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Art, Life and Form On Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Existence

Abstract

The paper aims to investigate the peculiar relationship between art and life in the context of Nietzsche's thought. We mean to show how Nietzschean aesthetics is not conceived as a theoretical and rational reflection that abstractly investigates the conditions of possibility of beauty and art: on the contrary, aesthetics is understood by Nietzsche as a practice aimed at shaping life in a beautiful form. The topic of the Lebens-form is considered as a common thread of an original exegesis of human types as aesthetic symbols of life within Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche's notion of "becoming who we are" will therefore be understood as an ability to affirm and realize one's life in all its potential. The Dionysian conception of art, which is considered in The Birth of Tragedy as an ecstatic inebriation that stimulates life and saves man from the tragedy of pain, will then be compared with the idea of ars vivendi, referring to the notion of wisdom and to the Hellenistic-Roman practice of ἀσκησις.

Keywords

Lebensform, wisdom, existence

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1. *Aesthetics between science and existence: From Baumgarten to Nietzsche*

A long-standing historiographical tradition identifies the birth of aesthetics, as an autonomous discipline, with Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's work *Aesthetica* (1750). As is well known, Baumgarten coined the neologism "*Aesthetica*" by referring to the Greek adjective αἰσθητικός, which is translatable into Latin as *sensitivus*. Aesthetics, Baumgarten states, "is the science of sensitive knowledge as well as of sensible presentations (*Scientia sensitive cognoscendi et proponendi est aesthetica*)," (Baumgarten 2007: § 1). According to Baumgarten, the senses are organs of perception that provide the first cognitive access to the world and precede the intellect. The "empiricist" component of his work is intertwined with rationalist elements derived from Leibniz and Wolff (Tedesco 2000: 11). Baumgarten's rationalistic approach to aesthetics is what marks it out as *a science* in the first place. It is therefore an aesthetic of an essentially technical and epistemic nature, an aesthetic understood as "the theory of the fine arts, the lower doctrine of knowledge, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogy of reason" (Baumgarten 2007: § 1). As Herder states, Baumgarten's work is therefore "an aesthetics *of the learned*, not of man, an aesthetics, we might say, born on the basis of a prior 'logicization', *a reduction of experience to science*" (Herder 1985: 668; Tedesco 2000: 12).

The aim of Baumgarten's methodical classification is to categorize perceptions and investigate the limits of human knowledge. It is a question of rationalising and making comprehensible the apparently obscure world of sensory perceptions. Aesthetics thus reveals its essentially *theoretical* character. As a "lower doctrine of knowledge (*gnoseologia inferior*)", aesthetics is, however, merely the "little sister" of logic and, compared to the latter, it guarantees a less solid, less reliable and less certain knowledge of the world. Logic is, for Baumgarten, "dialectic, art of reason, analytical, sense of the true and the false, science of sciences, medicine of the mind, *organon*, light of the intellect" (Baumgarten 1973: § 9). Thus, logic, like the Platonic νόησις, is hierarchically closer to the true than sensible beliefs.

Baumgarten's analysis not only makes aesthetics an explicit and independent object of investigation but also inaugurates a model of *abstract* enquiry into beauty and art. The centrality Baumgarten grants to reason and the intellect, which have the roles, respectively, of

understanding and examining (*perspicere*), will influence German Enlightenment thinking and, in particular, Kantian enquiry.

Kant is actually critical of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (Bacin 2015: 15-33; Amoroso 1993: 21 ss.), and yet in his *Critique of Judgment*, he tries to construct an aesthetic *theory* and to build a *doctrine* of judgements of taste. Like Baumgarten, Kant thus fits into a precise systematic and rationalistic context. This vision of aesthetics develops under the theoretical sign of abstraction and of the primacy of noetic reason.

With respect to this approach, the aim of this paper is to highlight some basic features of a different aesthetic tradition that focuses on the essential relationship between *life* and its *forms*.

In the second *Untimely Meditation (On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life, 1874)*, Nietzsche quotes a letter from Goethe to Schiller (12 December 1798): "In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity" (UB II: 59)¹.

From the point of view of the "Goethe's pupil" Nietzsche (Montinari 1981) art must withdraw from the role of "lower doctrine of knowledge" and go beyond the boundaries of the transcendental doctrines of judgement of taste. Art, rather, must represent for Nietzsche "the great-

¹ The translations used in this essay are from the Cambridge Edition of Nietzsche's works. The abbreviations of Nietzsche's works used in the footnotes and in brackets in the text refer to the following writings: AC: *Der Antichrist, The Antichrist*; EH, *Ecce Homo*; FW: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, The Gay Science*; GM, *Genealogie der Moral; On the Genealogy of Morality*; GT, *Die Geburt der Tragödie, The Birth of Tragedy*; JGB: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse, Beyond Good and Evil*; M: *Morgenröthe, Daybreak*; MA I-II: *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I-II, Human, All Too Human*; UB II, *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen II, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben: Untimely meditation II, On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*; Za: *Also sprach Zarathustra, Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The works are listed with the title, shortened in the aforementioned abbreviations, followed by the number of the aphorism or the section title and the page number. When available, the translation of the posthumous fragments is also from the Cambridge Edition (*Writings from the Late Notebooks*). Nietzsche's works and posthumous fragments are, however, also identified with reference to the German standard edition by G. Colli and M. Montinari (*Kritischen Studienausgabe* [KSA] in 15 Bänden, Berlin-New York, de Gruyter, 1967 ff.). For posthumous fragments, I used the abbreviation NF (*Nachgelassene Fragmente*). The abbreviation NF is followed by the year, the number of the fragment group which the specific fragment belongs to and, in square brackets, by the number of the specific fragment.

est stimulant of life" (NF 1888-1889, 14 [120], KSA 13.299), the "pure seduction of life" (NF 1888-1889, 17 [3], KSA 13.521).

Nietzsche's aesthetics does not correspond to a theory that defines sensitive knowledge as the "little sister" of logic, nor does it propose a hierarchical cognitive model. Rather, Nietzsche's aesthetics confronts us with an indeterminacy of boundaries, encompassing not only poetry, music, figurative arts, and dance, but mainly concerning *experiences of existence and ways of life*.

For Nietzsche, every cognitive achievement is rooted in existential experience. The theoretical dimension is always intertwined with the concreteness of life: "And knowledge itself: let it be something else to others, [...] to me it is a world of dangers and victories [...]. 'Life as a means to knowledge' – with this principle in one's heart one can not only live bravely but also *live gaily and laugh gaily!*" (FW 324: 181, KSA 3.552).

