

Nietzsche and the Greek Idea of Immortality

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§ I. The Terrible Specter of Death: Natural Cowardice and the Will to Immortality

In his *Description of Greece*, Pausanias recounts a legendary boxing match between Creugas of Epidamnus and Damoxenus of Syracuse at the ancient Nemean games. Because night was drawing near and a victor had yet to be declared, the judges decided to produce a *klimax* by ordering the athletes to exchange undefended blows until one of them yielded. The boxers agreed and Creugas was first. He struck Damoxenus in the head; Damoxenus withstood the blow and then

bade Creugas lift up his arm. On his doing so, Damoxenus with straight fingers struck his opponent under the ribs; and with the sharpness of his nails and the violence of the blow his hand pierced his side, seized his bowels and dragged and tore them out. Creugas expired on the spot....¹

The match was decided definitively — Creugas, or at least the corpse of Creugas, was recognized as the victor. Damoxenus was expelled from the stadium because, in dealing his opponent many blows instead of one, he had violated his mutual agreement.

Beginning a discussion Nietzsche and the Greek idea of immortality with this archaic account of an even more archaic occurrence may appear somewhat strange. This example of human behavior, however, is quite *apropos* because, like much of Nietzsche's work, it is at first glance an affront to our modern sensibilities. These are the sensibilities that tell us no athlete should die during an athletic competition; they tell us that no human being should die in such superfluous and non-serious circumstances and, moreover, that Creugas' recognition as victor is the only humane act the judges could have taken. The decision to recognize Creugas as the victor, however, was influenced by neither the cruel circumstances of his death nor the death itself. The Greeks did not share these modern sensibilities. Creugas was recognized as the victor because he won—his death was only incidental and, as cruel as it may seem, the *humanity* of the judges can exist as but a part of modern prejudices and imagination. Nietzsche understood that this cruelty of the Greeks, the people of Plato, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Aristophanes, is

¹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VIII, XL, 2-6.

difficult to reconcile with the modern penchant for exulting the Greeks as the founders of aesthetics, philosophy, and justice. “The Greeks,” Nietzsche writes, “the most humane men of ancient times, have in themselves a trait of cruelty, of tiger-like pleasure in destruction: a trait, ...which, however, in their whole history, as well as in their mythology, must terrify us who meet them with the emasculate idea of modern humanity.”²

The problem is that when modern readers meet Creugas and Damoxenus, they almost invariably do so with the “emasculate idea of modern humanity,” and, as Nietzsche suggests, they are terrified and are unable to conceive how such a highly cultivated people, how a people with such discriminating aesthetic taste, could find pleasure in these types of barbaric spectacles. The indignation and terror stem not just from the violence of the competitions, but from the fact that boxing at Olympia, not to mention wrestling and the pankration, no does not resemble a “mere” sport but rather they took on the mien of a deadly serious business in which competitors were frequently killed in the stadium. Because Creugas was killed in a sporting competition, because the competitors were determined to win at any cost, and because the contests generated such enthusiasm and celebration, such contests are therefore often deemed to be inconceivable acts of human behavior. For many modern observers, sporting activities ought not to be so serious as to endanger the lives of the competitors; the confusion of serious activities, which is to say life-threatening activities, with non-serious endeavors is considered barbaric. The death of Creugas, it seems, reveals a shocking lack of respect for human life on the part of the Greeks.

The Greeks, however, did not regard their athletic competitions this way. On the contrary, for the Homeric Greeks such endeavors were exemplars of noble human actions. For Nietzsche, this fundamental difference between Homeric culture and subsequent cultures lies at the core of his philosophical work. He recognizes that, contrary to what modern cultures would find acceptable, the Greek sculptor had “to represent again and again war and fights in innumerable repetitions” and that “the whole Greek world exult[ed] in the fighting scenes of the ‘Iliad’.”³

² Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homers Contest” in *The Collected Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. II, Livy edition, p. 51.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Likewise, he recognized that the Greeks valorized the oft-violent victories of their athletes with little regard for the sort of human suffering so disturbing to modern observers. Nietzsche, however, does not regard the Greek penchant for cruelty and destruction in the same way as his contemporaries. Whereas modern observers find in this trait “something offensive, something which inspires horror,”⁴ Nietzsche has nothing but contempt for this offence and horror, which he repeatedly calls effeminate and emasculate historical eunuchism.

With the contrast of these views we might be tempted to conclude that there actually is a difference in the value of life for the Greeks (and Nietzsche) and the value others, including moderns, put on life. But is this truly so? Can we properly conclude that one culture values life more or less than another? This is often the explanation many modern Western observers are forced to make when they are confronted by cultures that do not appear to have, at bottom, an equally intense desire to avoid pain and death. This would indeed be a convenient conclusion—simply to state that Mongols, warring Greeks, Iranians, Iraqis, Yugoslavians, suicide bomber, or whosoever engages in seemingly superfluously dangerous contests, are primitive and uncivilized people who value human life to a lesser degree. To make such a statement, however, would be to ignore some rather obvious facts: Iraqi soldiers and *jihadi* weep as readily for a dead companion or family member as the most sensitive Western observer. Achilles, upon hearing of the death of his dear friend Patroklos, is engulfed in a “black cloud of sorrow” and “he himself, mightily in his might, in the dust lay at length, and took and tore at his hair with his hands,”⁵ and even that incorrigible warrior Odysseus had tears well up in his eyes “and was stirred with pity” by the sight of the corpse of his companion Elpenor.⁶ Hence, we are faced with an obvious contradiction: on the one hand Homeric Greeks and other “barbarians” are affected by the death of kith and kin in the same way as modern observers, but on the other hand constantly engage in martial endeavors and, in Nietzsche's words, often find in the “the cruelty of victory the summit

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁵ *Iliad*, XVIII, 22-27.

⁶ Homer, *The Odyssey*, XI, 55-56.

of life's glories.”⁷ It is because of this contradiction that we may be tempted to agree with modern sensibilities, but if we look at what lies *behind* the Homeric world, and for that matter, behind any world, it will soon become evident that “we do not understand them enough in ‘Greek fashion’”⁸ because occurrences such as the ancient boxing match are as much of an expression of man's basic will to life as is the modern disdain for such life threatening endeavors.

