Nietzsche's Dabbling in the Political

To say that someone dabbles is very often a thinly veiled critique. To dabble is amateurish, not serious; it is to do something in a partial or inconclusive fashion. It is even said to be guilty of a certain conceit, an unwillingness to cede to those better qualified and more committed to what they are doing. So what does it mean, then, to say that someone dabbles in the political? This would seem a hobby especially fraught with pitfalls. Doesn't the political in particular demand serious engagement and concentrated attention? Moreover, doesn't Nietzsche himself imply more or less the same? For example, in the context of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he does not simply trace the origin of tragedy, but also relates it to the political concerns of his day, saying that one cannot grasp the significance of tragedy unless one also comprehends this "serious German problem."[1] And later, even though he has changed his political views, he is still equally earnest, when he asks in *Ecce Homo*, "What have I never forgiven Wagner? That he *condescended* to the Germans—that he became *reichsdeutsch*…As far as Germany extends it *ruins* culture."[2] It would seem, then, that rather than *dabbling* in the political, Nietzsche is fully engaged, intent, *serious*.

At the same time, however, isn't there something about the idea of dabbling that suits Nietzsche? Isn't its primary meaning as a "splashing about" strikingly resonant with his denunciation of the "spirit of gravity" in favour of "light feet"? In fact, if we revisit the two passages cited above, we might recognize in the latter of them not simply seriousness, but also and simultaneously a *critique of seriousness*. In other words, it may just be that Nietzsche's dabbling in the political is his way of taking the political seriously *precisely* by not taking it *too* seriously.

To understand how this could be so, we must return to Nietzsche's initial, and subsequently repudiated, engagement with the political. This engagement is particularly evident in the essay entitled *Socrates und die griechische Tragödie* that precedes and forms the basis of *The Birth of Tragedy*. The first thing we might remark about this very early essay, is that—as in the *Birth* itself—its politics is inseparable from the question of art. This is of utmost importance, because, as we

1 Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy,* p.13.
2 Nietzsche, F. *Ecce Homo,* p. 30.

will see, the seriousness of the political in Nietzsche depends very much on how seriously we take art. In fact, the latter is the challenge he aggressively throws out to us in the preface of the essay:

> "To take an aesthetic problem so seriously is clearly offensive to most points of view, as much for our aesthetes and their disgusting weakness, as for the robust and stout rabble, who see in art no more than a pastime."[3]

Already in this passage, Nietzsche makes socio-political distinctions between individuals based on their relation to art; however, it is only in the light of the politics that he militates *against* that these distinctions really come into focus, and what Nietzsche opposes is liberalism. In his early militaristic political phase, Nietzsche sees its dream of the "dignity of man," its empathy, and egalitarian impulses, as elements of an "anti-cultural doctrine" that stands in the "way of the genius,"[4] and prefers to it the politics of the Kaiser, which, for Nietzsche at least, had been able to show its strength in the then recent victory against France. Nietzsche's early politics, in other words, is an elitist one, which imagines the most able in all fields working toward the goal of the formation of the genius. As he puts it, "[n]either the state, nor the people, nor humankind are of themselves the way there [i.e. into the future], rather the goal lies in their apex, in the great 'individual,' the saint and the artist."[5]

But as it turns out, this desired genius is not simply "the saint and the artist," he is also "a warrior, a poet, a philosopher all at once."[6] He is, in other words, "a Renaissance man," a "future hero of the tragic consciousness," with whom will be inaugurated "the German rebirth of the Hellenic world."[7] Such a hero lies at the crux of what Nietzsche describes as his political hopes. And we might feel we understood these hopes—even as we also feel somewhat discomforted by them—if it weren't for one problem: namely, that the "Renaissance man" they call for cannot be actualized, and is necessarily a myth. In fact, Nietzsche acknowledges as much when he explains that this "future hero" is not to be found in the future at all, that he is "neither before nor

