

MYTH OR TRUTH

The Apollonian and Dionysian in The Death of Ivan Ilyich

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IN *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY*, FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE USES CLASSICAL GREEK TRAGEDIES TO BREAK DOWN THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE INTO TWO DICHOTOMIC CULTURES: THE APOLLINIAN AND THE DIONYSIAN. THE APOLLINIAN CULTURE REPRESENTS HUMANITY'S TENDENCY TOWARD ORDER, PATTERN, AND RATIONALISM, WHILE THE DIONYSIAN CULTURE REPRESENTS HUMANITY'S SIMULTANEOUS URGE TOWARD CHAOS AND EMOTIONAL INTUITION. WHEREAS CLASSICAL GREECE ALLOWED FOR BOTH TO COEXIST AND AUGMENT ONE ANOTHER THROUGH GREEK TRAGEDIES, WESTERN THINKING AND CULTURE ALLOWS FOR NO SUCH FRUITION; INSTEAD, WESTERN SOCIETY HEAVILY EMPHASIZES THE APOLLINIAN OVER THE NECESSITY OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE DIONYSIAN. IN *THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH*, LEO TOLSTOY TAKES THIS CULTURAL PRACTICE A STEP FURTHER, GIVING READERS A GLIMPSE INTO A SOCIETY THAT DENIES THE DIONYSIAN ENTIRELY. THROUGH THE DEMORALIZING DECLINE AND EVENTUAL DEATH OF IVAN ILYICH, TOLSTOY SUGGESTS THAT REJECTING THE DIONYSIAN NOT ONLY OBSTRUCTS SOCIETY'S TRUE UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE, BUT MAKES IT WHOLLY UNPREPARED TO HANDLE HUMANITY'S MOST ESSENTIAL TRUTH: ITS MORTALITY.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, author Friedrich Nietzsche analyzes the beginnings of Greek tragedy in order to reflect on the nature of human society, particularly that of Western thinking. He claims that Greek tragedies—and Classical Greece in general—accomplished what contemporary society has yet to achieve, which is the synthesis of Apollonian and Dionysian culture. Whereas both Classical and Western thinking exalt humanity’s need and desire for order and rationalism (i.e., Apollonian culture), only Classical thinking respects the necessary chaos and emotional instinct (i.e., Dionysian culture) that must also be acknowledged to form a complete picture of the human experience. In his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Leo Tolstoy exemplifies the consequences of glorifying the Apollonian at the expense of the Dionysian by portraying the slow and demoralizing death of his titular character Ivan Ilyich. The Apollonian culture of the story is so incognizant of Dionysian culture that it continuously disguises, and even rejects, the existence of human suffering and death. As a result, both Ivan and the people around him are unprepared, and largely unable, to face the harsh reality of mortality, adding much misery and fear to the end of Ivan’s life.

To begin, let me first set the stage by putting Nietzsche’s terms in their historical and cultural context. Nietzsche grounds the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy in the “excess of life” of Grecian culture from which the two symbolic godheads sprung. As opposed to the “moral eleva-



APOLLO (TOP) AND DIONYSUS (BOTTOM) (COURTESY OF FLICKR).

tion” of Christianity or other theologies, Olympians provided “nothing but the accents of an exuberant, triumphant life in which all things, whether good or evil, are deified.”¹ All characteristics of human life, all human impulses, were lauded and idolized in Classical Greek society, regardless of any moral judgment or reading of their worth. The deities were as complex, hypocritical, and prone to vice as any human being, leading Nietzsche to conclude, “thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it.”² With the gods of the day themselves representatives of humanity’s extremes, ordered Apollo and chaotic Dionysus were able to live as fundamental opposites without being in direct conflict. They could exist if not in harmony, then at least with mutual respect, allowing reason and instinct, order and disorder to hold the same amount of cultural weight. As a result, Greek society, and particularly Greek art, was able to foster an atmosphere in which both forces could exist as complements of each other, without the diminishment or invalidation of either.

