

20. Myth After Metaphysics in The Birth of Tragedy

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Abstract: This paper offers a plausible understanding of the notion of “myth” and its systemic role in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). This is carried out against the backdrop of interpretations that evince aporia or irony in Nietzsche’s invocation of the notion of myth, arguing that many alleged aporias arise precisely due to a lack on the part of Nietzsche to provide a sufficiently articulated account of the notion. Towards this end, it proposes that the notion of myth operates in two registers of meaning: first, “myth” as a hermeneutic structure that provides a narrative about reality; second, “Myth” as an “unconscious metaphysics” which is *not* a doctrinal account of reality, but a pre-reflective horizon and as the condition of possibility of rendering experience intelligible, distributing evaluative weight and thus essentially grounding *forms of life*. This distinction enables a nuanced reassessment of Nietzsche’s typology of artistic, tragic, and theoretic myths as competing axiological configurations that project their own (metaphysical) worldviews. This paper further argues that Nietzsche’s critique of Socratism targets not the falsity of its claims but rather its axiological architecture by denying the necessity of illusion and subordinating existence to theoretical justification. Thus, our paper argues that for Nietzsche, the Socratic myth undermines the conditions of affective attachment, perspectival inhabitation, and belief itself.

Keywords: Nietzsche; The Birth of Tragedy; myth; illusion; Socratism

Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to *live*. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—*out of profundity*.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*¹

Introduction: Situating the Text

When it comes to *The Birth of Tragedy* (hereafter, *BT*), we are at a juncture where we can finally “forget a few things about it”, as Nietzsche suggests, and approach the text with greater interpretive fairness.² The biggest hurdle towards appreciating the singularity of *BT* had been the baggage of Schopenhauerian metaphysical premises that it was seen as carrying. However, a recent interpretative strand of the scholarship on *BT* argues that its framework is innovative enough to be incompatible with the metaphysics of the Schopenhauerian kind. According to proponents of this reading, *BT* is best read as an exercise in myth creation (mythopoesis) rather than as advancing a set of metaphysical commit-

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge University Press, 2001), Preface, §4.

² *Ecce Homo, Why I Write Such Good Books*, *BT*, §1. Abbreviation of Nietzsche’s works with their translations used are as follows: *BT*= Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy or: Hellenism and Pessimism,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, 3rd ed. (Modern Library, 1968), 1–144, *BGE*= Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, 1st ed. (New York, United States of America: Vintage Books, Random House Inc, 1966), *EH*= Friedrich Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 69–152, *WEN*= Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings From the Early Notebooks*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Alexander Nehamas, trans. Ladislaus Löb (2009; repr., Cambridge University Press, 2010), *GM*= Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge University Press, 2017), *TL*= Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 139–52, *TI*= Friedrich Nietzsche, “Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer,” in *Nietzsche: The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153–230.

ments contra Schopenhauer. Thus, with the rise of the mythopoeic reading, the battleground of interpretation has shifted from the metaphysics presented in the text to the notion of ‘myths’ insofar as their precise nature, role, and value are concerned. These concerns in the mythopoeic scholarship on *BT* manifest themselves in two broad interpretative trends. Either Nietzsche’s invocation of the notion of myth is seen as foregrounding the futility of its invocation, or that though the invocation is intended as a serious systemic notion, it fails to work as intended, thereby rendering Nietzsche’s innovation of the notion inconsistent.

An example of the former trend can be found in James Porter’s claim that *BT* is ironic in its metaphysical commitments since it is “an inexorable attack on the credibility of all myths” wherein “myths counteract myths and all but cancel each other in overwhelming dubiety.”³ Situating the notion of myth in a self-defeatist posture in the framework of *BT* allows Porter to read Nietzsche as strategically mobilising the notion of myth to displace metaphysical commitments without necessarily escaping metaphysical thinking. This is thereby argued as enabling Nietzsche to produce a text whose conceptual framework is intentionally unstable. In variance with this trend, but still broadly adhering to it, Melanie Shepherd argues that it is precisely the presence of multiple narratives, or “perspectival myths,” of Apollo and Dionysius in *BT* that is indicative of Nietzsche’s perspectivism in its pragmatico-normative aspects, though in its primitive form. Subsequently, these aspects are fleshed out in greater nuance in his *On The Genealogy of Morals*, III, §12 (hereafter, *GM*).⁴ Shepherd’s thesis, however, is crucially premised on the assumption that Nietzsche essentially adopts a *theoretical* posture towards myth as a false story or *Wahn*.

Instantiating the other trend in the scholarship, Peter Poellner treats the notion of myth in *BT* as integral to its framework by arguing that myths are best seen as illusions (*Wahnbild*) that restore our affective attachment to life.⁵ However, despite a sympathetic understanding of the

³ James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on The Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 148.

⁴ Melanie Shepherd, “Myth, Perspective, and Affirmation in Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy,” *History of European Ideas* 44, no. 5 (March 7, 2018): 576.

