



KLE

# The Unveiling of Illusion in Nietzschean Aesthetics

Carolyn Gregoire

McGill University, Class of 2011

*Illusion works impenetrable,  
Weaving webs innumerable,  
Her gay pictures never fail,  
Crowds each other, veil on veil,  
Charmer who will be believed,  
By man who thirsts to be deceived.*

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Maya"

Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson—like his contemporary, existential philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—saw men in all stages of life as victims of illusion.<sup>1</sup> In his essay "Illusions" and his poem "Maya," Emerson outlines this viewpoint. The term *māyā*, in Indian philosophy, refers to the deity who creates both dreams and illusion—primarily referring to the illusion of duality in the phenomenal universe caused by the false perception of a distinct self. According to Buddhist doctrine, the individual only apprehends the falsity of this separation of self and world when he achieves a state of enlightenment and perceives the oneness of the universe. Similarly, Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy positions art as the force that allows man to break down the illusion of individuality which he requires to sustain a rational worldview and function in the world. This notion of illusion is imperative to the development of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy as presented in his influential works, *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. In exploring the Apollinian and Dionysian art impulses of nature, Nietzsche looked to the wisdom of Eastern philosophy and the ancient Greeks to determine that art is what gives people an awareness of truth and what "makes life possible and worth living."<sup>2</sup> Truth acts as the antithesis of illusion for Nietzsche, who believed that art could transcend illusion to reveal the deeper, primordial truths of nature. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche distinguishes between the Apollinian and Dionysian art forms, which combine in the art of tragedy to

unveil illusion and reveal life-affirming truths of nature. For Nietzsche, truth lies in the ability of the Dionysian art impulse, through mediation of the Apollinian aesthetic, to unveil man's illusory sense of individuality—just as the Eastern philosophers believed that the illusion of self, *māyā*, veiled the oneness of the universe. Nietzsche posits that truth wears masks of individuality, which are veils of illusion that conceal the fact that man exists as expressions of an underlying primordial energy impulse of nature. The Apollinian aesthetic, characterized by orderliness and beauty, allows man to bear the terrible truths of the Dionysian. Nietzsche uses the Apollinian and Dionysian art forms, which coalesce with equal weight in the art of tragedy, to affirm his aesthetic position that art has the power to unveil illusion and reveal the world's deep primordial truths. The free spirit, as presented in *Beyond Good and Evil*, is the individual who can bear these truths through exercising his creative freedom. By accepting life's uncertainty and instability, the free spirit chooses—instead of resignation—to actively love his fate and make his life a work of art. Both the revelation of truth through the art of tragedy and the notion of the free spirit as an artistic creator of his own life substantiate Nietzsche's famous claim that "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*."<sup>3</sup> In tragedy and the creation of an aesthetic life, art reveals the deepest truths about ourselves.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche explores the development of art with relation to the juxtaposition of the Apollinian and Dionysian art worlds. These two terms are derived from the ancient Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. Apollo, the god of all plastic energies, represents the symbolic arts of painting, sculpture, and poetry, while Dionysus, the god of wine, presides over the art of dance, music, and lyric

poetry. The two separate art impulses of the Apollinian and the Dionysian are differentiated by the altered states of consciousness of dreams and intoxication, respectively. While Apollo champions individual representation, the Dionysian necessitates liberation from the self. Nietzsche claims, “Apollo, as ethical deity, exacts measure of his disciples, and, to be able to maintain it, he requires self-knowledge ... with the aesthetic necessity for beauty, there occur the demands ‘know thyself’ and ‘nothing in excess...’”<sup>4</sup> The Dionysian reunion with nature directly contrasts with Apollo’s focus on the individual.

