

Chapter 9

‘The Last Great Romantic’: Nietzsche’s Romanticism Out of the Spirit of Decadence

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This chapter addresses Nietzsche’s complex relations to, and reactions against, those often entwined Romantic and Decadent tendencies that he identifies in philosophers, writers, and artists.¹ That Nietzsche’s relationship to Romanticism and Decadence is both philosophical and poetical in nature indicates the novelty of the approach he adopts to the broader questions of art and aesthetics. Reconceiving aesthetics from the perspective of the artist, Nietzsche rejects Kantian notions of disinterestedness and the transcendental sublime because Kant ‘like all philosophers considered art and the beautiful exclusively from the point of view of the “spectator”’.² For Nietzsche, Kant’s metaphysical concept of the beautiful ‘without interest’ (*GM*, p. 83) is a denial and an impoverishment of the aesthetic experience and, correspondingly, life itself.³

Like metaphysics, nihilism, and pessimism, Decadence for Nietzsche was a symptom of the greatest weakness. Decadent exuberance was an act of *nay*-saying; a denial of life on its own unquestionable terms. In this sense, Decadence was not merely an illness that infected the period later identified by literary historians as the *fin de siècle*,⁴ but a sickness capable of manifesting itself in any given epoch, stretching as far back as the Socratic age. Nietzsche clearly conceived of this

¹ For readings that align Nietzsche’s sense of Romanticism with Decadence see Andrea Gogroß Vorhees, *Defining Modernism: Baudelaire and Nietzsche on Romanticism, Modernity, and Wagner*, *Studies in Literary Criticism and Theory* 8 (New York: Lang, 2004), pp. 107–18. See also Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 1–12. For a critique of such readings see Michael Silk, ‘Nietzsche, Decadence, and the Greeks’, *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 595, 587–606. Hereafter *NDG*.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (1996; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), p. 83. Hereafter *GM*.

³ For a detailed discussion of Nietzsche’s re-evaluation of art and aesthetics see Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche, The Arguments of the Philosophers Series* (1983; London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 521–2.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of this see George de Huszar, ‘Nietzsche’s Theory of Decadence and the Transvaluation of all Values’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 6 (1945): 259–60, 259–72.

Decadent contagion as a historically and philosophically widespread phenomenon, as well as identifying ‘dialects as a symptom of *décadence*, for example in the most famous case of all: in the case of Socrates’.⁵ Socrates’s outward rude health and exuberance of spirit and intellect were signs for Nietzsche that, as the Greek philosopher recognized in his final moments, ‘Socrates himself has only been a long time sick....’⁶ Socratic reason and ‘dialectic’ (as a means to harmonize conflicting appetites) was ‘no physician’ to the condition of life, but only a symptom of a Decadent weakness that established a life-denying mastery of self and world to which ‘death alone is a physician’ (*TI*, [12], p. 44). In spite of such moments of outright condemnation of Socrates as man and dialectician, Nietzsche maintained an ambivalent relationship with the figure of Socrates throughout his own career. What Nietzsche found in this figure can be construed, on one hand, as a dogmatic life-denying self-mastery on Socrates’s part and, on the other, might be conceived of as a creative act of self-fashioning akin to Nietzsche’s own literary philosophical endeavours.⁷ Ironically, then, Socratic self-mastery has the potential to fulfil Nietzsche’s expectations of an authentic aesthetic act in the manner of the ‘grand ambition’: ‘To become master of the chaos one is; to compel one’s chaos to become form’.⁸

Nietzsche’s ambivalence towards Socrates equally holds true for the stance he adopts in relation to both Decadence and Romanticism. For all that Nietzsche disavows Decadence it remains for him an essential and necessary state, which must be endured and overcome.⁹ As such Decadence is as vital to Nietzsche’s thought as experience is to William Blake’s conception of redemption. Paradoxically, Nietzsche opposes all that is Decadent and Romantic by virtue of his own deliberate absorption in all that Decadence and Romanticism has to offer. ‘*Décadence*’, Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, ‘is what I have practised most’ and ‘in this if in anything I am master’ (*EH*, [1], p. 40). But his account and mastery of Decadence, as Nietzsche self-consciously declares, means that ‘I am the *opposite* of a *décadent*: for I have just described *myself*’ (*EH*, [1], p. 41). Decadence is an inevitable stage for any epoch; it must be endured and self-overcome.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. and intro. R.J. Hollingdale (1979; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), [1], p. 39. Hereafter parenthetically referenced with section and page number as *EH*.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale and intro. Michael Tanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), [12], p. 44. Hereafter parenthetically referenced with section and page number as *TI*.