Amidst this inclusive cultural climate, Nietzsche gave name to the two different, dichotomic subcultures at work. To understand the nature of the Dionysian culture, it is perhaps best to look at the ritualistic ecstatic dances and music that played during festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. As Greeks danced to the primal and rhythmic music of the festivals, losing themselves in the celebration, “all of nature’s excess in pleasure, grief, and knowledge became audible, even in piercing shrieks.”³ Nietzsche claims that through such festivals, the Greeks were able to acknowledge the integral and inescapable part chaos plays within human life. Rather than shy away from “the terror and horror of existence,” the Greeks willingly entered into a primal unity with it, where the most basic truths and instincts of nature and humanity were revealed. Nietzsche also concedes, however, that solely existing in such a “substratum of suffering and knowledge” ignores humanity’s additional impulses toward beauty and reason and would inevitably lead to death and pessimism.⁴ Just as Dionysus’ deification encouraged the emotional instinct and disorder of human life, Apollo’s prominence gave rise and validation to rationalism, beauty, and aesthetic order. Nietzsche writes, “Out of the original Titanic divine order of terror, the Olympian divine order of joy evolved through the Apollonian impulse toward beauty, just as roses burst from thorny bushes.”⁵ The Greeks understood that it is in the face of pain and suffering that humanity’s need for art and meaning becomes that much more intense, and that much more valued. Apollonian culture—including its

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emphasis on self-knowledge, proportion, moderation, and beauty—is essential to balancing out the extremes of the Dionysian culture; it is the thing that makes life worth living, the “rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion” humanity requires for “its continuous redemption.”⁶

Therefore, it is through the combination of the Apollonian artistic reason and the Dionysian impulse that the Greeks were able to produce the highest and truest of art forms: the Greek Tragedy. As Nietzsche writes, “the Dionysian and the Apollonian, in new births ever following and mutually augmenting one another, controlled the Hellenic genius.”⁷ Yet, this synthesis did not last. The “mutual augmentation” of the Apollonian and the Dionysian became more and more elusive in Greek tragedies, as each culture began to seek dominance over the other. Even life itself became the battleground on which the two halves of the dichotomy struggled, and continue to struggle, for total control. Nietzsche reflects, “And so, wherever the Dionysian prevailed, the Apollonian was checked and destroyed. But...it is equally certain that, wherever the first Dionysian onslaught was successfully withstood, the authority and majesty of the Delphic god exhibited itself as more rigid and menacing than ever.”⁸

It is exactly the latter of these realities that Tolstoy problematizes in his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, showcasing the need for both to exist in tandem. Through Ivan’s life, the reader is able to discern the Apollonian societal values he embodies. Ivan has one goal: to live life “just as life ought to go— easily, pleasantly, decently.”⁹ Within his personal life, Ivan seeks order, respectability, and polite pleasantness, as society expects of him. He enjoys marriage insofar as he enjoys the idea of marriage, while, at the same time, he appreciates the social status that accompanies it, thus “appealing to his superiors and their sense of propriety.”¹⁰ Yet, quickly he learns that marriage does not always fit that mold, as it does not “always mean enjoyment and decency, but...often disrupted them, and it was therefore necessary to guard against such disruptions.”¹¹ With the use of the delicate and polite word “disruption,” and the evasive structure of the sentence, Ivan textually

avoids naming or defining the problems in his marriage that stem from the Dionysian, therefore symbolizing society’s denial of its existence. Instead of recognizing and working through the chaos of marriage—intense emotions, erotic love, and even degrees of suffering—Ivan chooses to ignore them. They simply do not fit properly into society’s Apollonian conception of the union.