“The individual, with all his restraint and proportion, succumbed to the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states, forgetting the precepts of Apollo. Excess revealed itself as truth. Contradiction, the bliss born of pain, spoke out from the very heart of nature. And so, wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollinian was checked and destroyed.”<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche’s aesthetics emphasizes the duality of the Apollinian and Dionysian art impulses of nature before discussing their union in the art of tragedy. Both present very different truths, yet they are necessary to each other—the Dionysian forms the foundation of primal truth, and Apollo provides the impulse to beauty and aesthetic order necessary to bearing such terrible truths.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of the Apollinian lies in the wisdom of illusion. Nietzsche describes the Apollinian impulse as the art of sculpture, characterized by dream experience, enhancement of the individual, beautiful illusions, and appearance. The Apollinian plastic artist concerns himself with symbols and the contemplation of images.<sup>7</sup> Rooted in the illusions of dreams, the Apollinian is based on a state of consciousness in which the dreamer is the master of his own world of fantasy. Nietzsche posits that in the creation of dreams, everyone is truly an artist—which forms the essence of the Apollinian. But even when the dream is its most intense and reality, we recognize the dream as illusory.<sup>8</sup> The dreamer recognizes his dream as mere appearance, just as the

philosophical man knows that our being and reality are also merely appearance. “Thus the aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relations to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life...”<sup>9</sup> The reflection on dream images trains the aesthetic man for his life. In his dreams, both joyful and troubling, the dreamer can experience “the whole divine comedy of life”<sup>10</sup> passing before him in illusory form. The Apollinian wisdom of illusions lies in its instillation of an awareness of the illusion as mere appearance. After elucidating the importance of dreams in exposing reality as mere appearance, Nietzsche describes the god Apollo as the embodiment of a higher truth through these illusions.

“He who... is the ‘shining one,’ the deity of light, is also ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy. The higher truth, the perfection of these states in contrast to the incompletely intelligible everyday world, this deep consciousness of nature, healing and helping in sleep and dreams, is at the same time the symbolical analogue of the soothsaying faculty of the arts generally, which make life possible and worth living.”<sup>11</sup>

Apollo’s light and sun-like qualities wrap even the most frightening or angry dreams in a veil of illusion, making them appear beautiful. Such dreams are symbolic of the arts, Nietzsche claims, because both have the power to bring man to a deeper state of consciousness, more perfect than the phenomenal world, which reveals a higher manifestation of primordial truth. The perfection of these beautiful illusions allows man to glimpse the truth that the world is *not* intelligible. For Nietzsche, man’s falsely rational worldview, based on an illusory belief in opposites, is nothing more than appearance.<sup>12</sup>

To further elucidate the Apollinian art world and its interaction with the Dionysian, Nietzsche refers to the “naïve artist”—in this case, the term naïve refers to the oneness of man with nature, and immersion in the beauty of mere appearance. According to

Nietzsche, “Where we encounter the ‘naïve’ in art, we should recognize the highest effects of Apollinian culture... which must have triumphed over an abysmal and terrifying view of the world and the keenest susceptibility to suffering through recourse to the most forceful and pleasurable illusions.”<sup>13</sup> The dream—which is constituted by appearance of mere appearance—satisfies man’s inherent desire for mere appearance. The Apollinian exposes nature’s truths under a veil of aesthetic beauty, because “...the truly existent primal unity, eternally suffering and contradictory, also needs the rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion, for its continuous redemption.”<sup>14</sup> The Greeks used art to affirm to themselves that they were worthy of the glory of the gods, to “behold themselves in a higher sphere”—the sphere of beauty.