If, however, the will to life is defined as that which impels one to consider basic life—the condition of being alive rather than dead—as preferable to its opposite—the condition of being dead rather than alive—then we must reconcile what appears to be an apparent lack of the will to life with the modern revulsion for such barbaric spectacles. In other words, if we claim that the will to life is the driving force behind both the modern revulsion for certain aspects of Homeric culture and for Homeric culture itself, yet fail to account for what appears to be a lack of the will to life by Creugas and Damoxenus, Odysseus, suicide bombers, and so on, then we would be forced to follow the modern proclivity for dismissing certain cultures as barbaric. The task here, however, is not to repudiate the contention that these Olympic boxers were barbarians. This would be fruitless because the will to life, as it is manifested by Creugas' and Damoxenus' needless risking of life and limb, will always, from the perspective of contemporary observers, be inconceivable barbarism. Instead, the task is to discover what is meant by the will to life and, in particular, what it means within the context of the work of Nietzsche.

To do this we must first ask: What are the contemporary standards of the will to life? In other words, how do humans, and in particular, how does modern Western culture stand in relation to death and does this standing have anything in common with the Greeks? The answer to these questions is threefold and is based on two modest and fundamental tenets that are the prefatory ground for this discussion of Nietzsche's work. These tenets are fundamental because they are not exclusive to contemporary man; in fact, they are contingent on no specific temporal and spatial circumstance—and they are modest because they are not based on an hubristic and

⁷ Nietzsche, “Homers Contest,” p. 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

procrustean attempt to universalize contemporary values and notions. In other words, because of their modest nature, they can serve as the elusive yet crucial common point of agreement that is necessary for any discussion and, in particular, they will serve as appropriate groundwork for our discussion of the will to life in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The first tenet arises from the philosophical tradition of characterizing man in the state of nature. Whereas others have begun with the notion that man is by nature good, or that man is by nature evil, this discussion begins with the fact that man is by nature a coward. Untutored by conventional conditioning, man is a trepid creature—he is *homo timidus*. As will soon be demonstrated, it cannot be correctly stated that man is cowardly throughout the entire course of his life, but young children, and infantility is the only extant state of nature, is cowardly the moment they drop from the womb. As soon as the child experiences pain s/he will thereafter meet anything confronting his painlessness with fear. When a child falls, for example, s/he learns to fear stairs and be cautious of heights in general.⁹ When scratched by a pet s/he thereafter recoils in the presence of a hissing cat and approaches all cats with a degree of trepidation. Fear in the state of nature is thus equated with nothing more than pain and pleasure. What is pleasurable is not feared and what is painful is feared. Courage does not exist naturally—in the state of nature we find either fear or ignorance and ignorance is quickly transformed into fear. Although the child who has been scratched by a cat will be ignorant about dogs, s/he will quickly recall the painful feline experience and, when confronted by a snarling dog, this ignorance will transform itself into fear. S/he will fear the dog not because it is a dog, but instead because he has learned that hip-high, furry critters with claws and teeth are painful and to be approached with some caution. Hence the natural cowardice of man precedes his nurtured cowardice, but the latter is begotten by the former and, as such, it is as natural and as certain as natural cowardice. In other words, man is born a coward and during the development of his consciousness, which is to say, as s/he emerges from the infantile state of nature, s/he becomes more cowardly.

⁹ Quite similar to the Moro Reflex, which is present even at birth.

The second tenet is rather straightforward and requires little in the way of explanation: All sane and sentient adult human beings are perforce aware that they shall one day expire. That is, human beings recognizes and are aware of their mortality—a condition Nietzsche succinctly summarizes by saying that “the belly is the reason man does not so easily take himself for a god.”¹⁰ Man is reminded of his mortality thrice daily and occasionally, but with poignant efficacy, by the sight of an exposed belly like Creugas’. The second fundamental tenet therefore arises from the first. Man’s awareness of mortality arises from the fear of things painful because when s/he learns that the pain of hunger, and pain in general, is a forewarning of death, s/he has first sighted the terminal nature of his existence—he has been made aware of his mortality. Thus the dissolution of the puerile state of nature, which is characterized by either fear or ignorance, begins when the child matures because as he develops his consciousness he becomes more and more able to make the connection between hunger and death. When the child stands at the threshold of the state of nature, he gains the knowledge that hunger and pain mean mortality and mortality means death.

Death, however, is like an unfamiliar dog. It is an unknown. In fact, death is *the* unknown and since *homo timidus* fears things painful and things unknown, both of which are apparent characteristics of dying and death, he thus begins to fear death itself. The realization of mortality is begotten by fear but this realization also exacerbates the original proclivity to fear. In other words, whereas in the state of nature (infantility) the child’s fear is based on tactility, there is an intermediate state of nature in which the knowledge of death, or more precisely, the awareness of the unknown, becomes part of his consciousness. Fear is no longer contingent on merely the anticipation of immediate and superficial pain, but on the more gripping inevitability of the ultimate pain—on the anticipation of the pain of death. But just as the child recoils from the prospect of tactile pain, the conscious human being will also retreat from death. This retreat is *the will to life*, which means that the state of nature is abolished with the advent of the will to life. The state of nature no longer exists when man begins to address his fear of death: it ends

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #141, p.101.

when man transforms his natural fear into an unnatural courage. Hence, when we ask how man stands in relation to death, we are inquiring into the conventions he learns and creates in order to adequately cope with the paralyzing fear of death. Furthermore, when we ask if modern man's relation to death has anything in common with the Greeks, we can say that indeed it does—it arises from natural impulses that all men have in common.

Having stated these two fundamentals, we can now return to the threefold characterization of man's relation to death. The first characteristic stems directly from his natural cowardice and the awareness of his mortality. Since man is aware of his mortality, which means he knows that death is inevitable, and since man is uncertain of what follows immanent death, he fears the inevitable. And as we have already determined, that which is painful, or that which is potentially painful (*viz.*, unknown) is a serious matter. In short, death is unknown and frightening and, consequently, it is serious. Pain and uncertainty are serious, but death is the most serious—death is thus a terrible specter that haunts man from the day he becomes aware of his mortality.

The second characteristic of man's relation to death follows this directly. Because the terrible specter haunts man relentlessly, and because death is serious, it is therefore to be avoided. The fear of what happens after biological life causes man to eschew death for as long as possible. This, of course, is a restatement of the will to life—the preference of being alive rather than dead—but with the addition of *for as long as possible*. This modification of our first definition of the will to life seems to make the universal application of these characteristics impossible because we can point to Greek athletics as examples of people not avoiding death for as long as possible. In fact, we can point to the entire history of the West, including our 'civilized' modern era, as being rife with gruesome stories of martial bravery and barbaric spectacles resulting in untimely deaths. The fear of death, it seems, does not have an equally paralyzing effect for all men. Apparently, the second characteristic does not apply to Olympic athletes, warriors, suicide bombers, for whom the avoidance of death for as long as possible seems not to be their fundamental care.