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[3] Nietzsche, F. *Socrates und die griechische Tragödie,* p. 3.
[4] *Ibid.,* p. 7.
[5] *Ibid.,* p. 6.
[6] *Ibid.,* p. 5.
[7] *Ibid.*

behind us, but outside of time."[8] What we might even say is that Nietzsche's "future hero" is most readily grasped, not in terms of political activity as it is commonly thought of, but by means of a literary notion, of the "tragic hero" as it is understood by Walter Benjamin, who describes the tragic hero's action as follows:

> "[I]n respect of its victim, the hero, the tragic sacrifice differs from any other kind, being at once a first and final sacrifice. A final sacrifice in the sense of the atoning sacrifice to gods who are upholding an ancient right; a first sacrifice in the sense of the representative action, in which new aspects of the life of the nation become manifest."[9]

In Walter Benjamin's description of the tragic hero, we recover the basic traits of Nietzsche's "future hero." The latter is a mythical figure lying "outside of time," because he is "at once a first and final sacrifice." As such, his politics lies less in what he does or believes than the extent to which his mythic sacrifice relates to the future of his nation.

Moreover, tragic heroism makes sense of the strong connection Nietzsche establishes between art and politics. The relation is twofold. On the one hand, Nietzsche explicitly specifies that the "future hero" is an artist and poet. On the other, as a tragic hero, the "future hero" is inherently an artistic figure, stemming as he does from the domains of tragic drama and myth. As such, a politics embodied by the "future hero" is a politics that derives its very forms and concepts from the domain of art. It is only in this light that we can fully appreciate Nietzsche's early challenge to take art seriously: For him, the very possibility of the political depends upon it.

However, doesn't this seriousness also get him into trouble? Doesn't taking art too seriously run the risk of becoming a sort of dogmatic philistinism?—an unwillingness to engage in the possibilities art opens up—both revolutionary and democratic? As Thomas Mann puts it in *Doctor Faustus*: "Far be it from me to deny the seriousness of art; but when it becomes serious, then one rejects art and is not capable of it."[10] We

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[8] *Ibid.,* p. 6.
[9] Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* pp 106-7.
[10] Mann, Thomas. *Doctor Faustus,* p. 179.

see this risk in action here, because as it turns out, Nietzsche's argument for taking art seriously in *Socrates und die griechische Tragödie* depends upon the very politics it is in turn also the basis for. And as such, art and politics become entangled in a vicious circle of self-reinforcing conservatism.

To explain: the motivation Nietzsche offers in this essay for taking art seriously is entirely dependent upon our sympathy with certain "consonant feelings." Originally, "consonant feeling" is introduced as a description for the kind of intellectual experience Nietzsche believes himself to share with Wagner. As such, *Socrates und die griechische Tragödie* would be a "discussion over the origin and goal of the tragic work of art, in which the difficult attempt is undertaken to transpose our so wonderfully *consonant feeling* into conceptual form."[11] However, *this* "consonant feeling" is only a taste of the much wider resonance Nietzsche imagines his ideas eliciting, and it is in this larger circle of "consonant feeling" that his arguments about art and the political rest. As he puts it later in the essay (again addressing himself to Wagner): "Ah, my honourable friend, scarcely can I say in what way I tie my hopes for this rebirth [of the Hellenic spirit] with the current bloody glory of the German name."[12] What this means is that it is the actual political and military successes of the Kaiser, which underlie Nietzsche's motivation for taking artistic renewal seriously. As such, when he then turns and bases his political hopes upon this artistic renewal, he is really doing no more than conservatively reaffirming the politics already in place. In such a circular situation, it is hard to imagine an artistic renewal being anything more than a changing of the guard, whereby the "future hero" becomes the latest preserver of the old order.

This occurs, because the notion of a "consonant feeling" closes off possibilities before they have a chance to appear as possibilities. It bars the possibility, for example, that the "future hero" could promise a German future free of blood and sacrifice, and assures that rebirth will be nothing other than ever more tragedy. But perhaps even most importantly, "consonant feeling" eliminates the possibility of ever questioning "consonant feeling" itself. Because uncritically presupposed, "consonant feeling" is

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[11] Nietzsche, F. *Socrates und die griechische Tragödie,* p. 3 (my emphasis). Note that the preface to *Socrates und die griechische Tragödie* is directed toward Richard Wagner.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 5.

taken *too* seriously, and becomes a kind of *ersatz* seriousness, which actually wards *against* serious change and genuine rupture and renewal. It becomes that serious tone which reassures us that our expectations will indeed be satisfied.