Knowledge, therefore, for Nietzsche is not an abstract conceptual representation (*Ab-bildung*) but a process of formation (*Bildung*) that produces an existential transformation (*Um-bildung*) in those who experience it. How is the intrinsic and symbiotic relationship between art and life articulated in the context of Nietzsche's reflection? How do the actions of living (*erleben*) and knowing (*erkennen*) imply each other in a philosophy that is not only an abstract logical-discursive understanding, but also a "carnal" experience of life? What does Zarathustra mean when he claims that "Spirit is life that itself cuts into life"? (Za II *On the Famous Wise Men*: 80, KSA 4.134). What does it mean that the conceptually indefinable dynamic flow of life (*Leben*) – that always exceeds every form – is condensed into models, types and symbolic figures (*Lebensformen*)?

I will try, by faithfully following some passages from Nietzsche's works, to at least partially answer these complex and problematic questions. In particular, I will attempt to highlight the enigmatic richness of the relationship between art, life and form in Nietzsche's philosophy, which constitutes one of the most significant topics of his thought. What will emerge from the arguments of this article is that for Nietzsche, art, in its highest sense, corresponds to life itself as a creative experiment and an adventure of knowledge.

2. Werde, der du bist: *The art of becoming such as we are*

Art, for Nietzsche, is first and foremost a practice that addresses existence towards its success. It is an active effort that involves our psychophysical whole and enables us to shape and happily conquer ourselves. This conception of art is rooted in Nietzsche's exhortation "Become such as you are", which, in turn, refers to Pindar's second Pythian Ode (γένοι, οἷος ἑσσι μαθών, "Become such as you are, having learned what that is." (Pindar 1997: 238-239; Gentili 2009: 45)².

This paradoxical formulation seems to allude to the future planning (becoming) of something that has already happened (what one is). It is an invitation to realise one's own life in all its potential and is therefore a call for liberation and emancipation from any doctrine that deadens existence, that *hinders* life. Art is thus understood by Nietzsche as a creative and stimulating attitude that restores life to its fullness. It is the expression of a feeling of power, of vital richness, of euphoric ecstasy and intoxication (*Rausch*). Against all forms of renunciation, escape from life, *décadence* and pessimism, art transfigures and transvalues illness into health, the negative into the affirmative, impotence into power and weakness into vigour.

The close link between art and life in Nietzsche's philosophy is what distinguishes the latter from the metaphysics of the "Hinterworldly" (*Hinterweltlern*, Za I: 20-22, KSA 4.35-38). For Nietzsche, these are the devotees of the "beyond", "the Despisers of the Body" (Za I: 22-24, KSA 4.39-41), the sufferers of the soul, "the Preachers of death" (Za I: 31-33, KSA 4.55-57), the weary, the contemplatives and the resigned. Art, therefore, as an explicit affirmation of the sensory world is a counter-movement (*Gegenbewegung*) to all asceticism and sedation of the senses. The renouncement of the body and the rejection of the sensitive world correspond, according to Nietzsche, to the mystical culmination of Schopenhauer's philosophy, namely, the negation of the will (*noluntas*).

So understood, art also rejects Kant's formalist and imposing ethics, summed up in the categorical imperative "thou shalt". In the first chapter of *Thus spoke Zarathustra* "On the Three Metamorphoses" a "scaly" and "gleaming golden" dragon stands between the symbolic

² This quote is emblematic for Nietzsche and recurs in several passages of his work, see NF 1876-1878, 19 [40], KSA 8.340; FW 270: 152, KSA 3.519; Id. 335: 189, KSA 3.563; NF 1881-1882, 11 [297], KSA 9.555; Za IV *The Honey Sacrifice*: 192, KSA 4, 297.

figures of the camel and the lion. Upon every scale of this big dragon, “‘thou shalt!’ gleams like gold” (Za I *On the Three Metamorphoses*: 17, KSA 4.30). The moral law, that is the unconditional and a priori imperative postulated by Kant, represents for Nietzsche an obstacle in the path of self-realisation. This path leads from passive obedience and devotion to age-old values – symbolised by the camel’s patient and enduring spirit – to the free creative innocence of the child.

If “becoming such as one is” implies giving to life a beautiful form, just as the artist does with his work, the intrinsically metamorphic dynamic of the spirit evoked by Zarathustra provides some important indications of Nietzsche’s concept of “form”. The form (*Gestalt*) of life does not correspond at all to an ἰδέα, to a substantial essence that escapes becoming, but to a *dynamic* phenomenon in constant formation (*Formierung-Gestaltung*).

There is another famous and enigmatic passage from *Zarathustra* in which Nietzsche shows that artistic self-realisation is not a goal – a τέλος – that can be reached once and for all. Addressing the crowd in the hope of enlightening them about the nature of the Overman, Zarathustra declares: “One must still have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star” (Za *Prologue* § 5: 9, KSA 4.19). The “chaos”, which precedes the fixed form of reality, is the expression of the indeterminate region of “possibility”. It represents the only space for the freedom to “become such as we are”. In this fatal exposure to randomness, to τύχη, it is possible to mould ourselves, aware that the voluntary design of the human form has no pre-established guarantee of success. What is in our power is only to capture the chance in order to artistically give our finitude a provisional form. “To give birth to a dancing star” does not mean to arrive at a firm acquisition of oneself but rather to live in the openness of the possibility. It means playing with the nuances of becoming, mastering and not suffering “the chaos in oneself”. As beings constitutively in formation and exposed to destiny, humans are, for Nietzsche, “*the still undetermined animals*” (JGB 62: 56, KSA 5.81).

Since Nietzsche denies that subjectivity has any metaphysical foundation, the fluid dimension of the ego gains and acquires itself only in a constant reshaping and adaptation, in a perspectival and hermeneutic relationship with the world. Nietzsche therefore does not speak of an “I” (*Ich*) but of a plural self (*Selbst*). This plurality of the self is sometimes subjected to impulses that weaken it; sometimes it is increased by impulses that enliven it.

To “become such as we are” does not imply a definitive and stable achievement of a monolithic and univocal personality. It is not a question of corresponding to a metaphysical subjectivity that underpins our external and superficial attributes. Rather, shaping ourselves means increasing and expanding our psychophysical *Selbst*, which can only fully experience the infinite richness of its potential through art.