If, however, we ask what it means to avoid death for as long as possible, we will realize that in its most imperative form it means to avoid death forever. In other words, if the will to life demands of the individual to avoid death for as long as possible, the strongest demand it can make is to avoid death forever and herein lies the third characteristic of man's relation to death: since death is frightening and serious and to be avoided for as long as possible, it becomes man's task eternal to overcome it—to find a cure for both death and the paralyzing fear it inspires. The will to life, therefore, amplified by culture, becomes *the will to immortality*. It becomes the effort to overcome the seriousness of death by projecting one's existence beyond the boundaries of normal biological life.

Like the first two characteristics, this characteristic of man's relation to death is not exclusive to any particular culture at any particular time. It is held by those with modern sensibilities just as it is held by ancient Hellenic athletes. In fact, the will to immortality is necessarily part of all cultures because without it, the terror invoked by the certainty of death would make living impossible. Immortality, or at least the notion of immortality, allows man to know the unknowable—it creates a world in which man can know death, so to speak, thereby making it less frightening and less serious. The belief in immortality and the concomitant will to immortality allows man to believe that immanent life is more than just a prelude to death. This possibility is desirable because without it, existence would be difficult to bear and would amount to no more than an inescapable death sentence. The certainty of the finality of biological death is therefore often transformed into either uncertainty, or, to use terms more befitting the modern belief in immortality, into the certainty of projecting one's existence beyond immanent boundaries. It is through this transformation that the athletes with which we began, warriors, Socrates, martyrs (Christian and Islamic), and human beings in general are able to muster the courage required to put themselves in perilously dangerous situations, to opt for death, or to carry on living despite the terrible specter of death. Man's natural cowardice and the knowledge of the certainty of death are mitigated by the idea of immortality. The seriousness of immanent death is abated by the prospect of immortality in one form or another because if there is a possibility that

death can be overcome, it is no longer as serious or frightening. Like the dog feared by the child, if it can be dealt with, understood, or in Nietzsche's reckoning, overpowered, then it is less threatening. If it is less threatening, then it is less serious. The will to immortality is thus satisfied by cultural constructs that enables man to achieve what I will refer to as *ontological projection*. Culture is a genuine and concerted effort to overcome the fear inspired by the certainty of immanent death by projecting one's existence beyond normal existential boundaries.

Culture, which includes political endeavours, philosophy, and religious movements, is therefore spawned from *homo timidus*' psychological need to create a world and a consciousness that can adequately address the terrible specter of death. Although Nietzsche never uses precisely this language, it is not a stretch to say that this formulation is the underlying leitmotiv in the whole of his thought. In one of his earliest works, *The Birth of Tragedy*, he states that as human beings “we are forced to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence—yet we are not to become rigid with fear.”¹¹ Later, in *The Twilight of the Idols*, he writes that the driving force creating culture, and especially the culture of nineteenth century Germany, is “conditioned and excited by the feeling of fear.”¹² *Homo timidus*, as I have called man, fears death because it is the great Unknown, and since “danger, disquiet, anxiety attend the unknown,” Nietzsche states that man’s “first instinct is to *eliminate* these distressing states.”¹³ To overcome the anxiety caused by the Unknown, and to deal with the fear that accompanies the Unknown, man instinctively creates a culture with which he will be able “to trace something unknown back to something known [and this] is alleviating, soothing, gratifying and moreover gives a feeling of power.”¹⁴

It is this “feeling of power” that marks Nietzsche's departure from the usual and, as has been said, *humane* understanding of the will to life and the will to immortality. Whereas the terrors of individual existence force *homo timidus* to create an explanation, Nietzsche finds that

¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 17, p. 104.

¹² Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

for most of mankind, “any explanation is better than none. Because it is at bottom only a question of wanting to get rid of oppressive ideas, one is not exactly particular about what means one uses to get rid of them.”¹⁵ Nietzsche, however, *is* particular about the means. The indiscriminate creation of a form of ontological projection simply to get rid of oppressive ideas means that for most of mankind power remains merely a feeling; it is not true power. Consequently, the life lived by most of mankind becomes mere biological life because it neglects that which Nietzsche considers to be the essence of life and the ground of the will to immortality—the will to power.

Hence, to Nietzsche's understanding, the will to life and the will to immortality, as it is understood with modern sensibilities, is reduced to merely a struggle for biological existence and this “struggle for existence is only an exception, a temporary restriction of the will to life. The great and small struggle revolves around superiority, around growth and expansion, around power—in accordance with the will to power which is the will to life.”¹⁶ Thus does the boxing match between Creugas and Damoxenus demonstrate the difference between the will to life as it is understood with the “emasculate idea of modernity” and as it is understood by Nietzsche. For the former, it violates the principles of the will to life because it endangers the biological lives of the participants; for the latter and for the Homeric Greeks, it is a quintessential example of the will to life because it embodies the will to power and, as will soon be demonstrated, a higher form of ontological projection. Moreover, it demonstrates that risking one's biological life, or even losing one's biological life, does not necessarily negate the principles of what Nietzsche would consider to be a life-affirming form of ontological projection. The task of this general project is therefore first to categorize the various types of ontological projection that emerge from Nietzsche's work.¹⁷ Second, to demonstrate that these very distinctions provide a unique basis

¹⁵ *Ibid.*.

¹⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #345, p. 292.

¹⁷ This paper is a preliminary sketch of the first part of a larger project. In the larger project I identify five types of ontological projection in Nietzsche's work: 1) cosmological projection, which will be discussed briefly in this paper; 2) Anthropological projection, which is bound of with Socrates and Platonism; 3) Soteriological Projection, a chapter dealing with Nietzsche and Christianity; 4) pseudo-Cosmological Projection, a chapter dealing with Nietzsche and nationalism, and finally, 5) Technological Projection, a chapter on immortality in the post-modern, scientific and technological world. My thanks to Eric Voegelin for these categories.

for understanding Nietzsche's thought in general, and third, that the forms of immortality are not part of the historical record, but rather that they can serve as a basis for understanding how our own relation to death shapes the way we regard ancient boxing matches, suicide bombers, war, and many other “foreign” cultural anomalies. Let me therefore begin with some comments on Nietzsche’s view of the Greek world, specifically, with the pre- or non-Socratics.