⁵ Peter Poellner, “Myth. Art and Illusion in Nietzsche,” in *Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Peter Poellner and Michael Bell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 75–77.

role of myth in *BT*, Poellner concludes—on grounds of conceptual inconsistency—that *BT* ends aporetically because the function that myth is supposed to perform is foreclosed by the text's commitment to the "Wisdom of Silenus" as its definitive myth. In a more sympathetic tone, Béatrice Han-Pile portrays the notion of myth in *BT* as conceptually consistent in its invocation as "*symbolization* of the meaning of life."⁶ This is accomplished according to Han-Pile by transferring this meaning to the participants of the myth. But if so, then as argued by Han-Pile the notion of myth in *BT* entails an operational difficulty because "the symbolization performed by myths relies on the implicit claim that although the mythical narrative may seem ungrounded from an empirical perspective, it presents a correct symbolization of the ontological state of affairs", which results in the impossibility of being "convinced by [a myth] unless we already have had the kind of experience symbolically conveyed by the myth, in which case the myth is not truly needed".⁷ Consequently, even in Han-Pile's charitable reading, *BT* ends up begging the question due to the displacement of the efficacy of the notion of myths. Han-Pile's problematisation is picked up by Callum Blake, who asserts that the myth's claim to universality and the consequent inducement of life-affirming affects cannot help but succumb to the *particularity* of the initiated spectator of the tragedy, making it impracticable.⁸ This leads Blake to argue that the framework of *BT* presupposes that a spectator is already a participant in the *form of life* wherefrom tragedy employs symbolic (mythic) forms. Consequently, this eventually dooms *BT*'s project of the rebirth of tragic myth in the then German zeitgeist, given the claim of universality intrinsic to the notion of myth, while retaining the particularity of its embeddedness in the present.

In tune with this trend, but emphasising the theme of continuity in Nietzsche's intellectual career, Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes argue that there is virtually no difference between the positions of *BT* and *GM* as in both instances Nietzsche's invocation of the notion of myth is a cali-

⁶ Béatrice Han-Pile, "Nietzsche's Metaphysics in the Birth of Tragedy," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (November 9, 2006): 395. Emphasis in original.

⁷ Han-Pile, "Nietzsche's Metaphysics in the Birth of Tragedy," 395–96.

⁸ Callum Blake, "Myth and the Problem of Initiation in The Birth of Tragedy," *The Agonist*, 2018, 130.

brated response to the perennial problem of meaning.⁹ For Gemes and Sykes, “myth is a literally fictive narrative encompassing symbolical archetypes that help provide a structural unity to experience”, which is necessary for cultural flourishing.¹⁰ This also resonates with Douglas Burnham’s assertion that the unity of myth implies the unity of a culture’s hermeneutic horizon, and that a unified myth implies a unified culture.¹¹ Such readings reinforce the view that myths are necessary not just individually but collectively.

Following this trend of reconstructively reading *BT*, this paper argues that the notion of myth in the text is best read as switching between two registers of meaning. First, as a narrative about reality that falsifies the flux of becoming through the deployment of an axiological framework that *specifically structures* the flux *as* reality. Second, as a pre-reflective horizon that grounds the narrative about reality in distinct *forms of life*. We denote the former as ‘myth’ and the latter as ‘Myth’. The incentive of such an aspect-reading of M/myth in *BT*, apart from addressing the lacunae in the scholarship, is that we can better understand the full scope of Nietzsche’s intervention in the zeitgeist as a *Kulturkritiker*, particularly through his critique of Socratism.¹² In this, our paper reads *BT* as articulating the modality in which culture fundamentally shapes our existence by not only furnishing illusions through which life can be affirmed, but, more importantly, fostering the *ability* to believe in illusions irrespective of their content. Essentially, this orientation towards the notion of culture anticipates and encapsulates the thrust of the critique of modernity that is offered in *BT*—that is, in a zeitgeist dominated by Socratism (just as much in our own time as in

⁹ For a discussion of a striking proximity between early and later Nietzsche’s views on tragedy, see Aaron Ridley, “Nietzsche on Tragedy: First and Last Thoughts,” *The Monist* 102, no. 3 (March 19, 2019): 316–30.

¹⁰ Ken Gemes and Chris Sykes, “Nietzsche’s Illusions,” in *Nietzsche on Art and Life*, ed. Daniel Came (Oxford University Press, 2014), 82–83.

¹¹ Douglas Burnham, “Apollo and the Problem of the Unity of Culture in the Early Nietzsche,” in *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*, ed. Anthony K. Jensen and Helmut Heit, vol. Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy (Bloomsbury, 2014), 92.

¹² This paper understands the influence of Socratism, following Gianni Vattimo, in “represent[ing] the entire way of thinking characteristic of the history of Western philosophy up to Nietzsche, its scientific-technical reasoning and the instrumentality of its many forms (modern technology, political economy, etc.).” Robert T. Valgenti, “Vattimo’s Nietzsche,” in *Interpreting Nietzsche: Reception and Influence*, ed. Ashley Woodward (London: Continuum, 2011), fn 5.

Nietzsche's), we are dangerously close to losing our ability *to believe* in anything at all.

Towards that end, the first section of the paper explicates Nietzsche's portrayal of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Here, the paper exegetically argues for a reading that broadens the purview of these portrayals. This enables us to flesh out the locus of the notion of the 'myth' within the text. Our reading is further complemented with formulations from the *Nachlass* and Nietzsche's essay *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, contemporaneous with *BT*. In the second section, the paper builds on the idea that myth operates in two registers of meaning in the text by explicating the three kinds of myth articulated there. This explication is done by elaborating on the axiological topography of each of these myths. Finally, the third section of the paper deploys the description from the preceding sections to capture the deviant nature of the theoretic myth. The paper argues that this deviancy is most evident in the form of life this myth engenders, in which the productive relationship between suffering and life is rendered pathological. The paper concludes by briefly emphasising Nietzsche's critique of Socratism in light of its hegemonic grip over the interplay between Myth and myths.