Nietzsche cites Schopenhauer’s *principium individuationis* (the principle of individuation) to explain this higher sphere of Apollinian dream images and beautiful illusions. Schopenhauer’s *principium* is based on the concept of *māyā*, the “veil of illusion.” Schopenhauer explains that in a world of torments, man is able to exist calmly and rationally because of a trust in his own existence as a distinct individual, separate and unique from the rest of the world. This is the illusion of *māyā*, which is overcome by reaching enlightenment, or—in Nietzsche’s case—art. Through the Apollinian aesthetic impulse, faith in the *principium* receives its “most sublime expression,”<sup>15</sup> to such an extent that Nietzsche proclaims Apollo himself to be the divine image of the individual. Nietzsche states that the eternally suffering and contradictory nature of primal unity requires this pleasurable illusion of individuality for its continual redemption. As beings who are wrapped up in this illusion, we consider it to be the reality of our existence.<sup>16</sup>

The Apollinian aesthetic influence not only enables us to mirror the beauty of the gods, but also looks beyond the illusion of individuality for a higher truth of a transfigured world. In the plastic arts, the artist as a creator is fully an individual, mastering his own inner world of fantasy. The truth of the Apollinian is that individuality is an illusion, and human beings

are only expressions of an underlying primal unity. Through art, one may unite with the “primordial artist of the world,” becoming at once “subject and object, poet and actor, and spectator.”<sup>17</sup> In this state, the artist identifies himself with all the many masks of individuality that truth wears, which break down into the single “primordial artist of the world”—a term Nietzsche also refers to as the true author. The veil of pleasurable illusion brought to light in the Apollinian artistic energy of nature must be transcended in order to gain access to the higher truth of primordial unity. The collapse of the *principium* is the first step in deconstructing the illusion of individuality, which is where the Dionysian artistic energy comes into play. Through the Dionysian, identification with the ego is broken down, and the rational worldview disintegrates, causing a powerful and terrifying liberation from self that Nietzsche describes as ecstatic intoxication.<sup>18</sup>

At the collapse of the *principium individuationis*, a blissful ecstasy reveals itself in the Dionysian impulse, which is intimately associated with the analogy of intoxication. Under the influence of narcotics, the emotions of Dionysius are awakened in the soul and as they gain intensity, “everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness.”<sup>19</sup> The union of man and man is reaffirmed, as well as the union of man with all of nature—allowing for a feeling of oneness with the universe to emerge, putting man in a sort of enlightened state of creativity. When illusion has been destroyed, man feels the soul of the race and of nature, rather than his own individual soul, which Nietzsche has shown to be illusory. In the Dionysian orgies of the Greeks, nature “attains her artistic jubilee ... the destruction of the *principium individuationis* for the first time becomes an artistic phenomenon”<sup>20</sup> The Dionysian connects man to the “artistic power of all nature” through the arts of music, dance, and lyric poetry. Nietzsche cites the view of Schopenhauer that music, an art free from language and symbols, is the creation of a copy of the primal unity of the world.<sup>21</sup> In song and in dance, man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying in the air, dancing...

he feels himself a god... he is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity."<sup>22</sup> At the collapse of the *principium*, the Dionysian artist surrenders his individuality to expose the unity of all men in nature. "The Dionysian musician is, without any images, himself pure primordial pain and its primordial re-echoing. The lyric genius is conscious of a world of images and symbols—growing out of his state of mythical self-abnegation and oneness."<sup>23</sup> The veil of illusion through which the phenomenal world appears is broken down, and the Dionysian state of consciousness comes to resemble a state of enlightenment. This intoxicated reality destroys the individual and subsequently redeems him with a mystic feeling of oneness.<sup>24</sup> The subject of the work becomes the artist as he is released from his individual will to become a projection of the primordial artist of the world. As an artistic image of the true author, man gains his highest dignity as a work of art, which Nietzsche cites as a reason that "it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified*."<sup>25</sup>