§ II. *Homo Timidus* and Cosmological Projection

1. Apollinian Culture

What we have set out thus far is that the historical task of Western political endeavors, religious movements, and philosophy is to create a world and a consciousness that will adequately address the terrible specter of death; that *homo timidus* necessarily creates a cultural milieu wherein his fear of death, which is the most terrible aspect of reality, will be abated by the prospect of ontological projection in one form or another. Now we will turn our attention to the following question: is one form of ontological projection superior to another? For Nietzsche, as has already been indicated, the answer to this question is a definite yes and much of his work focuses on this very theme. In fact, we can say that his body of work can be divided into two intricately interrelated parts: one which discusses a ‘better way’ of regarding immortality, and one that can be regarded as a polemic against the indiscriminate ways, which he calls the decadent ways, of overcoming the serious existential problems raised by the notion of death. Since, however, to be decadent means to be marked by decay and decline, there must necessarily be a healthy and lofty point of origin from which things can begin to decay and to decline. Thus we will begin our discussion of ontological projection here and because with this, we will be better equipped to understand what Nietzsche considers to be the decadent forms.

For Nietzsche, the lofty and healthy point of origin is best typified by the ancients. Specifically, it lies with the Homeric Greeks. With the Homeric Greeks he finds a plausible, perhaps even a noble manifestation of the will to immortality. However, before embarking, we

must add two words of reservation. First, when Nietzsche discusses the Greeks, he is not referring to ancient Greeks in general. He is quite specifically referring to the race of men who emerged from the age that corresponds with Hesiod's fourth age—the age of a “just and good, a godlike race of heroes, who are called the demi-gods.” He is referring to the race of men who “sought the flocks of Oedipus, and died in Cadmus' land at seven-gated Thebes; and some who crossed the open sea in ships, for fair-haired Helen's sake” and most importantly, he is referring to “the race of heroes, [who] *well deserve their fame*.”¹⁸

In Nietzsche's estimation, the later Greeks, that is, the Greeks subsequent to and including Socrates and Plato, are decadent for reasons that will be discussed in future chapters of this work. It is in the world of the pre-Socratic Greeks that Nietzsche presents an example of a better way. This, however, brings us to the second word of reservation. Nietzsche does not endorse this world wholeheartedly. He says that it is a “world into which I have sought to find a way, into which I have perhaps found a new way,” but he then immediately states that his “taste, which may be called the opposite of a tolerant taste, is even here far from uttering a wholesale Yes: in general it dislikes saying Yes, it would rather say No.”¹⁹

For this reason it is not surprising that Nietzsche began his philosophical publications with *The Birth of Tragedy*. In this work we find a basic contradistinction of cultures in the Greek world: the Dionysian versus the Socratic. As Nietzsche himself says about this book:

I was the first to see the real opposition: the degenerating instinct that turns against life with subterranean vengefulness (Christianity, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, in a certain sense already the philosophy of Plato, and all of idealism as typical forms) versus a formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence.²⁰

In other words, Nietzsche begins his philosophy by contrasting two ways of addressing the strange and questionable realities of existence; in the terminology I have set down, he begins by opposing a higher and a decadent form of overcoming the fear of death—a higher (tragic) and a decadent (nihilistic) manifestation of the will to immortality. For now we will discuss the higher

¹⁸ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 158-175, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 116.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 272.

type—which is embodied in the antithesis of the Apollinian (the world of dreams and sculpture: the more serious) and the Dionysian (the world of intoxication and music: the less serious).

The usual course for a discussion of *The Birth of Tragedy* is to focus on the Dionysian because it is this half of the antithesis that recurs repeatedly through Nietzsche's work. However, since the Dionysian is only half of the antithesis, it does not stand alone and a study of the Apollinian is equally necessary to understand the work fully. Apollinian culture, as Nietzsche calls it, is the world begotten of dreams. Dreams, he says, are where the "glorious divine figures first appeared to the souls of men; in dreams the great shaper beheld the splendid bodies of superhuman beings."²¹ From these images, man—the great shaper—is able to create an interpretation of life and "by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life."²² Dreams, however, do not always produce agreeable and friendly images. The harsher experiences of universal existence also pass into a dream world, which includes "the serious, the troubled, the sad, the gloomy, the sudden restraints, the tricks of accident, anxious expectations, in short, the whole divine comedy of life."²³ For Nietzsche, these images serve as the common ground of human experience and are not unlike what we have already described as the moment man becomes aware of his mortality. In the Apollinian dream world man "lives and suffers... amid the dangers and terrors"²⁴ and is thus made aware of the terminal nature of his existence. Hence Apollo, the god of dreams, the god of mere appearance, of illusion, of sculpture, of the nonimagistic, is also the god of the *principium individuationis*—the god of just boundaries.²⁵ When man becomes aware of his mortality, he becomes aware of the limits that perforce accompany finite individual existence. As Nietzsche indicates, from the *wisdom* acquired of the Apollinian dream world, where every man is an artist, "the Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence."²⁶

²¹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 1, p. 33.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, section 3, pp. 42-43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, section 1, p. 35.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, section 9, p. 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, section 3, p. 42.

It seems odd that Nietzsche would refer to the recognition of the terminal nature of human existence as wisdom. A spectator with the aforementioned modern sensibilities, or “with another religion in his heart,” will be discouraged and disappointed and soon turn his back on this Apollinian culture because he finds in it no reason for “moral elevation, even for sanctity, for disincarnate spirituality, for charity and benevolence.”²⁷ In short, he will turn his back on it because it does not assuage the discomfort that arises from the knowledge of his mortality; it does not help him overcome his fear of death. In fact, the folk wisdom to which Nietzsche refers does quite the opposite:

There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, without capturing him. When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was the best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word, till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: ‘Oh, wretched and ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.’²⁸

How, then, did such disheartening wisdom aid the Greek in overcoming the terrible specter of death?

For Nietzsche, the answer to this question lies in what he calls the Olympian middle world of art. That the Greek might endure the terror of this wisdom, that he might deal with the titanic powers of nature, he could “interpose between himself and life the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians,”²⁹ for the wisdom of the sylvan god, Silenus, also included the mythical exemplars. Nietzsche points to the quotidian consumption of Prometheus’ liver, Oedipus’ terrible fate, and the family curse of the Atridae as examples of the Olympian world participating in a universal Moira. Thus “out of the original Titanic divine order of terror, the Olympian divine order of joy gradually evolved through the Apollinian impulse toward beauty, just as roses burst from thorny

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁸ *Ibid.*. Cf. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*:

Though he has watched a decent age pass by
A man will sometimes still desire the world
I swear I see no wisdom in that man.
...Not to be born surpasses thought and speech.
The second best is to have seen the light
And then to go back quickly whence we came.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 3, p. 42.

bushes. How else could this people, so sensitive, so vehement in its desires, so singularly capable of *suffering* have endured existence, if it had not been revealed to them in their gods, surrounded with a higher glory?”³⁰