How much artistic triumph in the sense of power [...] And whenever a man says, he is always the same in his joy as he pleased! Artist, he enjoys himself as a power that he enjoys the lie as his power [...]. The art and nothing but art! It is the great facilitator of life, the great seducer to life, the great stimulant of life. Art as the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life, as the anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, Anti-Nihilistic par excellence. (NF 1888-1889, 17 [3], KSA 13.521)

Nietzsche denies that his philosophy is devoted to happiness in a petit bourgeois sense (“What matters my happiness? It is poverty and filth, and a pitiful contentment” [Za Prologue § 3: 6, KSA 4.15]; “What does happiness matter! [...] ‘I haven’t strived for happiness for a long time, I strive for my work’” [Za IV *The Honey Sacrifice*: 191, KSA 4.295]). Yet, for Nietzsche, the task of “becoming such as we are” corresponds to a happy artistic self-realisation and a celebration of existence. From this point of view, the “vast”, free, healthy, overwhelming and fulfilled man “must be the born apologist of life and his philosophy *eo ipso* must be an apotheosis of it, since life, to itself, cannot but always say ‘yes’” (Andreas-Salomé 2009: 129).

“What is life?” Nietzsche asks himself in *The Gay Science*, and responds: “Life – that is: continually shedding something that wants to die; Life – that is: being cruel and inexorable against anything that is growing weak and old in us [...]” (FW 26: 50, KSA 3.400). “What is happiness?” Nietzsche asks again in *The Antichrist*, and answers: “The feeling that power is growing, that some resistance has been overcome. *Not* contentedness, but more power; *not* peace, but war; *not* virtue, but prowess”. (AC 2: 4, KSA 6.170). In a contemporary fragment, Nietzsche writes: “Everything that lives is exactly what shows most clearly that it does everything possible not to preserve itself but to become *more...*” (NF 1888-1889 14 [121], KSA 13.301).

The exhortation to “become such as we are” does not therefore imply either an adaptation to one’s innate subjective essence or an ascetic denial of life. It is rather an invitation to exalt life and to promote its expansion, free from obligations and sanctions, beyond good and

evil. Nietzsche's new morality can then be seen as an "aesthetics of living"³. That is to say, as a chant to all that enhances life by guiding it towards its full realisation.

In the context of Nietzschean thought as an apology for life, schematically separating the theory of knowledge from the sphere of ethics and logic from aesthetics is therefore completely impossible. The philosopher, for Nietzsche, can never be a pure theoretician, who parts himself from existence by observing it as if it were an inert and indifferent object of study. The philosopher must not be a "technician of reason", who coldly dissects life as a scientist would do with cellular tissue under a microscope or with a corpse on an autopsy table. The *Erkennender*, the man of knowledge, is rather the advocate of a genuine will to live: he is the one who acts, creates and experiences. Similar to the Argonaut Theseus, the philosopher is a lover of journeys and dangers, of raids and of "the beautiful risk" (καλὸς κίνδυνος, Plato, *Phaed.* 114 d) inherent in any authentic experience of thought. This is why Zarathustra decides to entrust his own abysmal message of eternal return to sailors, "bold searchers, researchers" (Za III *On the Vision and the Riddle*: 124, KSA 4.197).

Nietzsche's thought – from his childhood diaries to the last "notes of madness" – is immune to any objectivising aspiration and aims to recompose the gap between life and thought inaugurated by Socratism and perpetrated by a two-thousand-year-old Platonic-Christian tradition. According to Nietzsche, it is precisely Socratism, which establishes Western philosophy as a symptom of *décadence*, that mortifies the stimulating power of art, which was instead fully operative in the archaic Greek world and, in particular, in the tragic sphere. In the young Nietzsche's writings, the rebirth of the "Dionysian" is therefore crucial in order to reconstitute the relationship between art and life,

³ The meaning of "aesthetics of living", as I will argue later, is understood here as a paradoxical a-moral morality. This aesthetics is characterized for Nietzsche by an "overflowing health", by an "abundance of existence" (GT *An Attempt at Self-Criticism*: 4, KSA 1.12) similar to "the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life" (GT 1: 17, KSA 1.29). Nietzsche also refers to the "high spirits", to the "unrest" and to the "gratitude" that "flows forth incessantly", linking these expressions to the celebration of the "Saturnalia of a mind" (FW *Preface to the second edition*: 3, KSA 3.345). Described this way, Nietzsche's aesthetics of living differs in many respects from that proposed by Foucault, which is *ethically* connoted as practical philosophy.

which had been disrupted by dialectical, metaphysical and theological traditions.

3. *“As a saving sorceress with the power to heal”. Art and life in the sign of Dionysus*

Ever since *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), the theme of *expansio animi* (*et corporis*) through art, which enhances the life of the creative artist, has been linked to the peculiar sensation of “intoxication”, which is one of the main attributes of the god Dionysus. In the preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, dedicated to Richard Wagner, Nietzsche shows that the basic intention of his book is to solve “a grave problem for Germany”, namely, the problem of evaluating art. In fact, art must once again become a central issue, in contrast to the established tradition that sees art as “an amusing sideshow (*lustiges Nebenbei*), a readily dispensable jingling of fool’s bells (*Schellengeklingel*) in the face of the ‘gravity of existence’” (GT *Foreword to Richard Wagner*: 14, KSA 1.24).

Nietzsche stands against the mercantile mentality of the age of industrial positivism, against the demeaning and devaluing view of art in the age “of worry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to ‘get everything done’ at once” (M *Preface*: 5, KSA 3.17). He declares his own “untimely” battle, alongside his master Wagner, to assign to art the essential function of a “true metaphysical activity”. This polemic against the modern decadence of art is, in some respects, an inheritance and a late fruit of Romanticism, which is still a point of reference for the young Nietzsche. Before Nietzsche, Friedrich Schlegel, in his work *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1797), also criticised the Enlightenment view of art as a “pretty childish game” (Schlegel 2001: 100). Yet, in comparison to the authors of German Romanticism, Nietzsche does not simply mean to emancipate the aesthetic problem of the Greek world from prejudiced intellectualistic or moralistic interpretations. He rather wants to indicate from the outset that the central theme of the book is art, its meaning, its function and its relation to life (see Ugolini 2007: 39).

The Birth of Tragedy is conceived, right from the first chapter as a contribution to “the science of aesthetics”. This reference to science, linked to “logical insight”, is placed by Nietzsche in close relation to the direct and immediate intuition of life. Nietzsche therefore fundamentally rejects the possibility of a “scientific essay” on aesthetics based on cognitive premises that are distinct from intuitive ones. He

fundamentally rejects a model of knowledge based solely on the abstract concept. This criticism of the one-sided logical-conceptual approach has its roots in Romanticism (Schelling, Schlegel, Görres, Humboldt) and in the philosophy of Schopenhauer and is primarily directed at the philosophical tradition ranging from Socrates to Hegel, which had considered art as a form of fallacious knowledge to be overcome in the concept.

