

figures of the monstrous in nietzsche's the birth of tragedy

paulo lima

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to show that in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche presents two conceptions of tragedy. The first is a static conception, which points to the essence of the tragic as an experience of the suffering that is inherent in human existence and as an exposure to the ambiguity of fortune in its connection to this suffering—i.e., to the possibility of it becoming either harmful (thus leading humans to suffer) or beneficial (thus leading them to prosper). The second conception is dynamic, in the sense that it involves a description of the history of tragedy. Here the history of tragedy emerges as a tragic narrative, whose heroine is tragedy (*die Tragödie*)

itself. The birth, decay and rebirth of tragic drama are stages of its tragic narrative in which it exposes itself to the ambiguity of fortune—either in the sense of disgrace or in the sense of prosperity. Since the first conception is the one usually discussed when *The Birth of Tragedy* is analysed, I concentrate on identifying the characteristics of the second, but not without considering the main traits of the first, for the proper determination of the second depends on this.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the second conception is a multiple one, for the process by which it is constituted involves a successive shift in the meaning of tragedy. It is a shift made possible by the ambiguity that the traditional notion of tragedy contains—i.e., by the idea of a change of fortune either in a positive or a negative direction. I try to show how this shift points to a multiplicity of meanings of tragedy and the way it represents a tragic narrative on the history of tragedy.

Paul Hammond analyses the deconstructive characteristics of tragic language—i.e., how it undergoes a constant shift of its meaning in the framework of tragic narratives—on the basis of tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare and Racine¹. I seek to carry out a deconstructive reading of *The Birth of Tragedy* along similar lines. However, Hammond does not consider *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is usually seen as a book *on* tragedy and not as a tragic book. By focusing on how Nietzsche deconstructs the notion of tragedy through his use of tragic language, I intend to determine a decisive aspect that makes *The Birth of Tragedy* a book of a tragic nature.

Hammond is inspired by Derrida's deconstructive thinking, more precisely by the idea that there is no 'transcendental signified' (*signifié transcendantal*) in human language and that the key concepts defining the human are 'under erasure' (*sous rature*) and no longer guarantee the coherence of thinking². I aim to show that a successive shift in the meaning of tragedy is present in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Unlike other deconstructive readings of *The Birth of Tragedy* (notably, de Man's)³, which highlight its inconsistencies and failures as a book project, I maintain that this shift represents a fruitful aspect, whose exploration reveals its implications in

terms of a politics of difference.

In my view, *The Birth of Tragedy* has a decisive political dimension, which has to do with the presence of the two types of tragedy whose experience and understanding can be a source of renewal of political structures and identities. In keeping with the deconstructive spirit of this chapter, I intend to explore the textual structure of *The Birth of Tragedy*—namely, as a catalyst for a transformative politics.

I use the term ‘politics’ to refer to what concerns the co-existence of humans, the institutions in which their co-existence materialises (e.g., the State) and the way they acquire their identity and mode of life through the role they play—e.g., the class they belong to—in the hierarchical structure founded on those institutions⁴. *The Birth of Tragedy* has a political dimension in this sense, which is inseparable from its cultural one. It explores the idea of culture as a collective expression and representation of political structures and the role humans play in them. It is in this interaction between politics and culture (more specifically, art) that *The Birth of Tragedy*’s potential vis-à-vis a politics of difference becomes evident, where such politics is conceived as the production of effects of dissolution and renewal on political structures and the identities of humans living within them.

The Birth of Tragedy comes closer to a politics of difference in a deconstructive sense—a politics of *différance*—when the second conception of tragedy is at stake. This conception involves a deferral or destabilisation of the meaning of tragedy—i.e., the revelation of the *différance* operated in the course of the history of tragic drama as Nietzsche describes it—and can work as a basis for a deconstructive politics of tragedy: a kind of political action that consists in deconstructing the meaning of tragic drama through an analysis of its history.

As we shall see, the notions of a politics of difference and of *différance* are complementary, in the sense that the latter seeks to promote a politics of difference of a non-metaphysical nature—i.e., a transformation of political structures and identities that is not guided by a previously established and anticipatable meaning

horizon.

In the course of this chapter, I carry out an analysis of what Nietzsche calls ‘the monstrous’ (*das Ungeheure*), as it is a phenomenon with structural importance in the composition of *The Birth of Tragedy*. I try to show that the monstrous plays a key role in both conceptions of tragedy, as well as in the political issue raised in the text. It will become clear that the phenomenon of the monstrous represents a decisive element in the way *The Birth of Tragedy* encourages a politics of difference. In the second section, I intend to highlight that a political transformation inspired by Greek tragedy must involve a conjugation between the monstrous force of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. In section 3, I point out that this conjugation represents the model from which the political transformations depicted in *The Birth of Tragedy* should be understood, with a special focus on the relation between tragedy and the historical significance of Greek political organisation and on the rebirth of the tragic in modernity. Section 4 problematises the meaning of the monstrous, in order to emphasise that, despite its apparently metaphysical status, this phenomenon has a non-metaphysical dimension, on the basis of which it is possible to fully explore *The Birth of Tragedy* with regard to acknowledging the singularity of every political transformation.

2. THE FIRST CONCEPTION OF TRAGEDY

Although the first conception of tragedy is the one usually focused on, the research carried out in this respect disregards a key component in Nietzsche’s definition of the tragic, namely the monstrous. Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* the term *das Ungeheure*, and others from the same semantic field, are constantly present. The consideration of such terms allows us to understand the essential role of the monstrous in determining the first conception of tragedy in its political dimension.