Nietzsche signals his awareness of the complexity of the notion of seriousness in the preface to *The Birth of Tragedy.* There he contrasts the seriousness of his aesthetic problem with what he calls the "seriousness of life," the concern of those who see "art as nothing more than an entertaining irrelevance."[13] These two seriousnesses—seriousness and "seriousness" (in quotation marks), if you will—form an important basis of Nietzsche's on-going thought on both art and the political. On the one hand, they are a function of Nietzsche's elitist and anti-democratic impulses. For him the world is divided into the strong few and the weak many, the rare yes-sayers and the *décadent* masses, and thus also the exceptionally serious and indifferently "serious." However, it must also be noted that for Nietzsche the difference represented by these pairs is not simply one of degree; it is not simply that the strong few are strong*er.* Rather, as Gilles Deleuze emphasizes in his reading of Nietzsche, the strong and the weak represent fundamentally different types.[14] Thus, and on the other hand, when Nietzsche speaks of a seriousness that distinguishes itself from banal, or even *ersatz*, "seriousness," he is undertaking a critique of seriousness that will, in turn, inform those domains he takes most seriously: art and the political.

The cornerstone of this critique is his insight that seriousness is actually not all that serious. In fact, the fundamental weakness of "seriousness" in quotation marks is precisely that it is strictly serious, that is, it is monotonously and gloomily grave. In *On the Genealogy of Morals,* he calls this the

> "the horror—by means of which promises were once made all over the earth, and guarantees and undertakings given—something of this *survives* still wherever solemnity, seriousness, secrecy, and sombre colours are found in the life of men and nations: the past, the longest, deepest,

[13] Nietzsche, F. *The Birth of Tragedy,* p. 13.
[14] See *Nietzsche et la philosophie.* PUF, Paris, 1962.

> harshest past, breathes on us and wells up in us whenever we become 'serious.'"[15]

Such "seriousness" is horrible because it is manipulative; it claims martyrs by preying upon the belief that "a cause for which someone is willing to die…must have something in it," must be "serious."[16] Whereas, in fact, "[t]hose things which mankind has hitherto pondered seriously are not even realities, merely imaginings, more strictly speaking *lies* from the bad instincts of sick…injurious natures."[17] What the "serious" in quotation marks suffers from is *ressentiment,* a wallowing in past injury that blocks all hope and projection into the future. Faced with such "seriousness" one must counter with a seriousness infused with "high spirits" and even "cheerfulness":

> "To stay cheerful when involved in a gloomy and exceedingly responsible business is no inconsiderable art: yet what could be more necessary than cheerfulness? Nothing succeeds in which high spirits play no part. Only excess of strength is proof of strength.—*A revaluation of all values…* such a destiny of a task compels one every instant to run out into the sunshine so as to shake off a seriousness grown all too oppressive."[18]

So what is this art of seriousness? How can one be serious without being *too* serious? Strangely enough, what Nietzsche implies in the many passages where he contrasts *his* "profound seriousness" with that in quotation marks is that one can be serious without being too serious *only* by *first* exposing oneself to the risk of being too serious. Profound seriousness, in other words, appears only in reflection upon seriousness, only in moments of relaxation that punctuate seriousness itself. When, for example, Nietzsche speaks of his seriousness in the *Twilight of the Idols,* he rhapsodises about a double movement of engagement and withdrawal: "ah, who today could grasp *from how profound a seriousness* a hermit is here relaxing—The most incomprehensible thing about us is our cheerfulness."[19] As such, profound

[15] Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals,* p. 42.
[16] Nietzsche, F. *The Anti-Christ,* p. 183.
[17] Nietzsche, F. *Ecce Homo,* p. 36.
[18] Nietzsche, F. *Twilight of the Idols,* p. 31.
[19] *Ibid.,* p. 73.

seriousness is really dual; its seriousness is marked by an essential moment of non-seriousness, a "gay science," that allows "the possibility of one day being entitled to approach the problems of morality *in high spirits.*"[20]

