



The Birth of Tragedy

Friedrich Nietzsche

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Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, published in 1872, is not only the first major work of the most provocative voice in modern philosophy but also the most important study of Greek tragedy since Aristotle's *Poetics*. In this remarkable essay Nietzsche announces his aggressive challenge to many of the most cherished philosophical assumptions of his own time, re-evaluates the development of classical Greek culture, and establishes aesthetic concepts which have had a decisive influence on modern discussions of art. The Greeks, Nietzsche argues, were in the period of their greatest achievements thoroughly pessimistic but found in artistic creativity the only possible justification for existence. As a result of this development they produced Greek tragedy, the noblest affirmation of human life. The later development of Greek culture, particularly the influence of Socrates and Euripides, was not, as so many modern classicists have maintained, the high point of Greek achievement, but a significant decline, the onset of a sickness from which the world is still suffering (a significant symptom of which is our preoccupation with morality, especially Christian morality and our faith in scientific scholarship). Central to Nietzsche's discussion is his analysis of the development of Greek tragedy as the result of the inherent tension between and ultimate reconciliation of two conflicting artistic impulses, the Apollonian and the Dionysian (corresponding to the two sources of artistic inspiration, dreams and intoxication, the former giving rise to the plastic arts and the latter to ecstatic visions and music). Only with the appropriate synthesis of these two drives could the highest form of life be attained. *The Birth of Tragedy* received a cool reception in Nietzsche's day, especially from the academic community, but it has since become a central document in modern aesthetics and has led to a significant reappraisal of the nature of Classical Greek culture. The book also serves as an eloquent introduction to the disturbing challenges Nietzsche issued to modern thinking. Ian Johnston's new translation captures the energy, eloquence, and power of Nietzsche's unique philosophical style in this extraordinary and influential work.

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