Just as the Apollonian dominates the Dionysian in his relationships and family life, so too does it control Ivan’s approach toward his work. Though Ivan works within the court system as a judge, he cares very little about justice, compassion, or truth. He enjoys his job because he enjoys the “knowledge of the power he wielded, the possibility of ruining anyone he fancied ruining,” afforded to him by a society that does not care about, nor is able to empathize with the suffering and chaos Ivan is employed to judge.¹² In fact, whenever faced with a potential breach of that strict order between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, “he felt strong enough...to reinstate the distinction between the official and the human by discarding the latter.”¹³ Though Ivan has the ability to connect with people on a more basic, empathetic level, he chooses to deny that Dionysian impulse; instead, he defines himself as the “official,” the embodiment of an ordered, rational Apollonian culture. Ivan is the “virtuoso performer,” always calculating and rationalizing, and as such he does not leave any room in his approach toward life to understand the irrationalism of his eventual suffering and death.¹⁴

Ivan is not alone in his inability to face mortality, however. Ivan’s friends and family also lack the capability to view Ivan’s misery outside of a self-centered, Apollonian lens. Throughout the latter half of the story, others around Ivan characterize his death and suffering as a “poison” and “oppression” affecting their lives; mortality is something entirely “indecent” and “unpleasant” that is somehow in his control, and, as his wife believes, “his fault.”¹⁵ Ivan realizes, “no one had any pity for him because no one had the slightest desire to understand his situation.”¹⁶ Because they have so relentlessly denied the Dionysian, they can only interpret his suffering and death as a break from the

Apollonian norm, rather than as a very natural and integral part of human life. Furthermore, instead of using Ivan's experience to contemplate their own mortality, they "otherize" his pain and suffering, depicting their unwillingness to understand the Dionysian impulse behind it, while perpetuating their continued inability to ever truly understand or empathize with it. As a result, Ivan's friends and family are only able to handle his impending death by rejecting its existence and significance entirely. To the very end of Ivan's life, they lie about the fundamental, human truth behind Ivan's suffering and death, "reducing the solemn act of his death to the same level as their social calls, their draperies, the sturgeon for dinner."¹⁷

The Apollonian culture is so ingrained into Ivan and the society around him that it is only in the last few moments of his life that he is able to face the Dionysian roots of humanity—suffering and death—and move past his crippling fear of death. After weeks of denial, Ivan begins to understand the emptiness of the Apollonian-centered life without the Dionysian to balance it out. He realizes, "This vindication of his lifestyle was holding him down, preventing him from moving on, and causing him the greatest suffering."¹⁸ Without the awareness of his inherent mortality, Ivan is unable to comprehend or move past the shock and supposed meaninglessness of his suffering. Thus, it is only when he faces his death, when he directly acknowledges his fear and then recognizes its uselessness, that he experiences his first moment of true joy; Ivan is finally able to exclaim "Oh bliss!"—just as the Greeks screamed in ecstasy in a similar recognition of the primal unity during Dionysian festivals.¹⁹

Yet, Tolstoy makes certain that he does not give us, the readers, any easy answers; we do not know, nor does Tolstoy give any guesses to the reason behind the "bliss," or the origin of the "light" Ivan sees in his final seconds for that matter.²⁰ Instead, Tolstoy abruptly forces us to enter into our own conceptions and imaginations of death and a potential afterlife to complete the picture, to round out Ivan's final experience. He compels us to ask ourselves if we have effectively reflected on our mortality, our Dionysian roots, enough to truly grasp the end of the book. As Nietzsche explains, it is only in the moment when we reconcile with the Apollonian and the Dionysian that we are truly able to learn any truth about humanity.

ENDNOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Press, 1967), 41.
2. *Ibid.*, 43.
3. *Ibid.*, 46.
4. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 45.
5. *Ibid.*, 43.
6. *Ibid.*, 45.
7. *Ibid.*, 47.
8. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 47.
9. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Ronald Wilks et al., (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 179.
10. *Ibid.*, 170.
11. *Ibid.*, 171.
12. Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 173.
13. *Ibid.*, 179.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 187, 188, 196.
16. *Ibid.*, 199.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 216.
19. Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 217.
20. *Ibid.*

REFERENCES

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Walter Kauffman. New York: Vintage Press, 1967.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Translated by Ronald Wilks, Anthony Briggs, and David McDuff. London: Penguin Books, 2008.