Nietzsche maintains that tragic drama corresponds to “the Apollonian embodiment of Dionysian insights and effects” and is distinguished from epic poetry “by a

monstrous gulf” (BT 44, t.m.⁵). This gulf is ‘monstrous’ (*ungeheuer*) not simply because it is a considerable one, but mainly because it is one established through the relation of tragic drama to the monstrous. Nietzsche reports that Oedipus spread around himself a magical and beneficent force “through his monstrous suffering” (BT 47, t.m.). His suffering is monstrous both in the sense that it is constituted by a relation to the monstrous and in the sense that it is this monstrous which, by its ambiguous nature, makes it possible for suffering to become beneficial. This suffering and the benefit coming from it result from Oedipus looking at “the inner, terrible depths of nature” (BT 46). ‘The terrible’ (*das Schreckliche*) belongs to the same semantic field as ‘the monstrous’ (*das Ungeheure*), which means that Oedipus’ suffering and its beneficial character are consequences of his contact with the monstrous conceived as an ambiguous element. That the monstrous is at the centre of the first conception of tragedy is confirmed by Nietzsche when, in “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” (in accordance with the doctrine in *The Birth of Tragedy*), he characterises the Dionysian—i.e., the tragic—as a “monstrous phenomenon” (ASC 4).

The presence of the monstrous in tragedy is notorious throughout its history. Tragedians such as Seneca, Shakespeare, and Hölderlin are evidence that it has been explored in the plot construction of tragic narratives. Aristotle realised that it occupies a decisive place in the formation of tragedy. In the *Poetics*, he indicates as key elements in the structure of tragedy ‘the terrible’ (τὸ δεινόν) and ‘the awesome’ (τὸ θαυμαστόν)⁶. What he does not emphasise is the ambiguity of the monstrous—i.e., the possibility of it becoming harmful or beneficial—this being a decisive aspect in some tragedies that are considered exemplary. By considering the Oedipus myth as depicted by Sophocles, one can verify that the events marking its protagonist’s life are terrible and awesome⁷, being at the centre of what Aristotle calls the ‘changing of fortune’ (μεταβάλλειν) either in a positive or a negative direction—i.e., the “transformation [...] from adversity to prosperity or prosperity to adversity”⁸. This myth is most important for Nietzsche and decisively influenced the content of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Certainly, it was also as a

result of his interpretation of it that Nietzsche could understand the monstrous as something overwhelming, whose ambiguity makes it possible that tragic art turns suffering into something beneficial (especially BT 47).

Most passages in *The Birth of Tragedy* with direct political implications can be found in the framework of the first conception of tragedy. The monstrous phenomenon of the Dionysian erases differences between humans by means of a renewal of ties between them that are deep, because founded on nature itself. This renewal is mediated by the common background of all natural beings. Humans, animals, plants and the earth itself are reunited in nature. As a result, “the slave [becomes] a free human, [...] all the rigid, hostile barriers [...] between humans break asunder” (BT 18, t.m.). When speaking of the dissolution of barriers between the slave and the free human, Nietzsche draws attention to the political nature of such barriers—i.e., to the fact that they are sanctioned by political institutions⁹. Such a reconciliation is conceived in *The Birth of Tragedy* in an absolute way. Nietzsche maintains that each human “feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him” (BT 18). By carrying out this unification, nature reveals itself as “the [...] primordial unity” (*das Ur-Eine*, KSA 1, 30; BT 18). In these moments, humans experience in themselves something going beyond the appearances of nature and underlying its appearances—“something supernatural” (*etwas Uebernaturliches*) or monstrous (KSA 1, 30; BT 18).

Nietzsche speaks of the cyclical occurrence of the Dionysian, which exerts its effects at unpredictable time intervals. The Dionysian is understood as an artistic power, whose activity is opposed to another artistic power, the Apollonian, against which it exerts a destructive effect. The Dionysian occurs as the cyclical destruction of Apollonian creations. Both the Dionysian and the Apollonian are artistic forces in nature, with their ability to create going beyond what is usually identified as art in the strict sense—notably, political phenomena. As will become clearer in what follows, the Apollonian represents a force that is responsible for the institution and preservation of political structures and identities, while the

Dionysian acts as a force for the dissolution and renewal of such structures and identities.

Nietzsche shows that the political creations of the Apollonian mirror its artistic creations, especially sculptural ones. Such political creations correspond to “the noblest clay, the most precious marble” (BT 18). Through this comparison, he associates the political creations of the Apollonian with the rigidity and clarity of contours characterising sculptural productions. The Apollonian poetic manifestations which Nietzsche contrasts with the nature and effect of the dithyrambic chorus are epic poetry and Apollonian choral lyric. What characterises the rhapsode’s recitation of epic verses is that it preserves a distance between the former and the images conveyed by the verses. There is no identification between the rhapsode and the action depicted in his poetry (BT 43).

The Apollonian produces in artistic terms in the strict sense the same effects as it does as a natural power: effects with a political dimension. Nietzsche points to these effects when referring to Apollonian choral lyric, especially the hymns sung by virgins in religious processions honouring Apollo (BT 43). In general, Apollonian choral lyric emphasises the presence of the individual singer and does not have the potential for unification that Dionysian choral lyric does (BT 44). In addition, it imports political distinctions into its artistic expression, so it is characterised as a form of expression contributing to the preservation of these distinctions, being devoid of any potential for renewing political structures: “The virgins who walk solemnly to the temple of Apollo [...] remain who they are and retain their civic names” (BT 43).