Apollonian-Dionysian Binary and the Grounds of Myth

In Nietzsche's own estimation, the first two sections of *BT* claim to contribute to the "science of aesthetics". He intends to do so through the formulation of his thesis that the production of all art can be explained through the duality (*duplicität*) of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The text informs us that the Apollonian and the Dionysian are designations for *impulses* animating two opposing spheres of art. As explicated in *BT*, for Nietzsche, the former is exemplified by the art form of sculpture (visual-plastic), while the latter is taken to be exemplified by the non-representational art form of music (auditory). However, considering the operational logistics of these drives in the context of the theory of aesthetics put forth in *BT*, we can map their manifestation beyond the narrow confines of 'aesthetics'. As indicated by Burnham and

Jesinghausen,¹³ these drives are rather fundamental to existence itself, in that their operation can be mapped onto the levels of bodily states, human existence, cultural anthropology, and, finally, onto ontology itself. Initially, to understand them, Nietzsche asks us to “conceive of them as the separate *art* worlds [*Kunstwelten*] of dreams and intoxication.”¹⁴ At multiple junctures in the text, he identifies the Apollonian with the *principium individuationis*, or the principle of individuation, which simultaneously represents the condition of possibility/*production* of appearances (*Schein*) and their subsequent *reproduction* (hermeneutics).¹⁵ Thus, the currency of the Apollonian is the *form* or *limit* through which the phenomenal world of appearances is constituted, akin to the transcendental apparatus of Immanuel Kant.

It is in the logistics of production of appearances that the Apollonian betrays its ontological commitments because hermeneutics (intelligibility) is premised on the coagulation of the principle of individuation, into the “principle of identity: the authority of language, of the code, of the institution” and the “reality principle: consciousness, the subject, the ego, substance”.¹⁶ It is this that coagulation commissions in the production of the functioning notion of ‘particulars’ and that of stability and permanence. Thus, the Apollonian commits itself to an ontology of Being, since its operation presents reality as always-already interpreted and intelligible. This ontology is further corroborated by Nietzsche’s assertion that sculpting is the Apollonian art form par excellence. Seen thus, the Apollonian drive is the grounds for the epistemic freezing of the flux of appearances and their subsequent hermeneutic deployment. It is because of such a deployment that Apollonian drive forms the basis of all identity.

Furthermore, Nietzsche describes the Apollonian and the Dionysian drives “as artistic energies which *burst forth from nature herself*,

¹³ Cf. Douglas Burnham and Martin Jesinghausen, *Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy: A Reader’s Guide* (A&C Black, 2010), 28: “In any case, it turns out that the implications of the pairing of these two ‘drives’, named after mythological gods, extend far beyond the remit of art, or rather, the significance of art is widened to such an extent that it encompasses the whole of human life. The two art drives can therefore also be regarded as the two most fundamental life drives.”

¹⁴ *BT*, §1. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ *BT*, §1-2, 4, 16, 21. Also, prominently identified in his essay *The Dionysiac Worldview*.

¹⁶ Keith Ansell Pearson, “[Review of Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle by Pierre Klossowski and D.W. Smith],” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 18 (season-03 1999): 85.

without the mediation of the human artist—energies in which *nature's* art impulses are satisfied [...].¹⁷ This is indicative of the fact these drives are traceable back to nature in form of their operation on the level of human existence, through the entailment of their respective spheres on this level for the *operative* ontologies to which each of these drives would be committed. From the analogy of separate art-worlds and the degenerative effect of the Socratic privileging of the Apollonian intelligibility over the Dionysian on instincts asserted later in the text (§§13-15), we can infer that the Apollonian concerns the 'hermeneutic', whereas the Dionysian concerns the 'physiological' aspect of our existence. The physiological aspect of our existence concerns our constitution as being-in-the-world, which, like every other organism, is fundamentally attuned to the nature of reality as one of perpetual change. That is, the Dionysian is designated by an ontology of absolute Becoming. The *absoluteness* of Becoming endows *excess* as the currency of the Dionysian since it is always-already prior to any attempts of imposition of *form* to generate intelligibility and thereby defies the sanctity of conceptual limits, foreclosing the possibility of any neat articulations. Therefore, Nietzsche asserts that the Apollonian maxims are "‘Know thyself’ and ‘Not too much!’, whereas getting above oneself [transgression] and excess [...] true hostile demons of the non-Apolline sphere", i.e., the Dionysian sphere.¹⁸ We can simplify the matter by stating that, generally in *BT*, the Apollonian deals in the currency of form and is driven towards perpetual (de)limitation of the flux of becoming, whereas the Dionysian deals in the currency of excess and is driven towards the perpetual transgression of the imposed forms. Moreover, since the flux of reality, i.e., *becoming*, is prior to its individuation as a multiplicity of appearances, therefore "the Dionysian is seen to be, compared to Apollonian, the eternal and the original artistic power that *first* calls the world of phenomena into existence."¹⁹ This reinforces the idea that (Dionysian) flux is, in a sense, always-already ahead of (Apollonian) imposition of forms, or simply put, reality, as such, at any given moment always exceeds whatever is intelligible about it.