⁷ Alexander Nehamas offers an excellent reading of the complexities of Nietzsche’s sustained ambivalence to Socrates. See Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998), pp. 153, 128–56.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. R.J. Hollingdale, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage-Random, 1968), III, [842], p. 444. Hereafter parenthetically referenced with book, section, and page number as *WP*.

⁹ See Silk, *NDG*, 595.

Romanticism and Decadence are pandemics across time, place, and space which are an active 'impoverishment of life'.¹⁰ Nietzsche observes in *The Gay Science* that the Romantic spirit – like Decadence – is a sickness which the highest type must overcome by conquering 'not only his time but also his prior aversion and contradiction *against* this time, his suffering from this time, his un-timeliness, his *romanticism*' (*GS*, V, [380], p. 343). Nietzsche's diagnosis extends to all the great names (including Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and by implication his own) of German philosophy, which he proclaims 'is the most fundamental form of romanticism' (*WP*, II, [419], p. 225). Nietzsche implicates himself further in the catastrophe of Romanticism by denouncing his early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in a later 'Attempt at Self-Criticism' (1886), as a re-enactment of 'the familiar romantic finale – break, break down, return and collapse before an old faith'.¹¹

As with Decadence, Nietzsche presents himself as an outsider commenting on the fallacy of the 'romantic credo' and, simultaneously, a conspirator implicated in the impending cultural disaster of Decadence already synonymous with Romanticism. Nietzsche's theatrical positioning of himself in these dual roles illustrates his alertness to his own literary and philosophical transformations over the duration of his writing career. Curiously, this artistic self-consciousness possessed by Nietzsche as a writer makes him akin to the fantastical creature of the Romantic poet's imagination which is, as we are told in *The Birth of Tragedy*, 'like the weird image of the fairy tale [that] can turn its eyes at will and behold itself; he is at once subject and object, at once poet, actor, and spectator' (*BT*, p. 52). If Nietzsche was in opposition to Decadence as a consequence of his own self-conscious immersion in all things Decadent, then Nietzsche was also a Romantic type, at once antithetical to, and implicated in, the traits of Romanticism that he outwardly deploras.

As Henry Staten neatly proposes, 'Romanticism would not be something *external* to Nietzsche's project but something that works from within, as what has to be opposed so strenuously because it is so intimate, so proper to Nietzsche's own economy.'¹² Much the same can be said of the ambivalent presence of Decadence in Nietzsche's intellectual economy. An affinity with Schopenhauer's Decadent aesthetics and 'romantic pessimism' is evident in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche believes that the tragic and destructive art of the Dionysian (particularly expressed through music) discloses something of the true character of a chaotic reality without order, rules, purpose, or meaning. In essence, the Dionysian encapsulates precisely what Nietzsche later defines as Romantic art in opposition to Apollonian Classical forms of art. Nietzsche conceives of life,

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage-Random, 1974), V, [370], p. 328. Hereafter parenthetically referenced with book, section, and page number as *GS*.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random, 1967), p. 11. Hereafter *BT*.

¹² Henry Staten, *Nietzsche's Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), p. 215.

history, even existence itself, as a process of mourning communicated through the Dionysian spirit of music which speaks only of ‘the elegiac sorrow of an eternal loss’ (*BT*, p. 118). The Dionysian discloses a tragic realism beneath the calm surface of the appearance of things.¹³

On Nietzsche’s account, the music of Dionysian tragedy reveals to us that our ordered reality of rules, meaning, and purpose is nothing more than an illusion. Such illusion, even a form of self-delusion, belongs to the aspirations of Apollonian art which envisions order and harmony to ensure that ‘beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life’ (*BT*, p. 104). This harmonious illusory dream of Apollonian art is the exact opposite of the tragic affirmation of reality revealed by its Dionysian counterpart. Dionysian art, for Nietzsche, does not only make us realize the tragic and chaotic nature of reality, but also consoles us by ending our sense of separation from the world around us by piercing us with ‘the maddening sting of these pains just when we have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy in this metaphysical comfort’ (*BT*, pp. 104–5). In direct contrast, Nietzsche’s concept of Apollonian art ‘tears us from Dionysian universality and lets us find delight in individuals; it attached outward pity to them, and by means of them it satisfies our sense of beauty which longs for great and sublime forms’ (*BT*, p. 128). It is through a discussion of Schopenhauer’s concept of art and the negation of the will that Nietzsche eventually conceives of the Dionysian and Apollonian forms of art as not mutually exclusive, but interrelated so that ‘Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus’ (*BT*, p. 130). Arguably by extension neither, then, does Nietzsche’s distinction between bad (Decadent) Romantic art and good (pure) Classical art hold fast since both forms could give shape to authentic or inauthentic sentiments; both forms of art could potentially enrich or impoverish life.