Whereas the Apollonian has to do with the contemplative distance between individuals and between the artist and the work of art, the Dionysian is related to an experience of self-transformation: “The human is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art” (BT 18, t.m.). As Nietzsche maintains, “all nature’s artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity” (BT 18). Instead of a contemplative experience,

as in the Apollonian, a profound emotional experience is at stake, shaking the limits of the individual self and uniting humans in a “higher community” in the monstrous (BT 18). The Dionysian destruction is the starting point of its activity of recreation and renewal—not only in artistic but also in political terms. The creations of the Apollonian are not merely annihilated but reworked in order to give rise to an artistically and politically renewed world. Nietzsche says: “Here the human [...] is kneaded and carved” (BT 18, t.m.).

The political dimension of the Dionysian has its exemplary expression in the tragic chorus, which has “purely religious origins” (BT 37) and corresponds to “the original formation of tragedy” (BT 37). It cannot be associated with any particular regime, not even with the paradigmatically Greek democratic one (BT 37). It does not represent “the people in contrast to the princely region of the stage” or “the immutable moral law of the democratic Athenians” (BT 36); nor does it correspond to “the premonition of a ‘constitutional popular assembly’”—but rather excludes “any kind of political-social sphere” (BT 37), although it is not devoid of any political dimension. When he says that it has religious origins, he is pointing to the fact that, as an expression of the Dionysian, it preserves its capacity to dissolve political differences and trigger an experience that can be the starting point of a new political order.

As Nietzsche indicates, “when faced with the chorus of satyrs, cultured Greeks felt themselves absorbed, elevated and extinguished” (BT 39). What is extinguished is the individual’s political identity, which reflects the structure of the community in which they live. Nietzsche states: “This is the first effect of Dionysian tragedy: state and society, indeed all divisions between one human and another, give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity [...]” (BT 39, t.m.). Nietzsche associates this feeling of unity among the spectators of tragedy with “metaphysical solace” (BT 39). The effect is brought about in humans by their recognition of a shared condition, namely that of living, mortal beings; and this realisation provokes delight in the renewing power of life, despite the mortality of the individual. The indestructibility of life does not equal its unchangeability. Since it has a

metaphysical connection with the dual—destructive and creative—power of the Dionysian, life is not characterised as a fixed substance behind the appearances of nature, but as an infinitely plastic substrate, whose activity is that of creation-destruction-recreation of an infinite multiplicity of appearances, among which are the different civilisations and their histories.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, tragic myth is of great importance for determining tragic drama as a fully-formed whole, as it is where the artistic powers of the Dionysian and the Apollonian are combined. Only through tragic myth is it possible to understand the political dimension of tragic drama—the way it works as a representation of the dynamics between the dissolution of a political order and the establishment of a new one. It is remarkable that in this context Nietzsche chooses the example of the Titan Prometheus, that emblematic figure of progressive thinking so revered by Marx and Wagner¹⁰. Nietzsche argues that the Prometheus legend has an “un-Apollonian quality” (BT 50, t.m.). We recall that the Apollonian aims at the preservation of beings in their individuality and the establishment of boundaries between them. In fact, its imperatives of “self-knowledge and measure” (BT 50f.) are means of affirming the boundaries between individual beings as “the most sacred laws in the world” (BT 51). Prometheus, however, is depicted by Nietzsche as a figure who violates those laws by offering fire to humans and thus allowing them to resemble the gods in this respect. Nevertheless, Prometheus is not only a transgressive figure, but an eminently progressive and emancipatory one, for his offer to humans of the fire stolen from Zeus aimed at making humans more independent from the gods and less subjugated to them.

As a symbol of human aspiration to a divine condition, Prometheus represents the necessity of crime: “wrongdoing is of necessity imposed on the titanically striving individual” (BT 50f.). The logic behind this claim is that an act contravening the laws in force is necessarily a crime. Nietzsche shows the close connection between Prometheus and the Dionysian when he speaks of “the common feature shared by the Promethean and the Dionysian” (BT 51, t.m.), and the fact that “the Prometheus of Aeschylus is a Dionysian mask” (BT 51, t.m.). Prometheus is

a particular manifestation of the cyclical occurrence of the Dionysian as a power that destroys the rigidity of the Apollonian, which threatens to stifle Greek life (BT 51).

However, Nietzsche also refers to “[t]he double essence of Aeschylus’ Prometheus” (BT 51)—“his simultaneously Apollonian and Dionysian nature” (BT 51, t.m.). He seems to have in mind another key aspect of the Prometheus story, namely the punishment Zeus inflicted on him for his crime¹¹. If Prometheus represents a break with the dominant political order, his myth as a whole draws attention to the fact that the state of affairs in which a political order is suspended cannot be perpetuated indefinitely. Nietzsche is pointing to the way tragic drama represents the dynamic of the suspension and re-establishment of political structures and identities.

The Prometheus legend shows that this re-establishment does not have to occur in a progressive direction, for a hardening of the law—i.e., a conservative re-establishment of traditional collective structures and forms of individual self-recognition—can also take place as a response to the suspension effect of the monstrous phenomenon of the Dionysian. The double essence of the Prometheus story “could [...] be expressed like this: ‘All that exists is just and unjust and is equally justified in both respects’” (BT 51). Nietzsche thereby indicates that the ambiguity of the monstrous lies in its potential to give rise to either politically progressive transformations in human communities or conservative retrenchments of traditional political structures. In terms of the political potential of the experience of the monstrous, both are equally possible. The dynamic inherent in tragic myth demonstrates that the success of the effort to renew political structures and identities (the politics of difference) depends on the specific character of the political project—i.e., on the specific expression of the Apollonian—that one seeks to bring into negotiation with the monstrous power of the Dionysian.