When framed thus, the intelligibility-generating hermeneutical op-

¹⁷ *BT*, §1. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *BT*, §4. Cf. P.G. Jung, *Three Formulations of Autonomy: Kant, Sade and Nietzsche* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2024), 164.

¹⁹ *BT*, §25. Emphasis added.

eration of the Apollonian functions by freezing the flux of reality through a schema that pivots on the demarcative principle of individuation. The intelligibility generated by the Apollonian drive has the status of an *illusion*, not just because the state of affairs it makes intelligible is always-already altered the next moment, but, more importantly, the intelligibility it generates is an individuated *perspectival* falsification of the non-static nature of *reality*. This cardinal feature of the Apollonian is what Nietzsche seeks to underline while professing that:

Knowledge, quite strictly speaking, has merely the form of tautology and is empty. Any knowledge that advances us is an identification of the non-identical, the similar, i.e. it is essentially illogical. [...] That a unity, e.g. a tree, appears to us as a multiplicity of properties and relations is anthropomorphic in two ways: firstly this circumscribed unity ‘tree’ *does not exist*; it is arbitrary to isolate a thing in this way (according to the eye, according to the form); every relation, rather than being the true absolute relation, is tinted with anthropomorphism.²⁰

Interpreting this assertion from within the framework of *BT*, we can argue that not only does the Apollonian drive create stable, though ultimately arbitrary realities, but more importantly, the underlying principle of identity that can afford the propensity of drawing equivalences is the key to the operation of the Apollonian drive. Consequently, he clarifies that “philosophy can only stress the relativity and the anthropomorphic character of all knowledge, as well as the *power of illusion* that prevails everywhere.”²¹ This exemplifies Nietzsche’s early position that all *forms* of intelligibility fall under the category of illusion, given our inability to access the state of affairs directly. This position is best articulated in *Truth and Lies in Extra Moral Sense* (henceforth *TL*), where Nietzsche argues that all we call truth is but a socially fabricated illusion. In this essay, Nietzsche asserts that language functions by means of an “allusive transference, a stammering translation”, i.e., by “making equivalent that which is non-equivalent.”²² The possibility of arbitrary entities generated by the Apollonian drive from the flux of reality being juxtaposed in the same context is actualised through the interfacing done by meta-

²⁰ *WEN*, 156–57 Emphasis added.

²¹ *WEN*, 104. Emphasis added.

²² *TL*, 145.

phors that stand proxy for those entities. Furthermore, Nietzsche claims that the logistical space of metaphors that enables language by originally standing proxy for two unequal entities *needs* to be forgotten because only by “forgetting this primitive world of metaphor” and our status as “*artistically creative subject*” can we function in our day-to-day activities.²³ Alternatively stated, the operation of language and human dwelling are simultaneously premised on the necessary (unconscious) privation of the logistical space of metaphors and our de facto creative nature. Burnham draws our attention to a crucial consequence of this position in terms of the fact that our forgetting of the logistical space of metaphors simultaneously entails losing sight of the axiological topography that fundamentally constitutes any language: “Language belongs to a people, and the particular ‘truths’ that it embodies are primarily values—a sense of good and bad, right and wrong—those that serve (or appear to serve) the people in terms of survival and prosperity.”²⁴ However, notwithstanding the fact that such forgetfulness, rather than hindering our linguistic ability, is the very condition for the possibility of language itself.

Analogous to how language functions by drawing equivalences between unequals, *BT* talks about the myth as a “concentrated image of the world” constituted by “the condensation of phenomena.”²⁵ We can take this articulation to mean that a myth presents a hermeneutic enterprise of casting diverse realities, akin to how universals subsume all emergent particulars. That is, a myth essentially provides us with an *orientation* vis-à-vis the flux of absolute *becoming* by offering a mode of construing it. A myth provides a narrative that enables a vision of what constitutes reality. However, an alternate notion of myth is operative in the text, characterised by Nietzsche as the “unconscious metaphysics” of a culture. Here Nietzsche seems to provide us with a distinct articulation of the myth as something which is indispensable for the collective dimension of existence, since “any people—just as, incidentally, also any individual—is worth only as much as it is able to press upon its experiences, the stamp of eternal.”²⁶ Consequently, this brings out a cardinal

²³ *TL*, 148. Original emphasis.

²⁴ Douglas Burnham, “Apollo and the Problem of the Unity of Culture in the Early Nietzsche,” in *Nietzsche as a Scholar of Antiquity*, ed. Anthony K. Jensen and Helmut Heit, vol. Bloomsbury Studies in Philosophy (Bloomsbury, 2014), 86.

²⁵ *BT*, §23.