The theory of the duality of Apollonian and Dionysian impulses is indeed described by Nietzsche as the result of an immediate intuition. This intuitive knowledge arises from the simple observation of the analogies between art and nature, that is from the polarities of male/female, day/night, life/death, positivity/negativity. The idea of aesthetics as a systematic discipline aimed at defining the purely cognitive role of art is again criticised here. Nietzsche rejects the traditional rationalistic method and promotes a reconsolidation of the link between art and life, aesthetics and physiology, creativity and the psychology of the artist. Nietzsche's approach is not philological, detached and objective but sympathetic, empirical, anthropological and existential towards the authentic essence of ancient phenomena and, in particular, towards the tragic.

In *The Dionysian Vision of the World*, Nietzsche associates the Apollonian and Dionysian with the two "natural artistic states" (i.e. physiological) of dreaming and intoxication. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, this intoxication refers to the capacity of art to revive and enliven man in the face of pain. Art has the power to stimulate life and redeem man from the anguished feeling of loss before the terrible presence of pain and the senselessness of death. It stimulates life by clearly rejecting ascetic resignation and, at the same time, it does not ignore the terrors and atrocities of existence but is in touch with the dark and contradictory background that is the source of pain. What Nietzsche means by "Dionysian", then, is the human soul's ability to deal with the most dramatic contradictions without succumbing and, indeed, to rejoice in the extreme laceration.

This dynamic is clearly expressed in a passage from *Twilight of the Idols* that refers directly to *The Birth of Tragedy*

Saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems; the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the sacrifice of its highest types – that is what I called Dionysian [...]. Not to escape horror and pity, not to cleanse yourself of a dangerous affect by violent discharge [...]: but rather, over and

above all horror and pity, so that *you yourself may* be the eternal joy in becoming, – the joy that includes even the eternal *joy in negating...* (GD *What I owe the Ancients*: 228, KSA 6.160)

Already in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche thus anticipates, through the Dionysian symbol, his own mature doctrine of *amor fati*. Loving destiny means “saying yes (*Jasagen*)” to life, justifying life even in its nocturnal, terrible, problematic and abysmal aspects. The man who is capable of radical “*pessimism of strength*”, “enjoys evil raw, undiluted, he finds *meaningless evil* the most interesting form” (NF 1887-1888, 10 [21], KSA 12.467).

Nietzsche opposes the schemes of modern aesthetics with a metaphysics of art: “For only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*” (GT 5: 33, KSA 1.47). Only in the act of artistic creation – understood first and foremost as the shaping of one’s own existence – do the suffering of the world, the senselessness of the tragic and the disorientation before death find meaning. Nietzsche thus provides a justification for existence based on artistic values. Man, he writes, sees

only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; [...]. Here, at this moment of supreme danger for the will, *art* approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live; [...]. The dithyramb’s chorus of satyrs is the saving act of Greek art [...]. (GT 7: 40, KSA 1.57)

Only by artistically transfiguring oneself into a follower of Dionysus does it become possible to sublimate the tragic into innocent and artistic play. But what does it actually mean to shape and constitute one’s life in a Dionysian sense? A clue can be found in the pages of *Ecce Homo* dedicated to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “One of the preconditions of a *Dionysian* task is, most crucially, the hardness of a hammer, the *joy even in destruction*. The imperative ‘become hard!’, the deepest certainty that *all creators are hard* is the true sign of a Dionysian nature”. (EH *Thus spoke Zarathustra* § 8: 134, KSA 6.349).

A superficial reading of this passage suggests a naive and ideological image of a “muscular” Nietzsche, who martially indicates the heroic path of “hardness”. A passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Za *On Old and New Tablets* § 19: 167, KSA 4.261), quoted by Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*, refutes this ideological interpretation and describes

The most encompassing soul, which can run and stray and roam farthest within itself; [...]. The soul that loves being, but submerges into becoming; the having soul that *wants* to rise to willing and desiring – the soul that flees itself and catches up to itself in the widest circle; the wisest soul which folly persuades most sweetly – the one that loves itself most, in which all things have their current and recurrent and ebb and flow. (EH *Thus spoke Zarathustra* § 6: 130, KSA 6.345)

Commenting on this passage, Nietzsche writes: “*But this is the concept of Dionysus himself*” (ibid.).

Nietzsche therefore does not exalt “hardness” in a violent and overbearing sense nor does he exalt “wild” lyricism and orgiastic unrestraint. Rather, he invites balance and celebrates the soul’s ability to contain contradiction in its fruitfully unresolved tension. Nietzsche’s message is therefore aimed at a harmonious and, at the same time, dynamic governance of drives and at a mastery of the psycho-physical self. As proof of this, Nietzsche’s words are extremely clear:

The psychological problem apparent in the Zarathustra type is how someone who to an unprecedented degree says no and *does* no to everything everyone has said yes to so far, - how somebody like this can nevertheless be the opposite of a no-saying spirit; how a spirit who carries everything that is most difficult about fate, a destiny of a task, can nonetheless be the lightest, spinning out into the beyond – Zarathustra is a dancer –; how someone with the hardest, the most terrible insight into reality, who has thought “the most abysmal thought”, can nonetheless see it *not* as an objection to existence, not even to its eternal return, – but instead find one more reason in it for *himself to be* the eternal yes to all things, ‘the incredible, boundless yes-saying, amen-saying’... ‘I still carry my blessed yea-saying into all abysses’... *But this is the concept of Dionysus once more.* (EH *Thus spoke Zarathustra* § 6: 130, KSA 6.345-346)

Conceiving oneself as a Dionysian work of art thus means affirming life by divining all its forms and therefore possessing a soul that is sufficiently vast and balanced to “happily” contain the conflicting nature of existence.

It is precisely in this sense that Zarathustra speaks of the *Übermensch* as a “sea” so vast that it can take in and absorb every “negative” product, every dross of *décadence* without being polluted by it: “Truly, mankind is a polluted stream. One has to be a sea to take in a polluted stream without becoming unclean”. (Za *Prologue* § 3: 6, KSA 4.15). The Overman thus symbolises the pure and absolute “saying yes” to life and, at the same time, expresses the fundamental Dionysian capacity to play

freely with the masks of existence without ever being subject to any of them⁴.

4. *Mask, symbol and Lebensform*

The theme of the mask (*Larvenmotiv*, Braun 2009: 36) is a major point in Nietzsche's aesthetics. This is a crucial issue for understanding the relationship between art and life, as the ability to dissimulate (*Verstellungskunst*) and be a good actor corresponds to the art of shaping oneself. The aristocratic type is able to dance playfully, ironically, gracefully with the multitudes of his own self. It is only from "the problem of the actor" that Nietzsche can approach "the dangerous concept of the 'artist'" (FW 361: 225. KSA 3.608). A strong and integral nature is characterised, according to Nietzsche, by adaptability, by radical eclecticism, by "the inner longing for a role and mask, for an appearance" (*Schein*, *ibid.*). A "well-turned-out person" (*wohlgerathner Mensch*, *EH Why I am so Wise* § 2: 77, KSA 6.267) will then be the artist of the self, the one who does not succumb to the singularity of form and who is not a slave to the "trivial mask" (Gurisatti 2012: 15-45; *Id.* 2016: 366-373). The trivial mask imposes a single role on existence, to which Nietzsche opposes the fruitfulness of what is "multiform", "mendacious", "diverse, hypocritical, artificial, and opaque" (JGB 291: 173, KSA 5.235).