Similar to the treatment of Socrates, Nietzsche’s ambivalent response to Schopenhauer is also instructive about his conflicted attitudes towards Romanticism. Much debate has centred on whether Nietzsche upholds or denies Schopenhauer’s severe pessimism about existence conceived of as endless suffering and illusion born of our submission to the demands of the will. For Schopenhauer, the will – closely aligned with Kant’s notion of the ‘thing-in-itself’ – is sovereign of all our knowledge and reason, existing outside of the confines of space and time. Paradoxically, the best life, then, is driven by the will towards its ultimate *telos* or end purpose manifest in its own annihilation. Only through art and our experience of the aesthetic, Schopenhauer contends, is this power of the will temporarily overcome or negated. The tragic mode, for Schopenhauer, brings

¹³ Writing on the purpose of fiction, Jonathan Franzen construes the Apollonian and Dionysian mode (once the former is assumed by the latter) as a ‘tragic realism’; glossing *The Birth of Tragedy* he writes that ‘an anarchic “Dionysian” insight into the darkness and unpredictability of life is wedded to an “Apollonian” clarity and beauty of form to produce an experience that’s religious in its intensity. Even for people who don’t believe in anything ... the formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight can be ... redemptive’ (p. 91). See Franzen, ‘Why Bother?’, *How to be Alone* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002).

us into 'complete knowledge of the nature of the world, which has a *quietening* effect on the will' (original emphasis). Writing of one of the highest modes of the aesthetic in *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer adapts Leibnitz's words to claim that 'music is the unconscious exercise in metaphysics in which the mind does not know that it is philosophising'.¹⁴ That Nietzsche's subtitle to the first edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* read 'Out of the Spirit of Music' suggests that a younger Nietzsche shared, perhaps, before his decisive break with Wagner, some of Schopenhauer's assumptions about the role of music and art more generally even if, by contrast, he conceived of Dionysian tragic disclosure as a means of agitating the will.

Nietzsche's preference for Dionysian forms of art – appropriately described through the language of intoxication – suggests both Schopenhauer's influence on Nietzsche's early thought and aligns him with those pessimistic Romantics who 'suffer from an *impoverishment of life* and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge, or intoxication, convulsions, anaesthesia, and madness' (*GS*, IV, [370], p. 328). Crucial to Nietzsche's early and later thought is his conception of art as encompassing life, which is only possible because he conceives of life, fundamentally, as art.¹⁵ This model of life as art enables Nietzsche, at his most accusatory, to discern between those of a Romantic disposition who seek 'calm seas . . . and redemption for themselves' and those, so he believes like himself, in *Untimely Meditations*, who advocate art as a 'voyage over strange [*Fremden*] dark seas'.¹⁶ It would seem that bad art is the creation of those Romantic Decadents so detested by Nietzsche. Yet Nietzsche's imagery for these opposing types of art point to nominal differences between them and evidently is born of his preference for Dionysian intoxication over sober Apollonian order. Nietzsche's privileging of Dionysian over Apollonian art is not in itself anti-Romantic but, in fact, merely a preference for one kind of aesthetic illusion over another. Arguably, the respective masks of Apollo and Dionysus symbolize two distinct illusory modes of Romanticism, one the light of visionary transformation and the other of dark, decadent, and destructive disclosure.¹⁷

Adopting a positive logical stance in *Human, All Too Human*, written (as its subtitle, 'A Book for Free Spirits', suggests) after the split with Wagner,¹⁸ Nietzsche berates art for its capacity for illusion and as one of the vestiges of the human impulse towards the metaphysical:

¹⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, ed. David Berman and trans. Jill Berman (London: Everyman, 1995), III, p. 172, III, p. 160. Hereafter *WWI*.

¹⁵ See Alexander Nehamas, *Life as Literature: Nietzsche* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), for the centrality of art to Nietzsche's thinking about the self and world.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale and intro. J.P. Stern (1983; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 116. Hereafter *UM*.