So what happens when Nietzsche attempts to do just this? What happens, in other words, when, with "high spirits," he dabbles in the political? For one thing, he turns against his earlier, pro-Kaiser, pro-Wagner position. This is clear from the passage we cited at the outset in which he denounces Wagner as "*reichsdeutsch*." But the rejection of Wagner goes deeper than this, because even if it seems at times that Nietzsche simply trades his pro-German stance for a pro-European one, in fact, Nietzsche's mature thinking on the political and art constitutes much less a stance than an extended investigation into the danger—but by the same token, the necessity—of stances.

In this investigation Nietzsche appeals to two counter-examples, that is, two models for what *not* to do. The first of these is Socrates. In the *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche relates his critique of the ancient philosopher directly to the problem of seriousness:

> "It is indecent to display all one's goods. What has first to have itself proved is of little value. Wherever authority is still part of accepted usage and one does not 'give reasons' but commands, the dialectician is a kind of buffoon: he is laughed at, he is not taken seriously.—Socrates was the buffoon who *got himself taken seriously*: what was really happening when that happened?"[21]

For Nietzsche, Socrates represents everything that can be wrong with seriousness. The latter's demands for clarity and intelligibility makes a "tyrant of reason,"[22] such

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[20] Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals,* p. 9. The full passage develops the kind of duality I am speaking of: 'it seems to me now that there is nothing that better *repays* serious consideration: to such rewards belong for example the possibility of one day being entitled to approach the problems of morality *in high spirits.* For high spirits, or, to put it in my own words, *gay science*—is a reward: a reward for long, bold, hard-working, and subterranean seriousness, which is not to everyone's taste, admittedly.'

[21] Nietzsche, F. *Twilight of the Idols,* p. 41.

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 43.

that reason rejects everything that is unable or unwilling to justify itself. Reason pessimistically presumes everything guilty until proven otherwise, and by such a means "devitalises"[23] its victims. One of its victims is ancient Greek tragedy, whose decline is outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and another is Athenian society itself, whose descent into *décadence* is a theme of the *Twilight of the Idols*. But why, we must still ask, was this triumph of the rabble over noble Athens possible? How, in other words, did Socrates indeed get himself taken seriously? The answer, strangely enough, is by his very non-seriousness. That is, Socrates "exercised fascination," because he "discovered a new kind of *agon*,"[24] a new game, with which he was able to entertain the aristocratic circles of Athens. But like all games, this one was also serious, because the distraction it offered, the flight into rationality it made possible, was an escape from what was perceived as the all more serious menace, the anarchy of the instincts. "[O]ne was in peril, one had only *one* choice: either to perish—or be *absurdly rational.*"[25] In Nietzsche's view, such absurd rationality was simply the choice of one form of *décadence* over another; nevertheless, it is still possible to see its appeal. Absurd rationality was taken seriously precisely because it appeared an escape, a game. Its seriousness, like that of the *buffo* Socrates himself, triumphed because it contained within it a non-serious moment.

It is this non-serious moment that makes Socrates exemplary; and if only he had directed this non-serious seriousness toward the furthering of life, then he might even have been a positive model for Nietzsche, but as it was, the ancient Greek is the example of what not to do. In fact, this very same mix of promise and disappointment marks the other counter-example in Nietzsche's life: Wagner. For, according to Nietzsche, Wagner yields to *décadence* like the cultured Athenians before him. Rather than pursue the "ultimate, highest artistic freedom, artistic transcendence,"[26] he becomes the mouthpiece of Christian morality and composes *Parsifal,* a denigrating "homage to chastity."[27] For Nietzsche, the question really has to be: "was this Parsifal meant to be taken *seriously*?"[28] Because, as he says,

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23 *Ibid.,* p. 42.
24 *Ibid.*
25 *Ibid.,* p. 43.
26 Nietzsche, F. *On the Genealogy of Morals,* p. 79.
27 *Ibid.,* p. 78.
28 *Ibid.,* p. 79.