3. THE SECOND CONCEPTION OF TRAGEDY

Nietzsche's sense of the tragic is clearly based on ancient Greek tragedy, but he is aware that the finished form of the latter is a consequence of a long process of transformation going back to a conflict between artistic forces inherent in nature and the way different cultures have established their connection with these forces. If his definition of the tragic results in a static conception of tragedy, his analysis of the formation of Greek drama makes it clear that the evolution of artistic manifestations in Greece is dynamic.

Nietzsche characterises the opposition between the two artistic deities, Apollo and Dionysus, as a monstrous one (BT 14). This opposition is monstrous not only in the sense that it concerns two immeasurable and irreducible forces, but also in the sense that each of them is constituted by a relation to the monstrous. Moreover, both have in the monstrous the principle of the various forms of their conjugation with one another. This becomes clear in regard to the Dionysian when Nietzsche refers to the breaking of the principle of individuation as something causing a "monstrous *horror*" (BT 17, t.m.) and then relates such an experience to the Dionysian rapture (BT 17). It is also the monstrous that allows him to determine the difference between the Barbarian Dionysian and the Greek Dionysian. These manifestations of the Dionysian are separated by a "monstrous gulf" (BT 20, t.m.).

The Apollonian too is formed by a relation to the monstrous. Nietzsche clarifies this connection through an analysis of the appearance of an Olympian culture and its excessive protection against the monstrousness of the Barbarian Dionysian. He points to the "monstrous need" (BT 22) from which the community of the Olympian gods was born. This need had to do with a "monstrous distrust of the Titanic forces of nature" (BT 23, t.m.). The Greeks were well aware of the astonishing character of these powers and wanted to protect themselves from succumbing to their destructive effects (e.g., BT 23).

The forms of conjugation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian are also established by a connection with the monstrous. With respect to the role played by the monstrous at a key moment in the formation of Greek tragedy, such as the

transition from pure musicality to image and discourse, Nietzsche argues that all that the lyric poet expresses through verbal language is already in music in the form of “the most monstrous generality and universal validity” (BT 36, t.m.). Although it is a passage in which he speaks of lyric poetry and not of tragedy, what he refers to is also valid for tragedy, as can be shown by a passage in which he maintains that it is in tragedy that music finds its “highest form of expression in images” (BT 80). The degree of generality characterising the musical phenomenon is superlatively monstrous because music relates symbolically to the monstrous—specifically to “the original contradiction and original pain at the heart of the primordial unity” (BT 36).

It has now become clear that the formation of Greek drama corresponds to a historical process. It has the characteristics of a narrative and reveals a dynamic conception of tragedy. Such a process is not presented as an increasing and unimpeded improvement until the full and mature constitution of Greek tragedy. If one considers this evolution from the point of view of the relation to the monstrous, one finds that Olympian culture represented an almost complete annihilation of the latter (e.g., BT 24).

In his investigation of the successive forms of manifestation of tragic art after the formation of Greek drama, Nietzsche claims that, unlike other artistic genres, Greek tragedy died by suicide, because of an internal conflict—i.e., it died tragically (BT 54). He explicitly conceives the history of the tragic genre as having a tragic character. The “monstrous emptiness” (BT 54, t.m.) resulting from the suicide of Greek tragedy has in Euripides one of the two great culprits. The characteristics of Euripidean tragedy rest on what Nietzsche calls aesthetic Socratism, the principle that everything must be reasonable (especially, BT 62). He explains Euripides’ adherence to aesthetic Socratism by the position of the latter as a spectator of tragedy, who thought that there were “too many tropes and forms of monstrousness” (BT 59, t.m.) in the tragic plots of Aeschylus and Sophocles. With Socrates’ help, Euripides felt capable of embarking on “a monstrous campaign” against his predecessors (BT 59, t.m.). The monstrous character of this struggle is

mainly connected with the fact that it is about the relation to the monstrous—one that ends up being blocked by the Euripidean practice of tragedy (see especially BT 59).

Another aspect of the monstrous becomes clear when Nietzsche considers Socrates. He speaks of the “monstrous scruple” (BT 66, t.m.) assailing one when one stands before the figure of Socrates. The scruple associated with Socrates derives from the fact that he denies the essence of the Greek world. Nietzsche suggests that what allowed Socrates to produce this denial was a “daemonic force” (BT 66)—precisely a force associated with that kind of anonymous ‘divinity’ (δαίμων) that frequently causes the misfortune of the tragic hero¹². Tragedy (*die Tragödie*) is thereby being elevated to the status of heroine—namely, of the tragic narrative that *The Birth of Tragedy* largely is.

