

DIONYSIAN METAPHYSICS: Dr. Walter Sokel on Nietzsche

By Daniel Blue

For its first offering of the season the Nietzsche Circle scheduled a comprehensive rather than a specialized lecture on Nietzsche. The speaker was Dr. Walter Sokel, Professor Emeritus at the University of Virginia and recipient of numerous distinctions both in this country and abroad. Dr. Sokel is universally admired for his studies of Franz Kafka, but this evening he chose as his topic "On the Dionysian in Nietzsche: Monism and Its Consequences," a survey which recast certain themes in Nietzsche's work and re-envisioned its unity in a fresh way. The first of the season's presentations, it would inevitably function as a kind of overture to the ensuing lectures, its treatment of Nietzschean motifs resonating in the months to come.

Dr. Sokel began with a somewhat startling challenge. "One of the major arguments in the reception of Nietzsche," he observed, "has centered around this question: Was Nietzsche a forerunner of a sophisticated aestheticist Fascism or was he a link between enlightenment humanism and post-modernity?" In his paper, Dr. Sokel explained, he would show that both contentions were largely true. His primary intention, however, was to demonstrate that these opposing legacies of Nietzsche sprang from a common root, that of the Dionysian.

That notion of the Dionysian, he suggested, could best be traced to Schopenhauer's notion of Will, that restless demiurge which created in the realm of representation a looking-glass in which it could display itself. Since the Will made this world in its own image, the latter was a place of relentless struggle. Nothing lasted, nothing satisfied, and Schopenhauer reviled it as a torment of unmet desire. Nonetheless, he discovered one consolation in this ceaseless inconstancy: the world, at least, was one. It was all of a piece and we were part of it, and he described the relief this afforded in a single paragraph of exceptional power.

Half a century later, this vision apparently impressed Friedrich Nietzsche, who, according to Dr. Sokel, made it the linchpin of *The Birth of Tragedy*. In that reconsideration of ancient Greek drama, he argued that the chorus might acclaim the Apollonian individuals only to see them destroyed, but they did not despair, for they

themselves survived and thereby proved the teeming and inextinguishable continuity of life. Nietzsche thus reversed the poles of value which Schopenhauer had assigned to the Will. Rather than deplore its futility, he celebrated its unquenchable vigor. Individuals might rise and fall; the Will survived.

Nietzsche somewhat floundered after *The Birth of Tragedy*, and in the middle, so-called positivistic books he seemed to have forgotten Dionysus and his frenzies. In Sokel's view, however, the discoveries of that first work merely went underground, only to re-erupt in the dithyrambic *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. There the Dionysian acquired a new dimension. If *The Birth of Tragedy* carried the implicit moral, "Life survives," then *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* took this a step further: "Life ascends." By introducing the Will to Power and the need for self-transcendence, Nietzsche added a vertical dimension to the ever-changing but essentially sustained succession of the same. The doctrine of Eternal Recurrence (which reconfigured the insight of *The Birth of Tragedy*) received as complement a principle which allowed individuals to rise and thereby elevate life to unprecedented levels of energy and grandeur. Nietzsche was so thrilled by this possibility that he assumed the role of spiritual doctor, striving to nurture the best and bring them to maximal development. If he saw himself as medical authority and coach, however, he aspired as well to be a surgeon and to excise those individuals who might hold the hero back. He thereby aligned himself with the nascent science of eugenics.

At this point Dr. Sokel paused to make an observation about Nietzsche's *oeuvre* as a whole. The greatness called for by Zarathustra was an aesthetic, not a moral category, and clearly echoed the famous statement made in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "The world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon." Greatness could only be seen and appreciated from a spectator's point of view, whether that be a satyr eyeing Apollo, the theatergoer observing the stage, or Zarathustra himself contemplating humanity. In a sense it was not greatness which Nietzsche prized but admiration. Life was there to put on a show, and the higher its forms, the more thrilling the drama it provided (although in very different ways) both to participants and spectators. This attitude could creep into the most unlikely materials. For example, Nietzsche famously considered the Jews responsible for the introduction of slave morality and Christianity. Yet he also acclaimed their invention as an act of genius and acknowledged that they thereby immensely enriched humanity, introducing new

dimensions of interiority and motivational complexity to the hitherto rather shallow human soul.

Dr. Sokel then turned to the dialectical nature of Nietzsche's work, best shown through its many apparent contradictions. Some of the binarisms Dr. Sokel himself invoked -- Apollo/Dionysus, Eternal Return/Will to Power, spectator/player, creation/destruction -- seemed both irreconcilable and inextricably linked, rather like two wrestlers grappling to a draw. A particularly apt example of this dynamic could be found in the tension between the Will to Power, which he construed as the Will to Create, and the disenchanted flatness of the Eternal Recurrence. These two precepts -- the one a call to new heights, the other an insistence on the impossibility of doing anything new -- showed how deeply embedded in Nietzsche's work were two plainly incompatible principles. Yet in Sokel's eyes, the will was simply too tremendous to be confined within a single perspective, and the ensuing contradictions reflected its inassimilability to the structures of logical thought. This explained the variety and seeming incoherence of Nietzsche's many writings. He sought, not consistency, but justice, which, of course, he did not construe as equality before the law but rather as giving each thing its due. This refusal to stabilize meaning made Nietzsche a forerunner of the poststructuralists, and its ultimate expression could be found in that rhetorical ploy which unites opposed meanings in a single statement. "Irony," Dr. Sokel concluded, "is the supreme trope in which Dionysian holism expresses itself."

