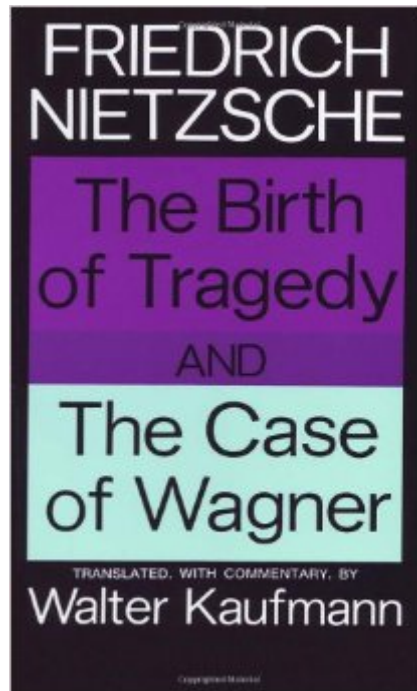


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The Birth Of Tragedy And The Case Of Wagner



Synopsis

The Birth of Tragedy (1872) was Nietzsche's first book. Its youthful faults were exposed by Nietzsche in the brilliant "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" which he added to the new edition of 1886. But the book, whatever its excesses, remains one of the most relevant statements on tragedy ever penned. It exploded the conception of Greek culture that was prevalent down through the Victorian era, and it sounded themes developed in the twentieth century by classicists, existentialists, psychoanalysts, and others. The Case of Wagner (1888) was one Nietzsche's last books, and his wittiest. In attitude and style it is diametrically opposed to The Birth of Tragedy. Both works transcend their ostensible subjects and deal with art and culture, as well as the problems of the modern age generally. Each book in itself gives us an inadequate idea of its author; together, they furnish a striking image of Nietzsche's thought. The distinguished new translations by Walter Kaufmann superbly reflect in English Nietzsche's idiom and the vitality of his style. Professor Kaufmann has also furnished running footnote commentaries, relevant passages from Nietzsche's correspondence, a bibliography, and, for the first time in any edition, an extensive index to each book.

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Customer Reviews

In this work, Nietzsche theorizes that Greek tragedy was built upon the wedding of two principles, which he associated with the deities Apollo and Dionysius. The Apollonian principle, in keeping with the characteristics of the sun god Apollo, is the principle of order, static beauty and clear boundaries. The Dionysian principle, in contrast, is the principle of frenzy, excess, and the collapse

of boundaries. These principles offered perspectives on the position of the individual human being, but perspectives that were radically opposed to one another. The Apollonian principle conceived the individual as sufficiently separate from the rest of reality to be able to contemplate it dispassionately. The Dionysian principle, however, presents reality as a tumultuous flux in which individuality is overwhelmed by the dynamics of a living whole. Nietzsche believed that a balance of these principals is essential if one is both to recognize the challenge to one's sense of meaning posed by individual vulnerability and to recognize the solution, which depends on one's sense of oneness with a larger reality. Greek tragedy, as he saw it, confronted the issue of life's meaning by merging the perspectives of the two principles. The themes of Greek tragedy concerned the worst case scenario from an Apollonian point of view--the devastation of vulnerable individuals. Scholarship had concluded that the chanting of the chorus was the first form of Athenian tragedy. Nietzsche interpreted the effect of the chorus as the initiation of a Dionysian experience on the part of the audience. Captivated by music, audience members abandoned their usual sense of themselves as isolated individuals and felt themselves instead to be part of a larger, frenzied whole.

"The Birth of Tragedy" (1872) was Nietzsche's first published work, and what a work it is. Taking as its point of departure the origins and eventual death of tragedy in ancient Greece, this book shouldn't be taken as a literal meditation on Greek tragedy. Instead, Nietzsche uses his discussion of this art form to analyse trends he saw in the Germany of the early-1870s and to examine the similarities between the Hellenic world and the world of Bismarckian Germany. He begins with an explanation of the dual Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies in art. The Apollonian, based on illusion, form, and restrained aesthetic contemplation, is contrasted with the Dionysian, which is characterized by a visceral, ecstatic, transcendental state. To Nietzsche, Greek tragedy was the only art form which was able to merge these two conflicting aesthetics into a successful union. He likens the operas of his then-hero, Richard Wagner, to the tragic drama of ancient Greece, and suggests that this similarity should be a cause of hope for the renewal of the "German spirit." Crazy? Of course. Nietzsche was not a man noted for his intellectual restraint, and his associative thinking is never wilder or more disputable than in "The Birth of Tragedy." It is this very wildness which would later lead the philosopher to all but disown this book. But "The Birth of Tragedy" is more than far-fetched theorizing--it is also a penetrating gaze into the destructive side of pure reason and the sunny optimism of the Enlightenment, which Nietzsche posits as being embodied in ancient Greece in the form of Socrates, whose withering, anti-aesthetic thinking Nietzsche finds deadening and repugnant.

The Birth of Tragedy, the first book written by towering nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, presents a highly individualistic and aesthetically sophisticated interpretation of Attic Tragedy, the Greek plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides which have long occupied an artistic peak of world culture. Nietzsche adopts the spirit of the Greeks, who had a god or goddess for every thing and every idea, and assigns parts of Greek Tragedy to the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo is identified with the plastic representation of reality that appears on the stage - the actors and dialogue that produce a reflection of reality. Dionysus, the god of wine, is associated with the music of the Greek chorus, an element added to Greek drama only later, after the establishment of the dramatic elements. Nietzsche argues that these two gods represent two responses to the suffering of existence. The Apollonian approach reacts to life with illusion, differentiation of the self from others, and moderation while the Dionysian approach is to lose one's self entirely and rejoin the oneness of the universe through music, drunkenness and dance. For Nietzsche, Greek Tragedy was born from the union of these two opposing forces when music was added to the dialogue and actors on the stage and this union created a sublime form of art through which life is made possible and worth living. This flowering of Tragedy as an aesthetic triumph was extinguished by the growing popularity of a rational world view, personified for Nietzsche by Socrates, which replaced the ascendancy of instinct with the tyranny of criticism.

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