⁴ "Saying yes" to life does not mean indifferent acceptance of all forms of life, nor does it presuppose a lazy and apathetic acceptance of the equivalence of perspectives. Such an acceptance would neutralise Zarathustra's (and Nietzsche's) critical spirit: it would defuse his ability to determine differences between positive and negative figures of existence. On the contrary, both Nietzsche and Zarathustra elaborate constructive and strong alternatives. The creative genius, the free spirit, the aristocrat and the man of knowledge are symbolic personifications that contrast with the models of *décadence* such as the ascetic priest, the melancholic, the magician, the philistine of culture and the last man. Embracing wholeness in difference, distinguishing without moralising, "rigorous thinking, cautious judgement and consistent reasoning" (MA I 265: 125, KSA 2.220) are then the characteristics of the *Übermensch*, who welcomes life and fully grasps its plural iridescences, nuances and "differences of degree" (NF 1888-1889, 14 [65], KSA 13.250). The Overman therefore welcomes life and grasps its differences without, however, discriminating, judging, selecting and rigidifying his experiences through a violent will.

“Faithfulness to the earth” and the sanctification of appearance thus appear to be fundamental practices for emancipating oneself on the one hand from faith in the “true world”, understood as the metaphysical beyond and, on the other, from faith in the subjective essence, in the hypostasis of the ego, hence Nietzsche’s invitation “to stop bravely at the surface, the fold, the skin” (FW *Preface to the Second Edition* § 4: 8, KSA 3.352).

The Overman does not exhaust his creative exuberance and his transformative energy in any of his masks: he freely and artistically masters them. Nietzsche’s entire philosophy is populated by masks, that is to say, by *dramatis personae* that personify certain thoughts and certain *forms of life* (*Lebensformen*). The use of the mask as an expression of human types and styles of existence reaches its zenith in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche’s “life forms” (the Dionysian artist, the romantic hero, the Alexandrian learned, the criminal, the tightrope walker, the magician, etc.) can be seen as representations and aesthetic symbols (*Sinn-bilder*) of life in its changing forms and facets (Giacomelli 2012: 19 ss. Id. 2020: 18 ss.). Since *The Birth of Tragedy*, the figures of the genius, the satyr, the poet, and Homer, Archilochus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Socrates themselves represent conceptual personifications (*Typisierungen*, Stegmeier 1994: 89, 107). Similarly, from *Human, All Too Human*, the traveller, the free spirit, the “man of knowledge” and the “good European” represent the modes of existence of uprooting, scepticism and the symbolic personifications of suspicion towards metaphysics and traditional morality.

A dense and colourful set of symbolic-allegorical figures then composes the *grand opéra* of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In this great symphonic poem, the multiple dreamscapes allow for the proliferation of scenic elements and actors such as the holy old man, the clown-jester, the tightrope walker, the gobbler, the diviner, the dwarf-mole, the tarantulas, the market flies, the voluntary beggar, the shadow and so on. These symbolic figures represent parts of Zarathustra’s plural soul. As an Iranian prophet, Dionysian philosopher and parody of Christ, Zarathustra is merely a name for a plurality of personalities and perspectives (see Pasqualotto 1985: 379). Zarathustra’s polyphonic soul is thus tempted, perturbed, nauseated, afflicted or elevated by its own inner components, its own masks.

Even late works – such as the *Genealogy of Morality* – are animated by anthropological figures and psycho-cultural categories. These “forms of life” are functional in an investigation of the various approaches to

existence, to the critique of culture, and to the archaeological reconstruction of the origin of moral values. The figures of the master and the slave, the aristocratic nobleman, the “blond beast”, the Jewish and the Christian priests thus provide Nietzsche with a means of conveying his critique of traditional beliefs.

The symbol is the consistent expression of the riddle (*Rätzel*). Since it cannot be reduced to a single meaning, the symbol guarantees life’s plurality without betraying its dynamism. Nietzsche’s aesthetics thus appear as a large theatre stage on which the forms of life follow one another and take shape. The philosopher refers to “ideal-types” and “existential paradigms” not in order to crystallise life in static images or archetypes but to provide a plastic and extemporaneous face for the infinite number of human cases.

Nietzsche develops a conscious process of stylisation and simplification, a *reductio ad simile* of forms of existence characterised by a similar degree of power. The “type” – that is, the form of life – of the “slave” condenses and symbolically unites the “weak”, sick, submissive singularities destined to subjugation and marked by the “herd instinct” (*Heerdeninstinkt*). The “type” of the “well-turned-out person”, on the other hand, represents a condition of physiological hubris linked to “a powerful physicality, a blossoming, rich, even effervescent good health” (GM I: 17, KSA 5.266). This particular active and creative type is also able to shape its own values and morals. He is the “free spirit” who denies any predictability of life by playing innocently with its forms. References to Homeric, Roman or Germanic nobility thus become, for Nietzsche, a pretext for determining a *Rang-ordnung*, a hierarchical arrangement of *Lebensformen*. The provisional hierarchy of these “forms of life” is based on the great psychological generalisation between the active-creator type, which claims a lordly, playful and artistic right to life, and the passive-reactive, weak, cowardly-plebeian type (κακός-δειλός, GM I, § 5: 14, KSA 5.263). The latter passive type is the unhappy wretch who submissively suffers the impositions and prescriptions of an externally imposed morality (see Giacomelli 2015: 55-84).

The symbol, as a sensitive expression of the “form of life”, represents a condensation of the will to power into an image, that is, a provisional declination of the flow of becoming into a form. This interpretation supports the thesis that Nietzsche’s aesthetics goes beyond the traditional connotation of “the science of beauty in the arts”. Rather, this vision of aesthetics assumes precise existential options and models of existence. Nietzsche’s dynamic worldview is temporarily fixed in his

changing masks, which, for a moment, give a face to certain intertwined forces. The will to power is condensed extemporaneously into a form. The “form of life” is thus a symbolic manifestation of the *Wille zur Macht*, a provisional expression of the dynamic flow of becoming.