The wisdom of the sylvan god, which applied in the mortal and immortal worlds alike, allowed human existence to mirror Olympian theogony. Now, if we recall that Nietzsche refers to man as “the great shaper,” it becomes evident that the wisdom of Silenus is actually human wisdom. Thus both the “glorious divine figures,” the gods, and poetic inspiration, the wisdom of the gods, were created from a most profound need—the need to overcome the terrors of existence. Thus, in Nietzsche’s words,

the same impulse which calls art into being, as the complement and consummation of existence, seducing one to a continuation of life, was also the cause of the Olympian world which the Hellenic “will” made use of as a transfiguring mirror. Thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it—the only satisfactory theodicy! Existence under the bright sunshine of such gods is regarded as desirable in itself, and the real pain of Homeric men is caused by parting from it, especially by early parting: so that now, reversing the wisdom of Silenus, we might say of the Greeks that “to die soon is worst of all for them, the next worst—to die at all.” Once heard, it will ring out again; do not forget the lament of the short-lived Achilles, mourning the leaflike change and vicissitudes of the race of men and the decline of the heroic age. It is not unworthy of the greatest hero to long for a continuation of life, even though he live it as a day laborer. At the Apollinian stage of development, the “will” longs so vehemently for this existence, the Homeric man feels himself so completely at one with it, that lamentation itself becomes a song of praise.³¹

Hence, the *Apollinian* makes the Greek man both aware of his mortality and at the same time seduces him to continue living despite the terrors of existence. The Greeks create culture, specifically, they create *Apollinian culture*, to overcome the fear of death. Apollinian culture, however, does not satisfy their need for ontological projection—hence the other side of Nietzsche’s duality: the Dionysian.

2. Dionysian Culture

Whereas Nietzsche describes the Apollinian world to be the world of dreams and terror, for the Dionysian world he uses the analogy of intoxication. The Dionysian is the “blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature” and brings with it a

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

“collapse of the *principium individuationis*.”³² Of course, the ecstasy of the Dionysian emotions is most readily achieved under the influence of “narcotic draught,” or, in more romantic terms, from the “potent coming of spring that penetrates all nature with joy.” With either description, under the charm of the Dionysian, the emotions grow in intensity and “everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness.” The bond between man and man is renewed, and nature, “which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man.”³³

For Nietzsche, Homeric man is able to stand out of the knowledge of his mortal boundaries with the ecstasy of Dionysian intoxication. The hostile barriers of necessity are broken in the orgiastic singing and dancing of the Dionysian. Thus, in

song and 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 into the air, dancing. ...supernatural sounds emanate from him, too: he feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams. 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.³⁴

In other words, Dionysian ecstasy stands in direct opposition to the Apollinian *principium individuationis*. Whereas Apollinian art creates boundaries, the rapture of the Dionysian art, while it lasts, creates boundlessness and excessiveness. It temporarily erases the limitations of human existence by transfiguring man into a participant in the world of the gods. “The worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality,” Nietzsche writes, are therefore separated by a “chasm of oblivion.”³⁵ In this state of oblivion, man is temporarily able to forget the horror or absurdity of existence of which the Apollinian dream world has made him aware. Of course, with enough narcotic draught or potent comings of spring, any human could temporarily forget his troubles, but with the advent of the Dionysian festival, the “destruction of the *principium individuationis* for the first time became an artistic phenomenon”³⁶ and overcoming the terrors of existence becomes an act of creative deification.

³² *Ibid.*, section 1, p. 36.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, section 7, p. 60.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, section 2, p. 40.

Hellenic man, however, could never completely abandon the Apollinian in favor of the Dionysian because both are “artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*.”³⁷ Just as man cannot control the convalescent dreams that spring from the natural world of sleep, neither can he reject the raw sensuality and cruelty of Dionysian revelry. The songs and pantomime, however, of the “dually-minded revelers was something new and unheard-of in the Homeric-Greek world; and the Dionysian *music* in particular excited awe and terror”³⁸ because it defied the martial and measured nature of Apollinian art. This music, which Nietzsche refers to as the Dionysian dithyramb, embodies all the symbols of excessiveness and boundlessness—the opposite of the Apollinian. Hence, for the Apollinian man, the Dionysian dithyramb man would have seemed as “titanic” and “barbaric” as the “pre-Apollinian age—that of the Titans; and the extra-Apollinian world—that of the barbarians.”³⁹ But in this, even the Apollinian Greek would re-cognize his inward relation to the overthrown Titans and heroes and be forced to recognize that “despite all its beauty and moderation, his entire existence rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, revealed to him by the Dionysian. And behold: Apollo could not live without Dionysus! The ‘titanic’ and the ‘barbaric’ were in the last analysis as necessary as the Apollinian.”⁴⁰

The separate art worlds of the two deities are in constant opposition, but at the same time they mutually augment each another. The Apollinian Greek sees in his nature the titanic and barbaric, and the Dionysian Greek is always drawn back from orgiastic revelry by the Apollinian. As we have already noted, the oblivion of Dionysian intoxication is only temporary because the terrors of everyday reality, the terrors of the wisdom of the sylvan god, necessarily re-enter man’s consciousness. These art impulses are simultaneously present in the Greek man; these two separate inclinations run parallel to each other and are, for the most part, openly at odds in each man. As such, the two art impulses impel each other constantly to create new and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, section 4, p. 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*.

more powerful artistic births, which in turn perpetuates the antagonism. This perpetual antagonism, however, “is only superficially reconciled by the common term ‘art’; till eventually, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic ‘will,’ they appear coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art—Attic tragedy.”⁴¹

Thus for Nietzsche, tragedy was the result of the welding together of the Apollinian and the Dionysian. This mysterious union, as Nietzsche calls it, had its origin in the dramatic dithyramb of the Dionysian musician, who, in his art form, created a “repetition and a recast of the world.”⁴² Such a musician was, “without any images, himself pure primordial pain and its primordial re-echoing.”⁴³ Nietzsche claims that this music evolved itself into the Greek satyr chorus—the chorus of the primitive tragedy—which had as its domain a space high above that of ordinary mortals. In fact, for the actual presentation of these early tragedies, the Hellenes constructed a platform which represented “a fictitious *natural state*” whereupon resided “fictitious *natural* beings.” The scaffolding, however, is “no arbitrary world placed by whim between heaven and earth; rather it is a world with the same reality and credibility that Olympus had with its inhabitants possessed for the believing Hellene.”⁴⁴ Thus, having confronted the reality of the terrors of existence, the Greek man of culture sat himself before the middle world of the dithyrambic satyr chorus and felt himself to be “nullified,” preserved, and lifted up. He experienced the metaphysical comfort

that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable—this comfort appears in incarnate clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations and of the history of nations. With this chorus the profound Hellene, uniquely susceptible to the tenderest and deepest suffering, comforts himself, having looked boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature, and being in danger of longing for a Buddhist negation of the will. Art saves him, and through art—life.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, section 1, p. 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, section 5, p. 49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, section 7, p. 58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Herein lies the crux of what Nietzsche considers to be the higher form of ontological projection. With tragic art the Greek is able to turn “the nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live.”⁴⁶ When struck by the frightening reality of the finite nature of his existence, he overcomes the paralysis by placing himself, at the same time, both before and within a transfiguring reconstruction of the eternally recurring cosmological order. Thus the Homeric Greek form of ontological projection, the form of ontological projection from which Nietzsche says there can only be decay and decline, can be thought of as *cosmological projection*. For these Greeks, cosmological projection is embodied in the Dionysian mysteries and therein “the *fundamental fact* of the Hellenic instinct expresses itself—its ‘will to life’.”⁴⁷