> "one might be tempted to suspect, even to wish the opposite—that Wagner's Parsifal was meant as a joke, as an epilogue and satyr play, so to speak, with which the tragedian Wagner wanted to take his leave of us, of himself, above all, of *tragedy,* in a fitting and worthy way, that is to say, in an excess of the highest and most mischievous parody of the tragic itself, of the whole horror of earthly seriousness and misery as it has existed from time immemorial, of the *crudest form*, now overcome at last, assumed by the unnatural ascetic ideal."[29]

Such a leave-taking by the "tragedian Wagner" would be the opening of tragedy to its own parody, to its own non-serious seriousness. And as such would be the model for a politics that avoided becoming its own tragic victim.

Moreover, the person who would pursue such a politics would be, in Nietzsche's view, a "good European," and it is on this theme that I wish to conclude, because this idea is as relevant today as it was for Nietzsche over a century ago. There is much discussion these days about Europe and about what it means to be a European: And it is an open question what a "good" European—in the geo-political sense—believes, and believes worth defending. One answer, or at least approach, to this question has been to maintain that what a "good" European is is *not* an American. As it is, in fact, the counter-exemplarity of America for Europe has a long history. What is important to note, however, is that unlike some today who imagine the relation between these two representatives of Western democracy as that of unavoidable confrontation, who see them as somehow mutually exclusive such that the one will necessarily thwart the other, Nietzsche saw them as part of the same development. Because of his anti-democratic tendencies, he sees this commonality in a negative light, and yet his insight still rings true:

> "But there are opposite ages, really democratic, where…a certain cocky faith…the Athenian faith that first becomes noticeable in the Periclean age, the faith of the Americans today that is more and more becoming the European faith as well: The individual becomes convinced that he can do

[29] *Ibid.*

> just about everything and *can manage almost any role,* and everybody experiments with himself, improvises, makes new experiments; and all nature ceases and becomes art."[30]

The irony is that this faith, which he here denounces as an "artist's faith," a faith of actors,[31] is not actually first and foremost an insidious export from the US or sign of European *décadence,* but rather the very faith needed by "good Europeans." What separates "good Europeans" from their *décadent* peers is not that the latter restlessly experiments and the former purposefully constructs—a misunderstanding that Nietzsche himself encourages with his opposition of "actors" and "architects"—rather what marks "good Europeans" is that their experimentation is done, if you will, in *good faith*. A "good European" knows that he is living in an era of experimentation, and thus does not claim to have arrived at some final solution to contemporary problems. "Good Europeans" do not proclaim party platforms. As Nietzsche puts it, speaking for "good Europeans" by playing with the political slogans of his day:

> "We "conserve" nothing; neither do we want to return to any past periods; we are not by any means "liberal"; we do not work for "progress"; we do not need to plug up our ears against the sirens who in the market place sing of the future: their song about "equal rights," a "free society," "no more masters and no more servants" has no allure for us."[32]

In the view of "good Europeans," not only are political slogans suspect, but also all political systems, no matter how ideal, will necessarily, *as systems,* become the tragic victims of their own rigid demands. According to Nietzsche, the "good European" is simply "too open-minded, too malicious, too spoiled…too well informed [and] too travelled"[33] for such reified politics. In other words, the "good European" has much more in common with the many emigrants who in Nietzsche's day left for distant shores: both are "compelled to this by—a faith,"[34] by the conviction that they deserve more. Such "good Europeans" refuse to take any political vision so seriously as to

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[30] Nietzsche, F. *The Gay Science,* p. 303.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.,* p. 338.
[33] *Ibid.,* p. 339.
[34] *Ibid.,* p. 340. My point in this is obviously to challenge the article of faith that Nietzsche's idea of the "good European" is necessarily concerned with actual Europeans in the geo-political sense.

believe that there cannot be something more or better. They hope to be able to project politically into the distant future, but also believe that whatever the result of the endeavour, that it will have failed if it does not also bear witness to the strengths of dabblers: an openness to changes of opinion, a willingness to accept one's mistakes, and, perhaps most importantly, the self-confidence needed to laugh at oneself, and encourage others to join in the mirth.

Julie Kuhlken
Concordia University