Human types in Nietzsche can describe reality (as in the case of the priest, the historian and the journalist) or hint at future possibilities (as in the case of the “Higher Man” or the Overman). In the second case, Nietzsche shows the forms in which man rises above himself. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in particular, it is possible to recognise exemplary images by which man orient himself, or negative images that he avoids, or guiding images that show him the way to the Overman (See Jaspers 1981: 19 f.).

5. *Wisdom, dissipation and seduction. The plurality of the ars vivendi*

As I have tried to point out, Nietzsche uses anthropological-existential figures in order to individualise and concretise a specific gradient of power (*Macht*) and thus to provide a visible “face” for specific concretions of practices and values. These “forms of life” seem to oscillate between exemplary and deterrent models, between redemption and melancholy, between light and darkness. And yet, for Nietzsche, there are certain symbolic figures that appear both luminous and obscure at the same time. This is the case, for example, of the so-called *Verbrecher-Typus*, that is, the “criminal” paradigm. It represents an “artistically” higher form of existence than the *bonhomme*. The criminal is, in fact, a rebellious spirit freed from the “bad conscience” of guilt, from the binding rules of the norm, which clog up vital energies and prevent them from being released. The *Verbrecher-Typus* represents the happy exception resulting from archaic aristocratic immoralism. He enjoys “freedom from every social constraint” (GM I, § 11: 23, KSA 5.274) and is akin to those “noble, powerful, dominating” ones who “return to the innocent conscience of the wild beast, as exultant monsters, who perhaps go away having committed a hideous succession of murder, arson, rape and torture” (Ibid.).

This condition of audacity, unpredictability and cruelty is close to drunken Dionysian madness. It is an experience proper to an aesthetics of existence that also contemplates excess, negativity and sympathy for dissipation. It would, however, be naive and misleading, as noted above, to unbalance the relationship between art and life in Nietzsche’s

thought unilaterally towards Dionysian wildness and exuberance. The idea that Nietzsche is merely the glorifier of an unbridled vitalism and the celebrator of conflict and warrior individualism has now been widely refuted⁵.

Nietzsche's theoretical proposal is therefore not reducible to an apology for indifferent perspectivism and Dionysian intoxication. Nor does Nietzsche's philosophy correspond to the critique of the so-called "ascetic ideal". In the *Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche shows what peremptorily denies the possibility of conceiving of oneself as a work of art. These deleterious elements are pessimism, resignation, passive nihilism, "sickness, tiredness, distemper, exhaustion, impoverishment of life [...] 'will to negate life', a secret instinct for annihilation, a principle of decay, belittlement" (GT *Attempt at Self-Criticism* § 5: 9, KSA 1.18).

Platonic transcendent metaphysics, Christian morality, the Buddhist negation of desire and Schopenhauer's asceticism constitute different forms of liberation *from* life. These forms of self-denial are embodied in the human type of the ascetic priest, who is "the incarnate wish for being otherwise, being elsewhere" (GM III § 13: 88, KSA 5.366).

To this peculiar *Lebensform*, Nietzsche certainly opposes the types of the Dionysian artist and of the aristocratic-dominator, embodying "the pathos of nobility and distance" (GM I § 2: 12, KSA 5.259), which, however, to be such, require a particular discipline and empowering capacity. This capacity does not correspond to quietist asceticism and self-denial as *noluntas* but to *ἄσκησις* (*askēsis*) as a positive, affirmative and immanent exercise. *Askēsis* is therefore a vital practice, useful for psychophysical health and aimed at self-government and self-care⁶.

⁵ Among the more clueless and ideological interpretations are included Mussolini 1908/2006; Baeumler 1931/1983; Rosenberg 1934, Oehler 1935; Kriek 1935.

⁶ A recent essay (Lucci 2020: 11-148) traces the plurality of meanings of *askēsis* in Nietzsche's thought from the writing of *The Dionysian Vision of the World* (1870) to *The Antichrist* (1888) and the contemporary posthumous fragments. Lucci dwells, in particular, on the third Essay of the *Genealogy of Morality* (1887). Also in this context, within the vast constellation of meanings in which ascetic ideals are articulated for Nietzsche, an important distinction emerges between "negative-passive" and "positive-affirmative" asceticism. Passive asceticism is understood as hostility to life and is typical of the ascetic priest, while active asceticism is understood as the ability to manage and discipline one's psycho-physical energies. One's will to power must not simply be unleashed and let loose but must be channelled, cultivated and managed appropriately.

This kind of discipline does not deny life but, on the contrary, shapes it towards its best form by directing it to “become such as it is”. *Askēsis* has its roots in the Hellenistic-Roman world and corresponds, among the Epicurean, Stoic and Neo-Socratic schools, to the practices of αὐτάρκεια (*autarcheia*, independence), ἐγκράτεια (*enkrateia*, freedom-autonomy), ἀδιαφορία (*adiaphoria*, detachment-indifference), σωφροσύνη (*sophrosyne*, moderation), παρασκευή (*paraskeuē*, equipment), ἀταραξία (*ataraxia*, imperturbability). The Dionysian artist, if he does not want to lapse into indifferent relativism (cfr. Gerhardt 1989: 263 ff.; Gori-Stellino 2014: 101-129) or uncontrolled intoxication, must be his own master. For Nietzsche, the artist is therefore the director of his own masks, the strategist of his own symbolic game, the choreographer of his own dance. Nietzsche opposes the dimension of temperance, self-mastery, self-government, moderation, dietetics and shrewdness to the Platonic-Christian path of liberation from the body (see Gurisatti 2012: 15-45; Id., 2015: 181-210; Id., 2016: 355-377). *Wisdom* is thus considered the vital alternative to asceticism and self-sacrifice.

Askēsis, as an “exercise of discipline”, can be considered a practice aimed at educating and shaping man. The “well-turned-out” man possesses the characteristics of serenity, good humour, moderation, detachment, prudence and caution which can be summed up in the Hellenistic-Roman virtue of φρόνησις (*phronēsis*, wisdom). This wisdom will flourish again, in the forms of *sagesse*, *retraite*, *charme* and *politesse*, in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century French moralism (Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Chamfort and Fontenelle. See Campioni 2001: 6 ff.).

For Nietzsche, the wisdom underlying the philosophies of Epicurus, Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius is the opposite of the Platonic tension towards transcendence. And yet, this form of psycho-physical exercise and worldly asceticism does not neutralise the tragic-Dionysian character of existence, nor does it sever Nietzsche’s link with the innocent heroic violence of the archaic world. The fullness of life of the aristocratic warrior, the tragic pathos of the Dionysian artist and the self-control of the wise man who cultivates *askēsis* give meaning to each other. The “predatory” and dominant type can only succeed in its growth thanks to a capacity for control that does not succumb to *ressentiment* but allows the will to power to develop in a balanced and harmonious way. Similarly, the type of the Dionysian artist does not succumb to complete self-forgetfulness thanks to a rare and nonchalant capacity for equidistance from extremes and thanks to the ability to

smile joyfully at destiny. This dimension of self-mastery, self-care and self-control coexists with Dionysian excess, preventing the latter from degenerating into a disturbing and uncontrollable enthusiasm. Perhaps the most eloquent expression for this tension between control and excess is the oxymoron “wild wisdom” (Za II *The Dance Song*: 84, KSA 4.140).