As has been said, the will to immortality is the will to life in its most imperative form. Ontological projection is the culture created to realize the will to immortality and cosmological projection, manifested in Dionysian mysteries, is the Homeric Greek expression of the will to immortality. With this, Nietzsche would certainly agree, for when he asks, “What did the Hellene guarantee to himself with these mysteries?” his answer is quite pointed: Homeric man guaranteed to himself “eternal life, the eternal recurrence of life; the future promised and consecrated in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond death and change.”⁴⁸ For Nietzsche, this triumphant Yes to life beyond change and death contained in the Dionysian symbolism represents the profoundest instinct of life and the highest manifestation of ontological projection because, as an expression of the will to life, it is an even stronger expression of the will to power. Before the Dionysian satyr chorus, Nietzsche writes, Homeric man overcomes his great fear of death because he experiences an

affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems, the will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I called the Dionysian, *that* is what I recognized as the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. Not so as to get rid of pity and terror, not so as to purify oneself of a dangerous emotion through its vehement discharge... but

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 120.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

beyond pity and terror, to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction*.⁴⁹

In other words, the Homeric Greek expression of the will to immortality contained not only a joy in destruction, which means a joy in overcoming and overpowering, but also a joy in the eternally recurring destructive forces of the cosmos. He took joy and found an affirmation of life from the fact that he could willingly transfigure himself into an equal participant both before and within these eternally destructive powers. These powers, however, are not only destructive because they also embody creation. The affirmative Yes to the pain of death and change includes a Yes to beginnings as well. As a Yes to the eternal recurrence of life, it includes a Yes to the pains of life and birth. With the Dionysian, the pains of existence are mirrored by the pains of childbirth, and the Homeric Greek was able to understand that “all becoming and growing, all that guarantees the future, *postulates pain....*” He discovered that “for the eternal joy in creating to exist, for the will to life eternally to affirm itself, the ‘torment of childbirth’ must also exist eternally.”⁵⁰

3. The Eternal Recurrence of the Same

For the reader familiar with Nietzsche's work, the parallel between cosmological projection and his doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same should be evident. Cosmological projection is for Nietzsche the highest formulation for overcoming the horrors and absurdities of existence because, above all, it embodies both the eternally recurring destructiveness and the creativity of the will to power. Although the doctrine of the eternal recurrence of the same is not stated in precisely these words in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the proto-thought is present and even Nietzsche later recognized this. Similarly, in Nietzsche's early work the notion of the will to power is present but the thought is not specifically articulated. Despite this, however, it is important to note that the ideas are present in the very beginning of his work and, moreover, that these two ideas, which Martin Heidegger refers to as two of Nietzsche's five

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

major rubrics,⁵¹ are interconnected with each other in such a way that it is impossible to understand one without the other.

The connection between the eternal recurrence, the pain of existence, the will to immortality, and the will to power becomes more evident when Nietzsche first directly articulates the thought. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes:

The Greatest Weight.—What, if some day of night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moon light between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!'

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.' If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?⁵²

The communication of the eternal recurrence is called the greatest weight because from it man is given the thought that he must live out the horrors and absurdities of existence, the thought that he must relive the fear-inspiring world that is revealed to him in the Apollinian dream world, for all eternity. Indeed, this is a great weight for man to bear.

However, it must be noted that the communication of the doctrine is at this point only in the interrogative. Nietzsche asks “what, if...” this thought were given to man? What would man's reaction be? Would man curse the demon who spoke thus or would he call him a god? The answer begins in the next passage entitled *Incipit tragoedia*—the tragedy begins—which is nearly identical to the first page of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. We have already seen that at the Greek tragedy festivals the participants, through their shared experience of the theogonai, which is to say cosmological, trials and tribulations, felt themselves to be uplifted, nullified, and preserved. More importantly, they felt themselves to be, like the gods themselves, part of the eternally recurring cosmological order. Thus the first communication of the eternal recurrence in

⁵¹ In Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. IV, pp. 3-12. According to Heidegger, the other three major rubrics are: nihilism, the revaluation of all values hitherto, and Overman.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, #341, p. 274.

The Gay Science is not only a veiled proclamation, it is an introduction to the demon who will “speak thus”. It is an introduction to Zarathustra. Nietzsche himself says that “the idea of the eternal recurrence” is “the fundamental conception of this work”⁵³ and that Zarathustra is the teacher. The greatest weight, or, the heaviest burden that is put on man with the first communication of the eternal recurrence, is lightened with the appearance of the teacher.

And what does Zarathustra teach that lightens the greatest weight? Zarathustra teaches another of Nietzsche's five rubrics—he teaches the Superman. *Zarathustra* begins immediately after the first proclamation of the eternal recurrence but the first thing the teacher of eternal recurrence teaches is not the eternal recurrence of the same, but rather it is the Superman.⁵⁴ When Zarathustra, Nietzsche's literary incarnation of Dionysos, comes down from the mountain and enters the marketplace the first phrase he utters is: “*I teach you the Superman.*” Later in this sermon he says “The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: The Superman *shall be* the meaning of the earth!”⁵⁵ What this means is that the teacher of the eternal recurrence, when teaching this doctrine, is also teaching the willing of the Superman—the ultimate manifestation of the will to power. When the will to life, that is, the will to self-preservation, takes its most imperative form—the will to immortality—it is actually the will to power because “a living thing desires above all to *vent* its strength—life as such is the will to power—: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *consequences* of it.”⁵⁶ Hence on the one hand Nietzsche says that the Superman is the meaning of the earth, but on the other he says that the world is “a monster of energy, without beginning or end...” and that it is a “*Dionysian* world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying... *This world is the will to power—and nothing besides!*”⁵⁷

⁵³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 295.

