in the ecstasy of sound and motion in center of a mosh pit at a Slayer concert. Metal Heads are not nihilists nor are they utopians like the liberal and socialist secular cultures of the imperial West. In fact they may be more

fully aware and capable of dealing with the death and destruction for which their states are responsible. They know the familiar scene and experience it in mythological beauty; as in this stanza from Megadeth's *Architecture of Aggression* "Ensuing power vacuum / A toppled leader dies / His body fuels the power fire / And the flames rise to the sky / One side of his face a kiss / The other genocide / Time to pay with your ass / A worldwide suicide."²⁰ Metal, as the Megadeth example suggests, holds little hope that the violent hubris of human kind will be resolved when all states are liberal democracies at the end of history. As such the subject of the Dionysian experience is much closer to a Hamlet or Oedipus than a Jack the Dreamer. For sure the majority of the Metal community unlike the audience of Attic Tragedy are slaves not masters with little or no political power. But this genre is growing older and its Dionysian wisdom is spreading across the globe. For now economic models and utopian faiths still cling to the tentacles of power but the increasing number of crises in the distribution of resources, from food to energy to the recent financial debacle, make this time in history increasingly ripe for the return of a tragic worldview.

The return of a tragic worldview is by no means a utopian vision. Staying true to Nietzsche's thought it is a philosophy of pessimism. True enough, but a tragic culture though built on pessimism is not necessarily a cruel or authoritarian one. The liberal and socialist models built on the foundations of an optimistic faith in science and knowledge construct a culture of decadent rational actors whose rights to liberty and equality are supposedly protected by the sovereign. The egoist ethical principles combined with liberal optimism might well make populations and political leadership insensitive to violent origins of the stability they enjoy as well as the ongoing acts of violence needed to sustain the system. Further, it may well make them blind to the suffering of the human condition in general. The tragic worldview and the Dionysian aesthetic experience produce not only wisdom founded on pessimism but a subject capable of great measures of pity and empathy. It is in the loss of subjectivity, or the temporal suspension of alienation, that subjects are transfigured into the collective spirit and reconciled with the dark sadness of the human condition. This is why the chorus of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* could lament the death and suffering of the Trojan people as well as their own. Further Metal's lyrical narratives of suffering and violence may well allow the subject the same capacity for pity or at the least the knowledge one does not suffer alone. Metal opens up the political space for the catharsis of aggressive and vengeful drives as well as a possibility for reparation.

Let us imagine a rising generation with this fearless gaze, with this heroic attraction to what is monstrous (ungeheuer), let us imagine the bold stride of these dragon-killers, the proud recklessness with which they turn their backs on all the enfeebled doctrines of scientific optimism so that they may 'live resolutely', wholly and fully; would not the tragic man of this culture, given that he has trained himself for what is grave and terrifying, be bound to desire a new form of art, the art of metaphysical solace, in fact to desire tragedy as his very own Helen...²¹

Notes

¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, and the Case of Wagner* ([1st Vintage edn.; New York,: Vintage Books, 1967) 223p. p. 37

² Albert Henrichs, 'Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 88(1984), 205-40.

³ See Ch 3. in Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1994).

⁴ For an example of this argument see Ch. 4 in Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (4th edn.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974) xviii, 532 p. For an example of the opposing argument see Ch. 7 in Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche* (European Perspectives; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) xviii, 247 p.

⁵ Nietzsche and Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, and the Case of Wagner*. p. 130

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Dionysiac Word View', in Ronald Speirs Raymond Geuss (ed.), *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 117-38.

⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Raymond Geuss, and Ronald Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) xxxvii, 165 p. p. 43-44

⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) x, 874 p., p. 715

⁹ Nietzsche, Geuss, and Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. p. 43

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 45

¹¹ Aeschylus, 'Agamemnon'. (lines 62-67)

¹² On this see Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton ;, 1989) xxiii, 127 p.

¹³ Nietzsche, Geuss, and Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. p. 53

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 53

¹⁵ Aeschylus, 'Agamemnon'. (lines 176 -183)

¹⁶ *Vulgar Display of Power* (1992) (Atlantic / Wea).

¹⁷ *Black Sabbath* (1970) (Warner Brothers).

¹⁸ Nietzsche and Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, and the Case of Wagner*. p. 42

According to Walter Kaufman Nietzsche is here quoting Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* (line 1224) but according to Speirs and Geuss (Nietzsche, Geuss, and Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*.) Nietzsche is quoting a passage from Aristotle's *Eudemos* of which of fragments survive.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, Geuss, and Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. p. 40

²⁰ *Architecture of Aggression* (1992) (Capitol / Combat).

²¹ Nietzsche, Geuss, and Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. p. 88