The monstrous is no longer just that with which tragic art establishes an appropriate symbolic relation (in the case of pre-Euripidean tragedy) or a defective one (in the case of Euripidean tragedy and the aesthetic Socratism it helped to affirm). Monstrous is also what, as a result of the absence of such an appropriate relation, causes the degeneration of tragedy. Nietzsche characterises the Socratic inversion of the roles traditionally attributed to instinct and the intellect as a true “monstrousness *per defectum*” (*Monstrosität per defectum*, KSA 1, 90; BT 66, t.m.) or a “monstrous lack” (*monstroser defectus*, KSA 1, 90; BT 67). Because of the absence of the intellect’s connection with the monstrous, the monstrousness by defect characterising the Socratic inversion has to do with its destructive effect on the appropriate symbolic relation to the monstrous that pre-Euripidean tragedy represents. When tragedy, as heroine of Nietzsche’s tragic narrative, falls into disgrace or degenerates, the defect in relation to the monstrous is itself monstrous.

Thanks to Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s “monstrous courage and wisdom” (BT 87, t.m.) decisive steps towards the rebirth of the tragic and the victory over optimism were taken. By distinguishing between the true essence of things and mere appearance, these philosophers contributed decisively to the resurgence of

tragic culture—i.e., to the reopening of the path towards a “heroic attraction to the monstrous” (BT 88, t.m.). Their bravery is connected with the fact that they reopened culture to the possibility of an art form capable of rescuing the subject from “gazing into the horrors of the night” (BT 93) and of saving it with “the healing balm of appearance” (BT 93, t.m.).

As part of Nietzsche’s contribution to the rebirth of the tragic, he says that it is important to slip from a “tone of exhortation back into the mood which befits the contemplative spirit” (BT 98). One should look to the ancient Greeks in order to “learn” (BT 98) from them how the tragic should be reborn in modern times. He indicates that its rebirth brings with it the reactivation of its political effects. This is one of the reasons why the Greeks should be set as an example to him and his contemporaries. The politically exemplary character of the Greeks comes from the surprising way they were able to reconcile the powerful forces of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Nietzsche has in mind their wars against the Persians—i.e., wars that united the multitude of their cities against a foreign and oppressive power. Tragedy made possible the unity among them preceding the fights against the Persians and its regeneration after the destructive effects of these clashes. Drama has a deep connection with the “innermost vital ground of a people” (BT 98).

In order to understand the exemplarity of the political dimension of tragedy, it is important to formulate clearly the astonishment it causes Nietzsche. Two powerful forces are at stake here, each with its own political effects. On the one hand, there is the Dionysian, whose experience of rapture produces a “liberation from the shackles of the individual”—“a dwindling of the political instincts, to the point of indifference even or indeed hostility” towards any given political regime (BT 98). On the other, there is “the state-founding Apollo”, which Nietzsche calls “the genius of the *principium individuationis*”, for “the state and the sense of homeland cannot survive without the affirmation of the individual personality” (BT 98). The extraordinary effect of tragedy lies in the reconciliation it operates between these opposing forces, so that from them it is able to generate a “simplest political

feeling”, “most natural instincts for the homeland” and a “lust for struggle” (BT 98).

How is it that the Dionysian, a force that does not respect any given political regime and dissolves all differences between individuals, is combined with the Apollonian, a force that founds political regimes and establishes hierarchies among humans? What the example of the Persian wars indicates is that a force of transformation and liberation such as the Dionysian, combined with a force of order and constraint such as the Apollonian, generated a mobilisation for the defence of a pluralistic way of life against a strongly oppressive and centralised regime. Tragic drama was the occasion when the Greeks exposed themselves to a balanced conjugation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian—i.e., the dissolution of a given political order, as well as the subsequent need to affirm a new order or to reaffirm the old one. Given the Panhellenic nature of tragic representations, the Greeks experienced tragedy as an essential moment in the definition of their national identity.

These political features of Greek tragedy, which were already present in the first conception of tragedy, are now presented in their historical dimension, in accordance with the dynamic nature of the second one. Nietzsche argues that Greek tragedy occupies an intermediate place in political terms between Indian Buddhism and the Roman empire (BT 98f.). It is an intermediate position in a temporal and a conceptual sense. The ecstatic and orgiastic character of Indian Buddhism results in a “longing for nothingness” (BT 98), an “elevation above space, time and the individual” (BT 98). In other words, it corresponds to an extreme manifestation of the political effects of the monstrous phenomenon of the Dionysian in a given civilisation, whereas the Roman empire is where “the political impulses reign supreme” (BT 99) and “the most extreme worldlines” (BT 99) can be found—in short, it represents the monstrous and hypertrophied expression of the Apollonian and of Socratism in history (BT 98f.).

The decline of tragedy is due to a “tearing-apart of [the] two primal artistic drives”

(BT 110) whose combination it made possible. Its decline is “consonant with the degeneration and transformation of the national character of the Greeks”, showing “how necessarily and closely intertwined are the foundations of art and nation, myth and morality, tragedy and state” (BT 110). With the fall of tragedy and the resulting degeneration of the Greek people’s character, “Alexandrian-Roman antiquity” (BT 111) is born and ends up dominating European culture. Alexandrian-Roman culture—or, as Nietzsche also puts it, “the [...] Socratic-Alexandrian type of culture” (BT 97)—forms the basis of modernity in his time (e.g., BT 111).

When he says that one should look to the Greeks as an example of a rebirth of the tragic, Nietzsche is speaking of the reversal of a trend in modern culture to embody artistic forms of expression that do not stimulate the constitution of a true political community. This corresponds to a community capable of finding a compromise between the Dionysian instinct to dissolve political regimes and the Apollonian instinct to establish a political order. While we should acknowledge the risk that the conjugation of the Dionysian and the Apollonian translates into political conservatism and a reinforcement of hierarchies among individuals, he emphasises the possibility of political liberation and pluralism resulting from the experience of tragedy.