The truth of Dionysius lies in man's freedom from subjectivity and participation in the world as will. Nietzsche subscribes to the Schopenhauerian idea that the innermost nature of the world is not constituted by the principle of individuation, but rather by the will—a continual movement of turmoil and self-transcendence; a striving regardless of its fulfillment. The illusory masks of individuality are merely refractions of this primordial will; this false perception of a distinct self in a rational world is merely appearance—not reality.<sup>26</sup> Because this truth is difficult to accept, the mediation of Apollinian aesthetics is needed to bear the truths of the Dionysian. Just as the *principium* is manifest in the energy of the Apollinian, the energy of the Dionysian is evidence of the world will. "Apollo ... again appears to us as the apotheosis of the *principium individuationis*, in which alone is consummated the perpetually attained goal of primal unity, its redemption through mere appearance."<sup>27</sup> In contrast, the essential truth of the Dionysian is in its

acknowledgment that there is this will—this irrational force that governs the world beneath our illusions of individual distinctions and appearances. Nietzsche affirms that together, the contrasting forces of the Apollinian and Dionysian create art that exposes the deep, primordial truths of nature. "Dionysian art gives expression to the will in its omnipotence, as it were, behind the *principium individuationis*, the eternal life behind all phenomena."<sup>28</sup> Apollinian beauty is necessary to transfigure contact with the intense and terrifying truths of the Dionysian. "The muses of the arts of 'illusion' paled before an art that, in its intoxication, spoke the truth .... The individual, with all his restraint and proportion, succumbed to the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states, forgetting the precepts of Apollo. *Excess revealed itself as truth*."<sup>29</sup> Once the veil of *maya* has been destroyed in the Dionysian state, the artist may experience the excess of nature and universal harmony.

The art of tragedy is the apotheosis of the union of the Apollinian and Dionysian art forms, capable of revealing the deepest truths about ourselves. In the Greek tragedy, "...The gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature."<sup>30</sup> Tragedy recognizes individuality as illusion, and renders the self of the spectator illusory. The Dionysian truth of primordial unity, if not mediated by Apollinian beauty, would be dramatic enough to destroy the spectator. Therefore tragedy acts in contradiction, both reinforcing and breaking down the illusion of individuality—for Nietzsche, contradiction characterizes our unstable and irrational world order.

To deal with such instability, most people rely on a "knowledge of ignorance" and faith in opposite values, choosing to falsely view the world as rationally ordered. Nietzsche believes that man has long built his knowledge upon the will to ignorance, placing his faith in false antithetical values. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche states that untruth is a condition of life. Why do we want the truth at all? Why not rather untruth and uncertainty? Nietzsche believes that being born into the world,

man is placed in a creative position, in an individual confrontation in the absence of rules or a predetermined moral order.<sup>31</sup> But to recognize untruth as a condition of life means accepting that life is composed of interpretation, perspective, and gradations rather than absolute opposite values. The denial of free will is essential to Nietzsche's notion of creative freedom. By denying free will and moral choice, Nietzsche prefers instead to believe that everything in our world is driven by the will to power, the highest life impetus. As Nietzsche outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*, one connects to this force of nature through the ecstatic intoxication of the Dionysian. For Nietzsche, the illusion of individuality is intrinsically bound to the illusion of a rational world order. Man must perceive himself as distinct from others in order to function in a world that he perceives as intelligible.<sup>32</sup> Nietzsche's indeterminacy—the belief that there is no clear pattern or formula describing how the world ought to be—means that there can be no free will and no predetermined morality. It also means that the rational world is merely an illusion. The world as will developed “beyond good and evil,” and therefore is not subject to ethical law. This will is a perpetual striving, regardless of its fulfillment, and by nature is uncertain and of unstable identity. The greatest expression of the will can be found in those who Nietzsche calls “free spirits.” In Nietzsche's discussion of the free spirit, he posits that the strength of spirit should be measured by how much truth one can take.