⁵⁴ Nietzsche's term is “Übermensch”: literally, the Overman. Although this is translated as either Superman or Overman, for the sake of consistency, I will use Superman but the prepositional connotations of Overman should also be kept in mind.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 41.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, # 13, p. 44.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #1067, p. 550.

The confusion created by the apparent synonymy of the two rubrics is abated when we realize that Nietzsche has this in mind: *Homo timidus* properly overcomes the horrors and absurdities of existence when he participates in and accepts the cosmos as an eternally recurring quantum of power. He does this because as a participant he actively wills the transfiguration of his humanness into the quintessential manifestation of the will to power—the Superman. Thus *incipit tragoedie*, which means the highest form of immortality (cosmological projection) begins when man wills himself into the eternally recurring cosmological order of the Gods, is therefore also *INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA* because Zarathustra is the teacher of both the Superman and the eternal recurrence of the same. Zarathustra teaches immortality in the most literal meaning of word. He teaches non-mortality; he teaches the god-like overpowering of power; he teaches the godification of man; in short, he teaches cosmological projection which is not immortality *per se*, but rather, immortalization in the sense of deification.

The most succinct summary of this teaching of Zarathustra is found in the section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* entitled *The Convalescent*. In this passage Zarathustra's animals recognize the dual lesson of their master and state:

Thine animals know it well, O Zarathustra, who thou art and must become: behold, *thou art the teacher of the eternal return*,—that is now *thy* fate!

That thou must be the first to teach this teaching—how could this great fate not be thy greatest danger and infirmity!

Behold, we know what thou teachest: that all things eternally return, and ourselves with them, and that we have already existed times without number, and all things with us.

Thou teachest that there is a great year of Becoming, a prodigy of a great year: it must, like a sand-glass, ever turn up anew, that it may anew run down and run out: —

So that all these years are like one another, in the greatest things and also in the smallest, so that we ourselves, in every year, are like ourselves in the greatest and also in the smallest.

And if thou wouldst now die, O Zarathustra, behold, we know also how thou wouldst then speak to thyself:—but thine animals beseech thee not to die yet!

Thou wouldst speak—and without trembling, buoyant rather with bliss, for a great weight and worry would be taken from thee, thou patientest one!

'Now do I die and disappear,' wouldst thou say, 'and in a moment I am nothing. Souls are as mortal as bodies.

But the plexus of causes returneth in which I am intertwined,—it will create me again! I myself pertain to the causes of the eternal return.

I come again with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent—not to a new life or a better life or a similar life:

I come again eternally to this identical and selfsame life, in its greatest and in its smallest, to teach again the eternal return of all things, —

—To speak again the word of the great noontide of earth and man, to announce again to man the Superman.’⁵⁸

Zarathustra's lesson, as it is revealed through his animals, begins with the eternal recurrence and concludes with the Superman.

4. Cosmological Projection at Olympia

If the relationship between the eternal recurrence and the Superman, and the relationship between these rubrics and overcoming the horrors and absurdities of existence, is not yet clear, another source of light can be pointed in this direction. As has been demonstrated, with the Dionysian festival a cultural milieu was created wherein the spectators were able to overcome the fear of death by projecting their biological existence not merely forward, but also upward. The travails and uncertainties of human life and death were mirrored by Olympian theogony and the Hellene felt himself nullified as an equal participant in the eternally recurring cosmological order. The Dionysian festivals described by Nietzsche, however, were not the only festivals in the ancient world to re-echo the eternally recurring power of the cosmological order. Many of the life-affirming elements Nietzsche attributes to the Dionysian festivals are evident, perhaps even more poignantly, in the ancient Greek athletic competitions. More specifically, just as the Dionysian festivals were a cultural creation that allowed the Hellene to express his will to immortality as cosmological projection and immortalization, the competitions at Olympia served this same function. Moreover, the lofty and healthy type of ontological projection, as Nietzsche would consider it, that was manifest at the ancient Olympic athletic festivals was more than just the creation of a culture that allowed both the competitors and the spectators alike to participate in the eternally recurring cosmological order. It contained many of the origins of the cosmological order into which the Hellene aspired to project his existence. Although Nietzsche does not specifically discuss the Olympic games,⁵⁹ the healthy and lofty form of the will to

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, pp. 269-271. Livy edition.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche does discuss the agonistic element of Greek culture and was likely familiar with the ideas of Jacob Burckhardt, an historian who was a senior colleague of Nietzsche's at Basel University. Burckhardt coined the term 'agonal' when describing the contest as one of the main characteristics of Greek culture. It is possible that

immortality—the love of and participation in the eternal recurrence of the same—that he ascribes to the Dionysian festivals is equally applicable to the ancient athletic festivals.

In the agonistic culture of the Greeks, especially at the athletic competitions, fame was the prize for the victor. Winning was all-important because, as Pindar writes, “he who has won luxuriant renown in games or war, once he has been well praised, receives the greatest of gains: regard in the speech of his fellow citizens, and on the lips of strangers.”⁶⁰ In the ancient world, regard in the speech of fellow citizens is in fact fame. It is fame based on recognition and, if the deeds are noteworthy enough, the regard will be on the lips of citizen and foreigner alike beyond the earthly existence of the competitor. In other words, winning in contest (or war) allows the competitor, thanks to his noble deeds or speech, to project his existence beyond the boundaries of normal biological life. He will be recognized not only in life, but also in death.

As Huizinga asserts, winning not only demonstrates one to be superior in the outcome of the game *per se*, this superiority also “tends to confer upon the winner a semblance of superiority in general. In this respect he wins something more than the game as such. He has won esteem, obtained honour.”⁶¹ At Olympia, we know that the victor was awarded the wreath of wild olive, but this reward was, at best, perfunctory. The real reward of the victory was that it elevated the athlete “out of the anonymity of the daily round...[and] those who acquired personal fame received a further lease of life for they lived on in the memory of posterity.”⁶² In Lucian’s dialogue *Anacharsis*, Anacharsis, a Skythian, and Solon, the Athenian lawgiver, are discussing these very prizes. Anacharsis is having the purpose of the *gymnasion* explained to him and, being a barbarian, is understandably skeptical about the value of a simple olive wreath (or the crown of pine at Isthmia, the laurel-berries at Delphi, and the olive oil at the Panathenaia). Solon says to him:

Nietzsche did not devote much attention to the festival at Olympia because, other than ancient references, there were few extant sources available at his time. Interest in the festival does not seem to have waxed until well after the first excavation of the site, which was undertaken by Ernst Curtius in 1875 and finally yielded results in 1881. Excavation of the site continued well into the 1960’s.