The Greeks created a third way of founding a community, as an alternative to Indian Buddhism and the Roman Empire. They explored the political effects of tragedy, which made it possible “to avoid exhausting themselves either in ecstatic brooding or in a debilitating chase after worldly power and honour”, for tragedy is “a mediator between [these] strongest and inherently most fateful qualities of a people” (BT 99). Tragedy has a “monstrous power” (BT 99, t.m.)—it is able “to stimulate [...] the entire life of the people” (BT 99) by establishing a community in the monstrous. Modernity can look to the Greeks as an example, in order to exert a monstrous effect on Alexandrian culture—i.e., modernity’s rationalist and scientist side³. The ideal of Greek tragedy and its effects on the political community “survive for all time” (BT 99), which means that it awaits the opportunity to work

as an example for a liberation of modernity from the shackles of rationalism and scientism. It is only when drama has been used in this way that modernity can say that it has understood “the supreme value of tragedy” (BT 99).

Situated by Nietzsche at the end of the progressive reawakening of the tragic in German music (notably BT 94), the emergence of Wagnerian opera is an exemplary moment when art re-establishes its appropriate symbolic relation to the monstrous. When referring to *Tristan and Isolde*, Nietzsche speaks of a “monstrous force of image, concept, ethical doctrine and sympathetic excitement” (BT 102, t.m.). Wagnerian opera expresses the power of liberation that modernity has in relation to Alexandrian culture (e.g., BT 95), above all because of its connection with the “monstrous Dionysian drive” (BT 105, t.m.). Wagner looks to the Greeks as an “example” (BT 95), emphasising the “analogies” (BT 95) between German and Greek culture with regard to their tragic nature, in order to contribute to a “*rebirth of tragedy*” (BT 95). Like Greek tragedy, Wagnerian opera has the capacity to dissolve the differences between humans and to generate a community among them in the monstrous “womb of the primordial unity” (BT 105, t.m.). Due to its use of tragic myth, “understood as the transformation of Dionysian wisdom into images by means of Apollonian artistry” (BT 105, t.m.), Wagner’s opera carries out the desirable compromise between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. In its Wagnerian expression, too, tragic myth encourages a dynamic and creative political life, based on the transformation and renewal of forms of political organisation—i.e., a transformation and renewal of a transitory world of appearances, which is what a given human community founded in the state is. In Nietzsche’s words, “even the state knows of no more powerful unwritten laws than the mythical fundament” (BT 108).

The cyclical nature of the occurrence of the monstrous and the ambiguity of its political effects can also be seen in the history of tragedy, which Nietzsche does not conceive teleologically. In its course, there have been advances and setbacks concerning an appropriate symbolic relation to the monstrous and its liberating effect on the political rigidity of the Apollonian and of Socratism. The monstrous

manifests itself cyclically, sometimes in the form of the Socratic monstrousness by defect, sometimes in the guise of the Dionysian monstrous and its rebirth in modernity. The ambiguity of these occurrences lies in the fact that the monstrous leaves open the direction its concrete manifestations will take. This should be a concern for those looking in *The Birth of Tragedy* for an unambiguous source of inspiration for progressive and egalitarian political thinking. In accordance with Nietzsche's non-teleological view of the history of tragedy, the temporary rebirth of the tragic must be seen as non-definitive, for it is subject either to the failure of its realisation or to subsequent degeneration. The successful realisation of the politically transformative and revolutionary nature of Wagnerian opera depends on its effectiveness in triggering the experience of the monstrous Dionysian. On the one hand, it may exert its dissolving effect on the political order in the current state of the world of appearances and, on the other, a more progressive and egalitarian political organisation may take place through the renewal of those Apollonian appearances.

In the framework of the first conception of tragedy, above, it became clear that Greek tragedy, due to its connection with the monstrous phenomenon of the Dionysian, has the potential to mobilise for a politics of difference, conceived as a collective change of political structures and their modes of individual self-recognition, even if the monstrous Dionysian, by virtue of its ambiguity, leaves open the possibility of a re-establishment of traditional forms of political organisation.

The second conception of tragedy shows that the power of tragedy to promote a politics of difference has to do with its historical dimension. First of all, the balanced conjugation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, which allows tragedy to preserve its transformative capacity in political terms, can (and indeed does) suffer setbacks. Furthermore, the rebirth of tragedy, with its politically transformative potential, results from the resumption of artistic manifestations of the tragic in previous times. Finally, the attempt at such a rebirth is an historically situated one, for it tries to bridge the gap of an age still in force when there is no balanced conjugation of the Dionysian and the Apollonian and a deficit exists in

the ability of artistic creations to stimulate a politics of difference.

The rebirth of tragedy seeks not only an appropriate combination of the Dionysian and the Apollonian—i.e., the rejuvenation of the politically transformative power of artistic productions—but also the overcoming of a time when this is obliterated. The monstrous, on which tragedy's capacity for political change is based, corresponds not only to the element that is both destructive and creative in conjugations of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, but also to the force that exerts the dissolving effect that the rebirth of the tragic is intended to have on the Alexandrian era.