With this elegant insight, Dr. Sokel brought his survey of Nietzsche to a close. Obviously no informal summation can convey even the full argument of his presentation, much less its wit, play with concepts, or its many striking formulations. Yet there were subtle omissions in the lecture. Despite the forewarnings, for example, it was only by inference that this listener could link Nietzsche's support for eugenics and aestheticist bias to his ostensible status as "forerunner of a sophisticated aestheticist Fascism." By frequently adverting to some of Nietzsche's more problematic positions (on compassion and the Jews, for example), Dr. Sokel suggested how such a connection might be made, but he did not draw any conclusions himself. Instead, he slowly spun a comprehensive treatment of central themes which illuminated and redefined the whole of Nietzsche's production. His intent seemed to be less the elaboration of a thesis than an implicit re-envisioning which

encompassed, reconciled, and extended such varied materials as *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and the books which followed the latter.

Nonetheless, as with any piece so ambitious as Dr. Sokel's, questions arose. For example, in exploring how Nietzsche transposed Schopenhauer's ideas to his own purposes, Dr. Sokel identified two shifts. First, Schopenhauer tended to see the will as grasping and striving, whereas Nietzsche viewed it as expansive and creative. Second and more controversially, Dr. Sokel suggested that Schopenhauer tended to see life from the point of view of the individual, who inevitably suffers, whereas Nietzsche viewed it in the light of the whole that lasts and creates forever. In terms of *The Birth of Tragedy* it might be said that Schopenhauer identified with the Apollonian protagonist who encounters disaster and death, whereas Nietzsche took the part of the chorus who put this figure in context as but one constituent in a more comprehensive vision.

In support of this interpretation, Dr. Sokel mentioned Nietzsche's appeals to the satisfactions of spectacle, citing the many cases when he imagines the gods delightedly watching human interactions. Since Dr. Sokel wished to contrast this aesthetic with a moral attitude (a stance he associated with action), he perhaps overemphasized the contemplative aspect of Nietzschean admiration. He remarked at one point that Nietzsche construed "admiration as the province of the spectator and not the actor," and later he bluntly stated, "The main reason why admiration is an aesthetic rather than a moral category is its contemplative nature."

Now Nietzsche indeed often mentioned spectacle, especially in *The Genealogy of Morals*. Nonetheless, contemplation is a value which we might associate rather with Arthur Schopenhauer, who believed that when we admired artistic phenomena, we inserted a little sliver of detachment, that is, of non-being, between ourselves and the cravings of the Will and thereby momentarily freed ourselves from its pull. It was for this reason that he prized disinterested contemplation, a suspension of being with which Nietzsche would have nothing to do.

If Nietzsche made fun of disinterested contemplation, it was for good reason -- in his monism of will such detachment was impossible. We were always acting, and even if we appeared to stand still and merely interpret a phenomenon, we were thereby imposing on a complex of experience our own interpretation, an act of intellectual cooption which he saw

as an exercise of the Will to Power. Contemplation not only assumed that there was something given to contemplate -- that the world was laid open in its essential being for us to recognize and admire -- but that we were capable of such direct apprehension. Neither notion made sense in Nietzsche's cosmos of shifting objects and perspectives. This is not to deny the viability of Dr. Sokel's claim: Nietzsche's values did seem to involve being seen by others. What we had here appeared to be yet another case where Nietzsche seems to elude consistency of outlook.

In this case Nietzsche himself provided a clue. Although he rarely discussed aesthetics per se, he often pondered artistic creation and he clearly believed that his philosophic predecessors (Kant and Schopenhauer) had their priorities reversed. They asked how the recipient, the poetaster, the audience (the spectator, if you will) assimilated and evaluated the art object. The more important question was what moved the artist to produce it in the first place. If we were to explore art using the alternative of actors and spectators, then Nietzsche, *pace* Dr. Sokel, identified largely with the ones who made, not the ones who admired.

These two parties could, of course, be one and the same. No one more intensely scrutinizes an artwork than the artist who makes it; and this reflection shows that while Dr. Sokel may have offered a questionable justification, he was right in his fundamental judgment. Nietzsche did indeed identify with the satyrs, but not perhaps because they were spectators or contemplated the Apollonian individual; it was because they *made* the Apollonian individual; he was their creation, a vision they projected in their own midst. One might invoke this argument all the more since it suggests the power of Dr. Sokel's own presentation, for in his lecture he did something similar. He conjured up and displayed a vision of Dionysus so subtle yet imposing that it mesmerized at least one member of the audience and will color his readings of Nietzsche for a long time to come.