²⁶ *BT*, §23.

feature of Nietzsche's aspect-reading of the Apollonian in relation to the notion of "myth", which is invoked by him in *BT* to perform two distinct though interrelated functions. Its invocation encompasses both the functioning of myth on the concrete level (hereafter 'myth') and its functioning on the collective level (hereafter, 'Myth'). In this, the force of cohesion between the two invoked senses of myth lies in the modality in which the flux of appearances is *affectively* and existentially accounted for through an interplay between the two. It is this interplay of dependency and manifestation that ensures that an illusion (a myth), even though contingent, nevertheless sustains and functions as a stable ground of meaningfulness and signification. For instance, to the form of life underneath the aegis of the Greek myth, "even the immediate present had to *appear* to them right away *sub specie aeterni* and in a certain sense as *timeless*."²⁷ This *appearance* of the present as the eternal concerns the cardinal affective-existential nature of *indwelling* in the flux of appearances that the healthy interplay between Myth and myths enables. This is, in part, similar to Gemes' and Sykes' articulation of myth, as a "literary fictive narrative" that grants "structural unity to experience" by arranging the appearances.²⁸ However, we depart from Gemes' and Sykes's claim in our assertion that these fictive narratives (myths) are not to be taken as subjective innocent flights of imagination but are rather fundamentally grounded by the "unconscious metaphysics" (Myth). The former is illusory insofar as they grant us an axiological structure²⁹ that orients and commits us to a 'specifically structured' articulation of the flux of becoming. The latter is the "prereflective" ground that opens up the very possibility of such an articulation (myth). That is to say that the 'unconscious metaphysics' (Myth) is what embeds us within specific forms of life constituted by a language and a shared paradigm of activity (culture), which is made possible only as "reality *sanctioned by myth*".³⁰ Therefore, Nietzsche writes that, "without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of creativity: only a horizon defined completes and unifies a whole cultural movement."³¹

²⁷ *BT*, §23. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Gemes and Sykes, "Nietzsche's Illusions," 82–83. Poellner gives three definitions of myth.

²⁹ Used interchangeably with hermeneutic structure.

³⁰ *BT*, §7. Emphasis added.

³¹ *BT*, §23.

Moreover, one particular dimension remains absent in Gemes and Sykes's account of Nietzsche's invocation of the notion of myth. Let us recall the claim from *TL*, wherein we must necessarily forget both the aforementioned primitive world of metaphors and our *de facto* nature as "aesthetically creative beings". Similarly, in our everyday coping, we need to forget the myth as the hermeneutic structure that actively parses the flux of reality as *an* interpretation of the world. More importantly, in forgetting the existence of the hermeneutic structure that we deploy, we also forget the axiological topography that fundamentally underpins the narrative about reality (myth) by constituting the logic of parsing *becoming*. This axiological topography of a myth is the value constellation through which reality is falsified as a world with a disynchronous gradient of significance distribution. This is to say that a myth presents the world as already evaluated in terms of specific coping modalities, which are connoted as noble and worthwhile, while other modalities are looked down upon.

But what exactly is the problem with forgetting the axiological topography of the myth? Losing sight of the axiological topography of the hermeneutic structure implies forgetting its status as *an* illusion, which, though necessary for the production of significance, is nevertheless contingent in itself. Thus, forgetting the genuine nature of an illusion risks an unwitting overcommitment to it precisely because it lulls us into forgetting its contingent nature. This effectively implies a conflation between the illusion and existence that catastrophizes into the acceptance of the illusion's untenability as the untenability of existence itself. The next section articulates three kinds of myths present in *BT* while using their axiological topographies to gauge their sensitivity to the predicament of overcommitment to an illusion.

Cultural Paradigms as myths: the Artistic, the Tragic and the Theoretic

Gemes and Sykes instructively suggest that *BT*'s argument is not critically reliant on premises yielded by substantive metaphysics but is rather on facts attested by empirical reality.³² For them, the prime suspect here for committing to substantive metaphysics as an essential premise is the *Wisdom of Silenus*. Like Gemes and Sykes, we can argue

³² Gemes and Sykes, "Nietzsche's Illusions," 88.

that the text commits only to the *perceived* existential asymmetry of suffering to which humans are subjected, given their finitude. This suffering is an outcome of the fact that the primordial flux is not governed by the dictates of the logic of intelligibility and the subsequently generated axiological structure imposed on it. This non-compliance and the consequent suffering emerge from the fact that the flux of reality is indifferent to our imposition of meaning on it. Suffering must therefore be understood as an experience that necessarily follows the primordial encountering of the unintelligibility of Becoming *qua* Becoming (traditionally understood as Being *qua* Being), and the subsequent realisation that our construal of reality intrinsically bears with it the omen of its untenability as an eternal, and a stable, structure of signification. Within the text, this *perceived* existential asymmetry, which one necessarily draws between Becoming and Being, is referred to as the tragic or the “terrible truth” of our existence, given that any attempt towards this end is always-already an imperfect approximation.³³ The tragic truth denotes the breakdown of human coping due to the inevitable transgression of the axiological structure that is imposed as an account of the flux. The caustic nature of this truth leads to a loss of affective entanglement with life, wherein the prospect of further existence is attenuated. Therefore, art becomes a necessity for survival, since it is in and through art that the wound inflicted by the tragic truth is embalmed. For Nietzsche, it is through art that the axiological topography of a myth comes to be perpetually reappropriated in order to reinvigorate the possibility of its futural existence. When viewed thus, the Wisdom of Silenus is ultimately no more than a sobering Greek myth about the *perceived* existential asymmetry of suffering. It does not, therefore, commit Nietzsche to any substantive Schopenhauerian metaphysics. Nonetheless, for Nietzsche in *BT*, the realisation of the tragic truth for the ‘nobler natures’ does elicit three distinct strategies of coping with existence. Given the inevitability of suffering, Nietzsche delineates three distinct paradigms for moulding human activities (culture): the *artistic*, the *tragic*, and the *theoretic*.