4. A METAPHYSICS OF TRAGEDY?

What remains to be done is to clarify further the potential for a politics of difference inherent in the second conception of tragedy. We can do this by asking, polemically and provocatively, whether the monstrous might represent a metaphysical principle of cultural transformation. Metaphysical accounts of reality tend to emphasise 'the Same'—i.e., to reduce the multiplicity of reality to the same fundamental meaning and to impose this meaning as universally true¹⁴. If the monstrous had a metaphysical character—i.e., if it was reducible to an essential meaning at the very core of nature—it would diminish the singularity of each historical transformation in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For the account of cultural transformations, even if it points to a multiplicity of manifestations of culture over time, does not in principle prevent this multiplicity from being reduced to the same meaning. Furthermore, different models of culture can be considered instances of 'the Same' if they correspond to models imposed on individuals as true and as conforming to an underlying reality. In that case, 'the Same' would amount to the persistence of the foundation of a cultural model in a metaphysical conception of reality. For this reason, it is important to ascertain whether the monstrous can be read as having a metaphysical character in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and whether it is possible to carry out a non-metaphysical interpretation of this phenomenon—i.e., one that does not reduce it to a single, repeatable meaning,

thus freeing up the singularity of its occurrences.

Prima facie, it seems possible to interpret the monstrous in *The Birth of Tragedy* in a metaphysical sense, since Nietzsche at times builds his historical narrative of tragedy on the monstrous as central to the primordial unity at the very core of nature. This is clear in the historical narrative of the artistic forms preceding Greek tragedy, in the account of Greek tragedy itself, as well as in the narrative of the decay and rebirth of the tragic. Observing the “monstrous struggles and transitions” (BT 75, t.m.) between Socratic optimism and tragic art, Nietzsche seeks to take part in these struggles (BT 76) and to contribute to the rebirth of the tragic by taking on the monstrous force at work in the history of culture. His analysis of the way this force determines the concrete manifestations or absence of the tragic in history seems to suggest something—in a metaphysical sense—monstrous in the advances and setbacks of the tragic.

Although in *The Birth of Tragedy*, traits can be identified that point to a metaphysical interpretation of the monstrous, there are aspects in it that undermine this. Even if Nietzsche at times limits the ambiguity of the metaphysical monstrous in history, *The Birth of Tragedy* betrays, in its language and discursivity, an ambiguity of the monstrous in the history of tragedy. Specifically, he employs a rhetoric of the monstrous transcending the metaphysical dimension apparently attributable to this phenomenon, a rhetoric made possible by the ambiguity with which the monstrous has been expressed in the tragic literary tradition since antiquity. Possibly due to the influence of this tradition on the collective unconscious of Western culture, the ambiguity of the monstrous insinuates itself in Western languages in a way that makes it irreducible to a metaphysical entity—i.e., one with a single meaning, unequivocal in its contribution to the affirmation of tragic culture. Ultimately, then, Nietzsche’s account of the history of tragedy shows that the monstrous is not reducible to a metaphysical principle. Having established the irreducibility of the monstrous to a metaphysical principle, it is possible to look anew at Nietzsche’s account of the history of tragedy. The reconsideration of this history on the basis of a non-metaphysical understanding of the monstrous proves

especially fruitful from the perspective of a politics of difference.

In the context of Nietzsche's history of tragedy, the event of the monstrous is never just that to which each stage of Western culture establishes an appropriate or defective symbolic relation, but also that which has a destructive or dissolving effect on a given historical age. Although he never imports this meaning of the monstrous into his conception of the latter, it is present in *The Birth of Tragedy* and contributes decisively to the tragic nature of his historical narrative of tragedy.

If a metaphysical interpretation of the monstrous—as an insistence on the essence of the tragic repeatedly manifesting 'the Same' in the history of culture—prevents the full exploration of the potential of *The Birth of Tragedy* from the perspective of a politics of difference, the discovery of the non-metaphysical character of the monstrous has the opposite effect. The non-metaphysical monstrous has an authentically historical character, an ability to affirm 'the Other' in the history of culture—i.e., the singularity of each cultural transformation as a historically specific one, arising as an insurrection against the dominance of a given historical period, with uncontrollable and unpredictable consequences. Focusing on the non-metaphysical dimension of the monstrous is extremely fruitful in terms of a politics of difference. It allows one to detect a *différance*, a progressive shift in the meaning of the monstrous irreducible to a stable concept, related to the effects of the monstrous in history, which can favour the flourishing or the degeneration of the tragic. As we saw, Nietzsche's narrative of the tragic stages a multiplication and destabilisation of the meaning of the monstrous as it manifests itself historically.

Given the uncontrollable and unpredictable nature of the effects of the monstrous in history, the multiplicity of its meanings, as those of tragedy, can never be considered complete. Neither the monstrous nor tragedy, inasmuch as they bear a non-metaphysical character, can be subsumed under concepts that would enclose them within a delimitable semantic horizon. They are rather figures that refer to a dispersed multiplicity of meanings on the basis of different historical effects—whether effects of destruction or dissolution—without any claim to full

transparency and without excluding the absolute otherness of their manifestations to come⁵.

On the basis of the non-metaphysical meaning of the monstrous and of tragedy, Nietzsche's narrative of the tragic is also a history of political transformations. If the monstrous and tragedy are understood in a non-metaphysical sense, not only the awakening and reawakening of the tragic, but also its degeneration and decay correspond to transformations of political structures and the modes of individual self-identification within them. The idea of a politics of difference, as applied in the context of the opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, undergoes a broadening, for it can now refer to all kinds of political transformation. However, as demonstrated in section 2, above, in the framework of this opposition between natural forces—i.e., between the two forces lying at the core of nature—only the Dionysian can be interpreted as a progressive transformative force, whereas the Apollonian represents a force for the conservation of the *status quo*. This is because such a conservation does not belong to the scope of a politics of difference, but to that of a politics of 'the Same' and of the State, even though, within the framework of a non-metaphysical reading of political transformations, conservative political forces are also subject to a multiplication and destabilisation of meaning. In this sense, the re-establishment of a conservative political model, due to the fact that it is carried out in contrast to the regime previously in force, and in a historical context different from that in which it had existed in the past, corresponds to the affirmation of something that differs from itself and cannot be completely subsumed under the figure of 'the Same'.