The connection between Nietzsche’s aesthetics as an art of living and the ethical and aesthetic shaping of the self, characteristic of the Hellenistic schools and Roman Stoicism, clearly refers to the studies of the late Foucault. As is well known, texts such as *The Use of Pleasure*, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* and *The Courage of Truth* are focused on philosophy as an “art of living” (τέχνη του βίου, *tekhnē tou biou*) and on “self-care” (επιμέλεια έαυτου, *epimeleia heautou*). (See Foucault 1985; Id., 2005; Id., 2011).

The comparison between Nietzsche’s aesthetics and Foucault’s theme of “self-care” displays some problematic elements⁷. According to Claus Zittel (Zittel 2003: 103-123), these problems relate to Foucault’s interpretation of the ancient world but, above all, to the “perspectival” nature of Nietzsche’s psychology. Both aesthetically and psychologically, Zittel considers the classical concepts of “form”, “figure” and “self-formation” to be unacceptable to Nietzsche. These traditional concepts would, in fact, presuppose an art of living based on the criteria of identity, unity and essence, hence the difficulty of combining Nietzsche’s perspectival psychology with an aesthetics of existence, understood as a revival of ancient models of “good living” (Aristotelian wisdom, Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism). In the context of the Hellenistic schools – as in the case of the Stoics – the ethical dimension, according to Zittel, is not really centred on the self, which must, if anything, be transcended (Zittel 2003: 103). In the Hellenic world, moreover, ethics would not guarantee independence and the personal freedom at the core of the voluntary self-formation emphasised by Foucault. Personal choice would rather lie

⁷ It is Pierre Hadot, in particular, who criticises a lack of philological accuracy in Foucault’s interpretation of the ancient world. Foucault’s interpretation implies for Hadot an overestimation of the aesthetic dimension in relation to the Greco-Roman concept of “good living”. In addition, Hadot sees in Foucault’s reading a certain tendency to view the classics with excessively modern eyes. (Hadot 1995: 225; Id., 2002: 199 ff.; Detel 1998: 78, 275).

in the exclusive adherence to *one* form of life, which Stoicism, Epicureanism and Cynicism establish as conforming to reason.

Only by unhinging this dynamic of uniformity to a canonical and pre-established model – that is, the classical model of beautiful form – and thus depriving ethics as *Lebenskunst* of any foundation – can art and life find a point of fusion for Nietzsche. Only if one does not understand self-conquest in the synthetic terms of a complete self-interpretation, self-conquest, self-determination and self-legislation is it possible to disrupt the assumption of a static equivalence and uniformity between the unity of life and the unity of the work of art.

The very nature of Nietzsche's psychology, claims Zittel, reduces the unity of the person to a "fable" (see NF 1884-85, 37 [4], KSA 11.576-579) and defines the conscious ego as the superficial result of the blind play of drives. Nietzsche thus seems to reject the possibility of an ethics of conscious and autonomous self-modelling, that is an ethics of voluntary self-government. Consciousness, as a secondary phenomenon and a consequence of the struggle between instincts, should wisely and artistically shape life, but it always appears to be subject to the relationship between the drives. Understood in this way, consciousness only deludes itself into believing that it dominates agonial relations, which are, in fact, absolutely primary to it.

In short, if the individual is a grossly falsifying abstraction, if the subject and consciousness are merely names attributed for pragmatic reasons to conglomerates of forces with a transitory and occasional status, the possibility of freely cultivating and shaping one's own self-consciousness appears drastically limited.

Referring to Schopenhauer's comparison between will and intellect, which is that between the "master" and the "servant", Nietzsche often compares consciousness to a ruler who has no knowledge of what is going on in his kingdom: "However far a man may go in self-knowledge, nothing however can be more incomplete than his image of the totality of *drives* which constitute his being" (M 119: 74, KSA 3.111; see FW 333: 185-186, KSA 3.558 f.). The interactions that take place in the physiological sphere therefore remain largely opaque to consciousness: "Behind the consciousness the drives are at work" (*hinter dem Bewußtsein arbeiten die Triebe*, NF 1884-85: 39 [6], KSA 11.621, transl. by ours). It is precisely for this reason that a revival of the Classical-Hellenistic ideal of an ethics and aesthetics that aim at the harmonious unity of form and content and at self-legislation appears problematic in Nietzsche. Consciousness, which deludes itself into believing that it is "ruler at the

head of a commonwealth” inevitably ignores “the individual functions and even malfunctions of the community” (NF 1885: 40 [21], KSA 11.638). Consciousness merely chooses and makes clear and intelligible a selection of simplified and thus *distorted* experiences.

Even the self, which, according to Foucault, one should be able to master, seems in Nietzsche to withdraw from the domain of consciousness and ego and to rule over the latter in an inscrutable way. The self does not correspond at all to consciousness but is “a powerful commander, an unknown wise” that lives in the body and *is* the body (*Za On the Despisers of the Body*: 23, KSA 4.40). For Nietzsche, there seems to be no possibility for a conscious and formative activity to intervene with the “self” in an ordering and harmonising way.

In the concluding part of his critical contribution, Zittel points out the problematic nature of comparing the peculiar structure of a work of art to the ethical dimension. The specifically aesthetic narrative seems to possess a language, a form and an internal structure that cannot represent models of behaviour, except in terms of a distant analogy. The flexible and open character of literary narrative, for example, embraces spaces of freedom and contemplates ranges of action that are completely excluded from the particular narrative form of the individual’s life. The aesthetic text can express abrupt interruptions, continuous changes of perspective, marked inconsistencies and even self-destruction (see Zittel 2003: 120). Translating these dynamics coherently into the ethical sphere seems to be dangerous or even impossible. It is therefore no coincidence that some scholars of the aesthetics of existence, such as Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre, promote a strategically selective vision of art. They would seek aesthetic models for ethics on the basis of linear coherence and narrative unity:

Significantly, the choice of examples does not fall on Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, but rather on works from classical antiquity or on the realistic novel. MacIntyre favours Jane Austen and explicitly rejects the narrative style of Kafka, whose novels he rejects as incomprehensible. In order for Nussbaum to use Henry James’ novels as a model of ethical behaviour, they must first be cleansed of their abysmal amoral inscrutability. (Zittel 2003: 121, transl. by ours; see Nussbaum 1990; MacIntyre 1988)

I will try to respond, in a nutshell, to these critical remarks. One might note, firstly, that following the path of practical wisdom and the fusion of ethics and aesthetics does not imply an attempt to dispose of

one's life completely and consciously by stylising it in unity. Rather, wisdom is about the ability to manage the plurality of life and the profusion of its meanings so as not to be passively subjected to the dominance (*Herrschaft*) of impulses. Consciousness, in Nietzsche, is undoubtedly something secondary and derivative, but, nevertheless, we are able to shape our own selves. To avoid such an exercise in self-formation in the name of an absolute and ungovernable primacy of blind impulses that control the sphere of consciousness entails the risk of chaos and granting legitimacy to any action. If Nietzsche simply sanctioned the impotence of practical reason and conscience, that is, the impossibility of intervening in the impulses to dominate them, he would, in fact, allow for any violent, criminal or insane attitude.