Within the paradigm of the artistic myth, we are convinced of the possibility of life under sublime illusions.³⁴ Here, the recognition of the tragic truth becomes a site of deferment of suffering through the positing of alternate illusions (hermeneutic structures). The artistic myth thus af-

³³ *BT*, §7.

³⁴ *BT*, §3.

fords one to distance oneself from suffering as construed within a particular illusion. This awareness results in the synonymy of the site of the tragic truth's realisation with the particularity of that hermeneutic structure. Here, *BT* makes a claim, through recourse to the phenomenology of dreams, that the awareness of dream qua dream or the lack thereof determines one's affective stance towards it as either joy or horror, respectively. The artist's encounter with primordial flux qua illusion within the artistic myth incites a dream-like stance towards the unfolding of appearances, wherein, irrespective of the sublimity or wretchedness of the appearances' contents, the only investment is in the *enframing* itself. Here, the affective attachment to life in light of suffering is preserved through an emphasis on the bounty granted by the fact of co-terminousness of the hermeneutic possibility of projecting new illusions to enframe suffering and the truth of the eternal flux of becoming. Therefore, the loss of affective attachment to life induced by the attunement to existential asymmetry of suffering is *transfigured* into an enchantment towards life itself through the postulation of a new illusion. Nietzsche articulates this as "Apollo [overcoming] the individual's suffering by his luminous glorification of the *eternity of appearance*; here beauty gains victory over the suffering inherent in life; in a certain sense, a lie is told which causes pain to disappear from the features of nature."³⁵ That is to say that the artistic myth offers the possibility of affirming existence underscored by tragic truth through a magnification of the *prospect* of joy in life, to the point that the existential weight of suffering is not only rendered bearable but even enjoyable.

For Nietzsche, the Homeric Greeks were the champions of this modality of coping with existence because their attitude towards suffering was one of delight at the transfigurative prospects it offered their gods and heroes alike. Nietzsche asserts that for someone who participates in the Homeric Greek culture, engendered by the paradigm of the artistic myth, even the Wisdom of Silenus appears reversed since "the very worst thing for them was to die soon, the second worst ever to die at all."³⁶ In resonance with Burnham's thesis of the unity of the culture as grounded upon the unity of the myth, we could now argue that a myth engenders a form of life from which culture emerges as a paradigm of human activity, unique to the people who share the myth. As we can see

³⁵ *BT*, §16. Emphasis added.

³⁶ *BT*, §3.

from the example of the Homeric Greeks, the axiological topography of the myth underpins the very contours of the form of life in which they are embedded. The artistic myth (paradigm) gave Homeric Greeks access to a nexus of signification that enabled a particular orientation towards the fact of becoming, as instantiated by the multiplicity of narratives that express the contours of the shared myth, for instance, the narrative of Oedipus or Prometheus. In summa, the artistic myth engenders a form of life in which the *perceived* existential asymmetry of suffering foregrounds a paradigm of human activity such that it is not merely life-affirming but rather a transfigurative confrontation with suffering as the basis of cultural flourishing.

For Nietzsche, the paradigms of the tragic and artistic are distinct insofar as the former affirms the metaphysical unity underneath the ephemerality of individuation. Within the tragic myth paradigm, one comes to treat individuation as the primary source of suffering. Here, however, metaphysics concerning the reality underlying individuation is not conceived by Nietzsche as a Schopenhauerian *Will* that is fundamentally structured by a lack.³⁷ Rather, the artist's metaphysics (*Artisten Metaphysik*) holds that reality is a productive force that continually generates and dissolves individuated forms. Since appearances (i.e., occurrences) of suffering and joy are taken as the creative outpourings of the underlying reality itself, the acceptance of either induces ecstasy because even the ultimate reality "can attain salvation *only* in appearance", i.e., through individuated beings.³⁸ The tragic myth thus reconciles the affirmation of life with the recognition of suffering by embedding individuated existence within a metaphysical unity. Contra Schopenhauer, the tragic myth legitimises suffering without negating it and restores our belief in existence by dissolving the fundamental urge to justify the fact of suffering.³⁹ Nevertheless, the tragic myth is still considered an illu-

³⁷ *BT, Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, §5.

³⁸ *BT, Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, §5.

³⁹ For Nietzsche, the form of life engendered by this myth comes to be manifested in the form of festivals that displayed "extravagant sexual licentiousness, whose waves overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions". As Nietzsche sees it, these festivals were the sites where "the most savage natural instincts were unleashed, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty", which he deems to be "the true witches' brew" *BT*, §2. As an example of the tragic culture, Nietzsche mentions "Indian Buddhism". However, Walter Kaufmann tells us that from the second edition of the text, this example is changed to "an Indian (Brahmanic) cul-

sion because it affords us a narrative for orienting ourselves in the flux of becoming. The axiological topography of the tragic myth strategically privileges the participation in the unified whole over the inviolability of individuated existence. This thereby renders suffering legitimate, unavoidable, and endurable rather than eliminable or condemnable.