Interpreted in this way, *The Birth of Tragedy* is able to inspire different politics of difference—or different programmes of political transformation—seeking a basis in a philosophy of history. Inasmuch as Nietzsche's narrative of tragedy depicts a history of political transformations, it stages a process corresponding to a succession of multiple politics of difference. Each stage in this narrative consists in a politics of difference, whose idea is therefore subject to a destabilisation and a confluence with both the figure of the monstrous and that of tragedy. To

put it differently, *The Birth of Tragedy* describes a *différance* within the political transformations already underway in cultural history. The politics of difference, to the extent that it is inspired by the series of transformations in the framework of the narrative on the tragic, then acquires the status of a politics of *différance*—i.e., a politics aware of the singularity of every political transformation and any attempt at a political transformation in view of something other than the already existing.

This should not be confused with a defence of change for the sake of change. Rather, it is about recognising the imperfect character of all political change and the somewhat imposing character of any existing political model based on identity. What is at stake is the acknowledgement of the provisional character of these models, as well as the inscription of the ‘to come’ (*à venir*) within them, however just they may seem to be¹⁶. Nevertheless, there is always a risk inherent in the figure of the monstrous, which concerns the ambiguity that lurks in each of its multiple occurrences in history, in each moment when its power of dissolution mobilises a historically-specific change. In each of these occurrences, as we saw in section 2, above, such a power can either lead to a progressive transformation or to a conservative retrenchment. Everything depends on how the monstrous power of dissolution is dealt with.

PAULO LIMA is an Assistant Researcher at Nova Institute of Philosophy (Nova University of Lisbon). He teaches in the BA and MA degrees at Nova University of Lisbon Philosophy Department. His main areas of expertise are phenomenology (Husserl, Heidegger), ancient and contemporary philosophy (Plato, Nietzsche, Foucault) and classical literature (Hesiod, Sophocles, the tragic Seneca). He is now developing a project on ‘Pessimism as a Form of Nihilism in the Young Nietzsche’, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education).

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NOTES

1. Hammond, 2009.
2. Hammond, 2009, 8f.. Cf. Derrida, 1967a, 1967b.
3. De Man, 1972.
4. This definition of ‘politics’ is of Aristotelian inspiration, although it seeks to exclude the teleological implications of Aristotle’s definition and its connection with the idea of an intrinsic character of the human. There is no room here for a detailed discussion of how my definition of ‘politics’ is present in Aristotle’s *Politics*. As Rackham says in the “Introduction” to his edition of the *Politics*: “[*Politiké*] is the science of human affairs, of man’s happiness or good. This consists in a certain mode of life, and man’s life is shaped for him by his social environment, the laws, customs and institutions of the community to which he belongs. [...] The aim of *Politiké* is to discover first in what mode of life man’s happiness consists, then by what form of government and what social institutions that mode of life can be secured.” Aristotle, 1932, xvi-xvii. In this brief account, Rackham does not address the issue of the relation between a given constitution that underlies a political community and the hierarchical structure the latter implies.
5. Translation modified hereafter t.m.
6. E.g., Aristotle 1999, 1452a4-7, 1453a16-22.
7. E.g., Sophocles *Oedipus the King*, 1327-8, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 141, 202, 1586, 1665.
8. Aristotle 1999, 1451a6-15. The verb *μεταβάλλειν* is used in ancient Greek to refer to any kind of overthrow or change of direction, but in this Aristotelian passage it clearly points to the change in the tragic hero’s fortune.
9. Cf. BT 37, where Nietzsche refers to the opposition between the prince and the people as belonging to the “political-social sphere” (*politisch-soziale Sphäre*, KSA 1, 52).
10. Cf. Ruehl, 2004, 79f.
11. An eagle sent by Zeus to eat Prometheus’ immortal liver every day, which then grew back every night.
12. E.g., Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, 119; Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, 828f.
13. For a detailed account of the relation between, on the one hand, Alexandrianism and, on the other, Socratism and the decline of Greek tragic culture, cf. especially Porter, 2014, 42f.
14. The figure of ‘the Same’ (*le Même*) is borrowed from Levinas, who opposes it to the figure of ‘the Other’ (*l’Autre*). Cf. notably, Levinas 1971, sec.1. The figure of ‘the Other’ refers to the acknowledgement of the singularity of each individual and to the acceptance of their identity as being outside the opposition between the universally true and the universally false.
15. In his discussions of ‘the democracy to come’ (*la démocratie à venir*), Derrida maintains that the political sphere should be oriented by an openness to the future rather than by a fixed model of community. Cf. Derrida, 1993, 1994, 2003.
16. Cf. Derrida, 2003, where he speaks of democracy’s ‘autoimmunity’ (*auto-immunité*)—i.e., its ability to self-destruct through its own internal contradictions.

This essay was written with the financial support of FCT (Foundation for Science and Technology, Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education) under the project CEECIND/02734/2018. I should like to thank Ashley Woodward and Andrea Rehberg for their suggestions, which greatly contributed to improving the essay.