According to Nietzsche, only the strongest people—the free spirits—can face this fundamental indeterminacy of existence, accepting uncertainty and untruth as a condition of life. The weak must invent a stable order and the illusion of rational principles in order to face the world, wearing masks of individuality to avoid facing the truth. Yet free spirits can exercise their creative freedom and view the world as it is, facing the uncertainty and living in a self-transformative way. The free spirit, rather than choosing acceptance and resignation in the face of uncertainty, has chosen an active love of fate. According to Nietzsche, “everything is so regulated that the worst of all tastes, the taste for the

unconditional, is cruelly misused... until man learns to introduce a little art into his feelings and even to venture trying the artificial: as genuine artists of life do.”<sup>33</sup> Like the Apollinian dreamer, the aesthetic man creates his own reality. This exercise of creative freedom is accomplished by the aesthetic worldview, which allows the individual to make his life a work of art. The free spirit has uncovered the truth of appearances, and understands that “there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective evaluations and appearances...”<sup>34</sup> and therefore accepts the untruth of life and chooses instead to exercise his will through creating. Free spirits combat nihilism by creating a life-enhancing moral for themselves and creating aesthetic values that strengthen life—without masking the truth. The free spirit has embraced his fate and become a “genuine artist of life,” seeking to make his life a work of art. This goes back to Nietzsche's statement in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the world and existence are only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Nietzsche believed that a complete knowledge of the nature of existence could destroy a person, and so the strength of a spirit should be measured by how much truth it can handle, and more precisely, to what degree the truth must be masked, watered down, or falsified.<sup>35</sup> This goes back to the core of *māyā* and the illusory masks of individuality. Nietzsche states that “every profound spirit needs a mask; more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing thanks to the constantly false, that is to say shallow interpretation of every word he speaks...”<sup>36</sup> He describes the free spirit as a friend of solitude, because to the majority of people, who choose to remain ignorant rather than exercising their creative freedom, he appears masked.

The free spirit recognizes that “there is no other ‘reality’ than the reality of our drives” and thus turns to art as an expression of the will. Through the expression of creative freedom, one invents oneself through art—making one's life a work of art and thereby justifying world and existence as an aesthetic phenomenon. Through aesthetics, life gains its value when the individual—the free spirit who can confront life without masks, in all of its uncertainty

and instability—invents and reinvents himself, thus asserting the will to power. The essence of creative freedom lies in the artist’s ability to create his own inner world and his own truths, truly making life a work of art. Both the tragedies of the ancient Greeks and the creations of the free spirit unveil the illusion of individuality by revealing a primal unity of mankind. The truth of art is in its ability to create new worlds, positioning reality as mere appearance. One may interpret art in Nietzschean aesthetics as analogous to enlightenment in Eastern philosophies—an unveiling of the illusion of individuality, allowing man to gain access to deeper states of consciousness that ultimately reveal the oneness of the universe.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 38
25. *Ibid.*, p. 52
26. *Nietzsche on Art 2006* p. 19
27. “The Birth of Tragedy” p. 45
28. *Nietzsche on Art 2006* p. 30
29. “The Birth of Tragedy” p. 46
30. *Ibid.*, p. 59
31. Class notes, September 24
32. *Nietzsche on Art 2006* p. 15
33. Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 2003. p. 62
34. *Ibid*, p. 65
35. *Ibid*, p. 65
36. *Ibid*, p. 70

#### NOTES

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Illusions,” *The Atlantic*, November 1857.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche. “The Birth of Tragedy.” In *Basic Writings*, edited and trans. By W. Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 2000. p. 35.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 52
4. *Ibid.*, p. 46
5. *Ibid.*, p. 46
6. J.P. Stern. *A Study of Nietzsche*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. p. 173.
7. “The Birth of Tragedy” p. 52
8. *A Study of Nietzsche* p. 173
9. “The Birth of Tragedy” p. 34
10. *Ibid.*, p. 35
11. *Ibid.*, p. 35
12. Ridley, Aaron. *Nietzsche on Art 2006*. p. 15
13. “The Birth of Tragedy” p. 44
14. *Ibid.*, p. 45
15. *Ibid.*, p. 36
16. *Ibid.*, p. 45
17. *Ibid.*, p. 52
18. *Nietzsche on Art 2006* p. 17
19. “The Birth of Tragedy” p. 36
20. *Ibid.*, p. 40
21. *Ibid.*, p. 49
22. *Ibid.*, p. 30
23. *Ibid.*, p. 50