Distinct from the paradigms of the artistic and the tragic, Nietzsche construes the defining feature of the theoretic myth in terms of its treatment of suffering as a rupture of the hermeneutic structure. It thus treats suffering as a product of a hermeneutic defect that necessitates correction. In doing so, within the theoretic paradigm, myth is no longer positioned as *illusion* and conversely is taken up as an attempt to provide an accurate and objective description of reality itself. Consequently, its strategy consists of normatively recasting illusion itself as error. In doing so, it necessarily denies the status of an illusion, as an illusion, while simultaneously craftily erasing its status as itself illusory. Consequently, this covers up the very primordial ground (Myth) from which any affective entanglement with existence can be sustained, thereby foreclosing the possibility of any alternative illusion. For Nietzsche, this foreclosure is also an affective modality of ceasing the interplay between Myth and myths. Thus, any human activity that grounds and structures itself along this myth is operating within the *theoretic* paradigm “attribut[es] to knowledge and understanding the power of a panacea.”⁴⁰ In Nietzsche’s analysis, the strategy that this paradigm employs to make existence seem worthwhile is to “confine the individual within a limited sphere of solvable problems,”⁴¹ wherefrom a scientific justification of existence can be achieved by the *theoretic* man. For Nietzsche, the first articulation of the theoretic paradigm is the Socratic myth. Thus, within the Socratic myth, existence is approached through the grand project of correcting it and eradicating suffering through the deployment of science

ture” in the Grossoktav edition of Nietzsche *Werke* (1905). This correction is apparently “based on ‘a pencilled correction in Nietzsche’s own hands in his copy of the *second* version.’” *BT*, §18, fn 2. Even though Kaufmann dismisses both the examples on the grounds that they do not make sense, the invocation of the Indian Brahmanic culture is much more apt given its metaphysical commitment to non-dualism between *atman* (illusory individuated existence) and *Brahman* (our nature as the underlying reality devoid of ignorance about its true nature).

⁴⁰ *BT*, §17.

⁴¹ *BT*, §17.

(*wissenschaft*). Therefore, ‘knowledge’ becomes the primary currency employed towards that end by foregrounding “*dialectic* as the single path, induction (ἐπαγωγικοί λόγοι) and definition (ὀρίζεσθαι).”⁴² This is to say that human activities organised under the rubric of Socratic myth render the congenital relationship between individuation and suffering as something pathological. Herein, suffering comes to be seen as a cancerous outgrowth of existence that ought to be surgically removed through knowledge. It is this Socratic stance towards existence that leads Nietzsche to label it as *delusional*, given that its leitmotif is harboured by a denial of its own finitude.⁴³ That is to say that in the form of life engendered by the Socratic myth, the only legitimate strategy to cope with tragic truth is premised fundamentally on providing us with existential comfort by crusading against ignorance, and therefore, against illusions. Thereby, it craftily portrays illusions, i.e., our only modality of coping with the tragic truth as the site of error itself and consequently the ground of our suffering as well. That is to say, the Socratic paradigm curtails our hermeneutic nature and redefines who we are as hermeneuts. Within the Socratic myth, our hermeneutic prowess is reduced to operating under the garb of ‘truth-seeking’ beings.

Axiological Architecture of the Socratic myth

In its attempt to eradicate illusions altogether, the Socratic myth destroys the very medium through which existence can be meaningfully affirmed, given that what ultimately collapses in the Socratic myth is the necessary interplay between myths and Myth. The axiological topography of the Socratic myth is structured by the absolute privileging of knowledge and the resultant optimism to penetrate the very fabric of reality. For Nietzsche, it is this optimism that is characteristic of Socratic myth. It is precisely as a consequence of this naïve optimism that suffering is rendered pathological and illusion is disqualified as an error. This thereby makes the affirmation of existence conditional upon the progressive elimination of illusion as such. But in doing so, it undermines the very conditions under which any *affective* entanglement with existence is possible.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Greg Whitlock (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 145. Emphasis in original.

⁴³ *BT*, §18.

Consequently, the axiological topography of the Socratic myth forecloses the plurality of illusions or perspectives on existence. Instead, it privileges its own hermeneutic structure and the illusions it casts as *non-illusions* and as the only viable modality of encountering existence. It is with this hegemonic posturing that it precludes *any* possible illusion or perspective other than itself. Simply put, the Socratic myth is structured in a way that it projects itself as Myth. For Nietzsche, the catastrophic entailment of this architecture of the Socratic myth is that the metempsychosis of all existing myths into the Socratic myth. For Nietzsche, “He who recalls the immediate consequences of this restlessly progressing spirit of science will realise at once that *myth* as annihilated by it.”⁴⁴ Consequently, any approach towards existence must incorporate the theoretic convictions heralded within the Socratic myth for ascription of legitimacy, irrespective of the scope of one’s affective indwelling. Therefore, under the Socratic myth, our theoretic convictions cease to appear as illusions because the fact that they are “illusions we have infused into the nature” is concealed.⁴⁵ Due to this architecture of the Socratic myth, suffering translates into our inability to be rational enough, and thus becomes a self-legitimising mechanism that further reinforces the sanctity of the Socratic myth.⁴⁶ However, the virtue of a singular perspective, oriented by ‘truth’, within the Socratic myth implies that its project is to supplant the aesthetic-affective modalities of coping with existence with the theoretic-intellectual modality. In doing so, it denies the fundamental perspectival nature of our existence.