There are, moreover, several passages in Nietzsche's work in which the philosopher does not presuppose a coincidence between the sphere of works of art and the sphere of life, nor, consequently, the need for art to adapt to life in order to be exported and translated into the ethical sphere (FW 299: 169-170, KSA 3.538; GM III, §§ 1, 7, 9, 11, 26, 27. KSA 5.339 f; EH *Why I write such good books* § 3: 103-104, KSA 6.298 f.; EH, *Why am I so Wise* §§ 2, 5, 8, KSA 6.266 f.; EH, *Why am I so Clever* § 8, KSA 6.325). Rather, Nietzsche recognises a symbolic affinity between art and life, a complementarity that legitimises the possibility of orienting existence and giving a style – as far as possible – “to one's character” (FW 290: 163, KSA 3.530).

Thus Spoke Zarathustra further complicates the reading of Nietzsche's aesthetics as “self-care” and “practical wisdom”. One of the central themes of this work is, in fact, that of the surplus and dissipation characteristic of the “Bestowing Virtue” (*schenkende Tugend*). The term “virtue”, which immediately refers to the ethical sphere, in this case alludes to a particular dynamic of the psycho-physical expansion of the wise. The wise man not only governs and disciplines himself but, beyond circumspection and calculation, *bestows* himself with paradoxically absolute and non-altruistic generosity. Life thus achieves its artistic apex in the natural propensity to give of oneself. The sage, overflowing with gifts, is beyond moderation, self-control and circumspection (*Klugheit*) and shares with the *Übermensch* a condition of fullness and superabundance (*Überfluß*), hence the centrality, within *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, of a symbolism of surplus that acts as a counterpoint to that of dietetics. The gushing fountains, the river overflowing its banks, the clouds pregnant with lightning, the udder swollen with milk, the ripe fruit and the prominence of the colours of gold and blood-red are all symbols of

this superabundance. Among the virtues of the wise man, the naturalness of grace (*Anmut*) and magnanimity (*Grossmut*) stand out. These virtues are understood as spontaneous, natural and unreflective propensities to give. Just as the sun, “the overflowing one” (*Überreich*), dispenses its light without ever detaching itself from the star, so the promise of the Overman, to which the sage alludes, recalls the action of a continuous burning. This fiery light is given to all, yet it is given to each one in a particular way, through distinct reverberations. Gift and donor thus merge in a disinterested logic, alien – like art – to the principle of *do ut des*.

This giving in exchange for nothing is clearly outside the scope of an aesthetics of self-mastery and self-governance. According to Foucault, this form of governance, when it concerns the relationship between self and others, recalls the ancient practice of *parresia* (παρρησία). Ancient *parresia*, which expresses honest speech and the freedom to say anything, certainly has something to do with Zarathustra’s attitude towards his disciples, but it does not resolve the constitutive excess of this relationship with respect to a pedagogical and intersubjective dimension.

In the relationship between art and life, then, there is “in the foreground, [...] the feeling of fullness, of power that wants to overflow, the happiness associated with a high state of tension, the consciousness of a wealth that wants to make gifts and give away”. So, Nietzsche proceeds, “the noble person helps the unfortunate too, although not (or hardly ever) out of pity, but rather more out of an impulse generated by the over-abundance of power” (JGB 260: 154, KSA 5.210).

The dynamic of the “bestowing virtue” appears intolerant of any precepts. It shares the open and always interpretable character of the symbol: like life, moreover, the “bestowing virtue” is irreducible to any definition. Since life constantly transcends any form of knowledge that wants to crystallise it and reduce it to a mere datum, only art appears capable of adhering to existence without subjugating it. Only art appears capable of embracing existence without wanting to solve its enigmas. Meditating on Hölderlin’s poetry, Heidegger claims, in consonance with Nietzsche: “Yet we never know a mystery by unveiling or analyzing it to death, but only in such a way that we preserve the mystery as mystery” (Heidegger 2000: 43).

This unwillingness of life to be regulated by scientific reason reveals an essential analogy between artistic and erotic praxis. Art and eroticism, in their highest meanings, are both characterised by the

awareness of an impossible possession. Art, like love, must renounce the will to dominate. This purely *philo*-sophic attitude of erotic tension towards an indefinable, unfinished and necessarily elusive object is expressed in Zarathustra's dialogue with life in *The Dance Song*. Life appears to Zarathustra as "unfathomable (*Unergründliche*) [...] fickle and wild and in all things a woman". Life, in its seductive malice, does not allow itself to be possessed: "One thirsts for her and does not become sated", claims Zarathustra; "one peeks through veils, one snatches through nets" (Za II *The Dance Song*: 84, KSA 4.140). Zarathustra enters into a confrontational relationship (*Auseinandersetzung*) with life, and his love of life engenders a jealous relationship in his "wild wisdom": "she said to me angrily: 'You will, you covet, you love, and only therefore do you *praise* life!'" (Ibid.). Between wisdom and life, there is therefore a relationship of tension but also an indissoluble bond, a complementarity, a mixture: "At bottom I love only life [...]. But that I am fond of wisdom and often too fond; that is because she reminds me so much of life! [...] is it my fault that the two look so much alike?" (Ibid.).

This philosophical love, which involves Zarathustra, life and wisdom in a triangle, and which Nietzsche takes up in *The Other Dance Song*, activates an erotic game of detachments and approaches that only an art – in this case *Tanzkunst* – makes possible. Wisdom is therefore also gallantry, delicacy, grace and dancing levity towards *vita femina*. "But perhaps", claims Nietzsche, "that is the strongest magic of life: it is covered by a veil of beautiful possibilities, woven with threads of gold - promising, resisting, bashful, mocking, compassionate, and seductive. Yes, life is a woman!" (FW 339: 193, KSA 3.568).

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