⁶⁰ Pindar, *Isthmian Odes* I, 50-51.

⁶¹ Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-element in Culture*, p. 50.

⁶² Ludwig Drees, *Olympia: Gods, Artists and Athletes*, p. 101.

But my good man, we do not look at the prizes which are handed out. They are tokens of victory and a way to recognize the victors. Together with them goes a reputation which is worth everything to the victors, and getting kicked is a small price to pay for those who seek fame through pain. It cannot be acquired without pain, and the man who wants it must endure many hardships in the beginning before he can even start to see the profitable and sweet end of his efforts.⁶³

The wreath of wild olive is thus the crest or emblem that elicits recognition for the winner; it affords him esteem, honour, and power in both his time and after he has died.

Drees also recognizes that the only hope Hellenic man had for acquiring some form of immortality was to perform some deed that would be remembered by both the present and future generations. The deeds performed at Olympia, however, were not merely ‘some deed’, as Drees puts it. They were not arbitrary deeds that merely brought notoriety to the athlete. Instead, they were very specific deeds that created a very specific form of fame and recognition. Immortality was acquired at Olympia because when the wreath of wild olive was placed on the head of the victor, he was bestowed with the properties of the first Olympic victor—Heracles. By emulating the deeds of Heracles, the only human to ever become immortal, the Olympic athlete was not only defeating his opponents in the game, he was matching the deeds of the most enviable man. He was matching the deeds of a man who had gained a position over man—he was immortalized or, in Nietzsche's terminology, a Superman. And indeed, the winners at Olympia were often revered as gods upon returning to their native cities.

The immortality of the winner was further ensured, symbolically at least, because each Olympic victor was permitted to erect a votive statue at the sanctuary. On a most basic level, the physicality of these statues would speak to future generations of the accomplishment of the athlete thereby projecting him beyond the normal boundaries of his biological existence. There is, however, more to the statues. Drees tells us that the “victors were forbidden to erect statues which reproduced their own features.” Instead, the “votive offerings had to be presented in an ideal form.”⁶⁴ The athlete's natural bodily features were not recreated on the statue, but instead, the imperfections, which is to say, the humanness of his form, were replaced with the ideal body of the god. As has already been discussed, in winning at Olympia the athlete was emulating the

⁶³ Lucian, *Anacharsis*, 10-11. As cited in Stephen G. Miller, *Arete: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources*, p. 76.

⁶⁴ Drees, p. 104.

deeds of a god, or more precisely, of a mortal who became immortal, and in the commemoration of the emulation, the statue also had to reflect the divine nature of such an act. In other words, the statue immortalizing the athlete had to represent the symbolic immortalization of the athlete. In winning, the athlete had demonstrated the spirit of the god, had the spirit of the god placed on his head, and was artistically transfigured into the ideal form of the immortal god.

Non-competitors also had a stake in the mythological grounding of the festival which provides an explanation for widespread enthusiasm generated by the games. The second function that the festival at Olympia served for the Hellenes who were not victorious athletes is thus directly related to the immortality conferred on the victor. Huizinga tells us that winning at play, a category which includes the agonistic culture of ancient Greece, brings honor and esteem to the victor. We know that in Hellenic culture this is directly related to fame and immortality. The fame of the individual, victorious athlete, however, had a direct bearing on his fellow citizens because this same “honour and esteem at once accrue to the benefit of the group to which the victor belongs.”⁶⁵ The inhabitants of the victor’s native city shared his fame and, in the same way as Nietzsche describes it for the participants at the Dionysian festival, felt themselves to be nullified, preserved, and lifted up. Producing such a son meant that the city itself had elevated itself in the eternally recurring order of the cosmos and further, had procured the favor of the gods. The immortality bestowed on the one son thus became a renewed possibility for the rest, albeit via other forms of agonistic competition.

As would be expected, the victor received considerable fame and accolades in his native land. For example, in Athens, the victorious athlete was given the honor and leisure of free meals in the *prytaneum*, and in Sparta “they enjoyed the highest privilege to which a ‘peer’ might aspire for they were allowed to fight beside the king in battle.”⁶⁶ In many cities, when a victor returned from the sacred games, it was customary to make a breach in the city walls because the

⁶⁵ Huizinga, p. 50.

⁶⁶ Drees, p. 106.

victor had “assumed the identity of the god and consequently would have been entitled to a private entrance. In later times it was doubtless reinterpreted and may well have been regarded as an indication that a city which produces such valiant sons had no need of city walls.”⁶⁷ City walls, we know, are erected as a defense against uncertainty; they are erected for protection against unknown threats to the biological existence of the inhabitants and the immanent existence of the city itself. In short, they are political manifestations of the will to life. They are inspired by fear and erected as a barricade against death. Breaching the walls of a city after a native son has been victorious at Olympia is thus very significant symbolically—it demonstrates that the city as a whole is also participating in the cosmological projection embodied in the both the festival and the victorious athlete. It demonstrates that death, or at least the fear of death has, to some extent, been overcome through the deified athlete and the eternally recurring athletic festival.

Thus the agon, the competitions at Olympia, were a direct reflection of the theogonic cosmos. Participation in this struggle was a playful participation in the painful ‘death-struggle’ that is life. By playing with the most serious questions confronting existence, the Greeks were able to alleviate the seriousness of life. By participating in a playful recreation of the eternally recurring cosmological order, they were able, just as they were with the Dionysian festival, to turn “the nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live.”⁶⁸ They were able to turn the nauseous thoughts about life and its strangest and sternest problems into a higher form of ontological projection—cosmological projection. Solon sums it up rather succinctly:

I cannot, just by telling you about it, convince you of the pleasure of what happens at such a festival as well as you would learn for yourself, sitting in the middle of the crowd, watching the *arete* of men and physical beauty, amazing conditioning and great skill and irresistible force and daring and pride and unbeatable determination and indescribable passion for victory. I know that you would not stop praising and cheering and applauding.⁶⁹

And, as the order of nature was reflected in the athletic festival, the Hellene was able to praise and cheer the travails and uncertainties of human life and death; he was able to realize in himself

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*. Cf. Seutonius, *Nero*, 25.

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, section 7, p. 60.

⁶⁹ Lucian, *Anacharsis*, 14. As cited in Miller, *Arete*, p. 77.

the eternal joy of becoming – a joy which also encompasses joy in destruction. As he watched the beauty of the agon, he also watched a re-creation of life: his praising and cheering of the athletes would therefore be a praising and cheering of the eternal recurrence of life and death, and with the conclusion of the joyous festival, he could say, in accordance with Zarathustra's lesson of the eternal recurrence and the Superman, “Was that—life? Very well! Once more!”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 325.