If we take Gemes and Sykes’s claim that Nietzsche’s interest in the ancient Greeks is not in the content of their metaphysical claims but rather in their *ability* to believe them to be true, then *BT* seems concerned with the blueprint for the conditions necessary for human flourishing. This blueprint for cultural flourishing is hinged on fostering the conditions for an honest confrontation with existence, given one’s finitude. The upshot of the recognition of my finitude leads to the realisation of my nature as a hermeneut and, subsequently, to the awareness of

⁴⁴ *BT*, §17. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Jung, *Three Formulations of Autonomy: Kant, Sade and Nietzsche*, 166.

⁴⁶ Cf. *TI*, *Problem of Socrates*, §10: “Rationality was seen as the saviour, neither Socrates nor his ‘patients’ had any choice about being rational, — it was *de rigueur* [...] people were in danger, they had only one option: be destroyed or—be *absurdly rational*”. Emphasis in original.

my agentiality in terms of my affective entanglement, i.e., the *indwelling* within the world afforded by hermeneutic structure. More importantly, the recognition of my finitude simultaneously leads to the recognition of the possibility of construing existence differently. That is to say, for Nietzsche, recognition of one's finitude is at the same time the recognition of one's agentiality as a hermeneut. The perspectivity that entails our nature as a hermeneut is the "fundamental condition of all life", and the theoretic myth encroaches on this very condition by projecting itself as Myth.⁴⁷ In opposition to this, the paradigm of human activity in the form of life begetted by the Hellenic myth allows for a plurality of perspectives that are diverse and often discordant. This enables a plurality of perspectives through which one can approach existence on the basis of one's constitution and affective inclinations, thereby rendering *one's* relationship to suffering as one's own. Subsequently, it enables one to transfigure the very experience of suffering, given the ideality of one's affective entanglement or indwelling within one's perspective or hermeneutic structure.

Conclusion: Socratism Today

Interestingly enough, as some scholars observe, a text like *BT* is possible only in a zeitgeist dominated by the Socratic myth. Only when all myths with their own logic of normativity have been transmuted into a myth that projects itself to be the Myth, thus bearing upon them its criteria of normativity, can 'objective' claims about the nature of existence *as such* be made. Judging by the fact that the text's first sentence commits itself to a "*science of aesthetics*" (*aesthetische Wissenschaft*), but by §20 it begins to rejoice at the deconstruction of Socratism in the hands of Kant and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche seems to be aware of this predicament that made *BT* possible. This awareness is also reflected in the diagnosis of modernity that *BT* provides in the image of a "Music-Driven Socrates [*musiktreibenden Sokrates*]" that translates into a conception of science that recognises its true nature *as art*. That is a science that does not take itself too seriously—the *gay science*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ BGE, Preface. Cf. *GM*, III *What do Ascetic Ideals Mean?*, §12: "There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing'; the *more* affects we are able to put into words about a thing, the *more* eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our 'concept' of the thing, our 'objectivity'." Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ *BT*, §15.

Furthermore, as Silk and Stern show, the text was motivated in part by Nietzsche's own struggle with the conception of traditional enterprise of philology as a science professed as disinterested inquiry into the past (*Altertumswissenschaft*).⁴⁹ The broader point we want to convey with this brief biographical digression is that Nietzsche's critique of his *zeitgeist* is motivated by his inner discord and dissatisfaction experienced during the gestation of *BT*. The recognition of the hegemony of Socratic myth underlying Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with it remains the same for us in the 21st century. The existential threat posed by the Socratic myth concerns, *prima facie*, the state of homelessness induced by the successful projection of the Socratic myth as Myth. With the hegemonic dominance of the Socratic myth, the possibility of harbouring diverse perspectives on becoming, to make existence meaningful, has been buried as well. In its projection as Myth itself, the Socratic myth postures itself as an articulation of the 'unconscious metaphysics', thereby rendering it as thus falsifiable and consequently uninhabitable. But more importantly, owing to perpetual homelessness, we have forgotten what it means to have a home. Alternatively stated, we have made a home out of homelessness, a ground out of groundlessness. Therefore, even when modernity is desperate for a horizon or a ground of meaning, it is "doomed to exhaust all possibilities and to nourish itself wretchedly on other cultures" by *absorbing* and *assimilating* them into its culture and condition of homelessness because it does not *know* what a home looks like.⁵⁰ It is because of this perpetually unsatiated nature of the form of life engendered by the Socratic myth that Nietzsche describes Socrates as "the *vortex* and turning-point of so-called world history."⁵¹ This is but to say that, as Socratic subjects, we can only have an intellectual relationship to things that matter to us the most, even existential threats. Essentially, the Socratic myth has convinced us that our survival is coterminous with the picture of reality that it has fossilised for us. The dissatisfaction that one has today with the Socratic myth is that it presents itself to us as the final culmination of art itself.

⁴⁹ Michael S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 38.

⁵⁰ *BT*, §23.

⁵¹ *BT*, §15. Emphasis added.