¹⁷ See Caroline 'Kay' Joan S. Picart, 'Nietzsche as Masked Romantic', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55 (1997): 273–91.

¹⁸ See Carl Pletsch, *Young Nietzsche: Becoming a Genius* (1991; New York: Free, 1992), p. 202.

Art makes the thinker's heart heavy. – How strong the metaphysical need is and how hard nature makes it to bid it a final farewell, can be seen from the fact that even when the free spirit has divested himself of everything metaphysical the highest effects of art can easily set the metaphysical strings, which have long been silent or indeed snapped apart, vibrating in sympathy; so it can happen, for example, that a passage in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony will make him feel he is hovering above the earth in a dome of stars with the dream of *immortality* in his heart: all the stars seem to glitter around him and the earth sinks farther and farther away. – If he becomes aware of being in this condition he feels a profound stab in the heart and sighs for the man who will lead him back to his lost love, whether she be called religion or metaphysics. It is in such moments that his intellectual probity is put to the test. (Original emphases)¹⁹

Here Nietzsche avows and recreates the transformative effects (albeit illusory or delusory) of the power of art. As an artist Nietzsche beautifully captures the transformation brought about within the listener who, enwrapped in Beethoven's symphony, transcends place and time to be, momentarily, at one with the starry firmament. But Nietzsche's artistry and rhetoric is carefully controlled and self-consciously aware, 'like the weird image of the fairy tale [that] can turn its eyes at will and behold itself' (*BT*, p. 52), that 'such moments' both harbour and are punctured by a 'profound' pang and hankering after the 'lost love' of the metaphysical. Such a painful self-realization is enacted by Nietzsche's staged switch from an artistic flourish of vision to the philosophical question of 'intellectual probity'. Romantic high vision masks only an old dependency and, for all its seeming transcendence, gives way to a more painful realization and encounter with the contingent conditions of existence that such vision sought to evade. As we have seen elsewhere, then art (Romantic or otherwise) and artistry, at least as it is self-consciously practiced by Nietzsche, is all the more authentic for an awareness of its own fictive and illusory state. As such Nietzsche comes perilously close to taking on the role of the poet-prophet or priest that he seeks to ascribe to the Romantic artist.²⁰ Nietzsche's channelling of artistic vision and his rhetorically assured revelation that such vision is a haven for a desire for the metaphysical presents the philosopher as *vatic* figure.

These generative moments of philosophical ambivalence also characterize Nietzsche's more overtly poetic enterprises. This is not to suggest that Nietzsche as poet and Nietzsche as philosopher are easily divisible from one another. Nietzsche's serious and lifelong commitment to the poetic and the creative endeavour of writing poetry suggests the exact opposite. James Luchte, a recent

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale and intro. Richard Schacht (1986; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), [153], p. 82.

²⁰ As Julian Young observes of this passage from Nietzsche, 'If art functions for us as a substitute for religion then the artist must occupy a role similar to that of the priest or poet' (*Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (1992; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 66). See also Young's account of Nietzsche's use of rhetoric against the 'metaphysical in art' (pp. 67–9).

editor of Nietzsche's poetry, argues that Nietzsche's writing of poetry was an attempt to disclose the fundamentally bleak Dionysian nature of existence central to his philosophy and to give form to his philosophical desire to overcome life. Akin to Nietzsche's philosophical project, his creative endeavours as poet trace contradictory impulses towards escapist (Apollonian) transcendence and tragic affirmation (Dionysian disclosure) of reality in its rawest form.²¹

Nietzsche's poetry is as confrontational as it is fragile and delicately aware of the limitations of its own power. This fragility in vexed moments of doubt, akin to what has been termed a Romantic anxiety of reception,²² about whether the poetry of Nietzsche will find a readership is evident when he disparagingly declares: 'What does it matter? Who reads what I write?' ('The Pen Scribbles') ['Was tut's? Wer liest denn, was ich schreibe?' ('Die Feder kritzelt')]. Elsewhere Nietzsche asks both of the music of the gondolier and his own poetry, 'Was anyone listening?' ('I stand on the bridge') ['Hörte jemand ihr zu?' ('An der Brücke stand')]. There are also other more profoundly vexing moments in which poetry emerges as a spent force even before the instance of its own utterance; rather like the words of a reluctant suitor, the poet 'casts an empty word to wile away the time: / Into the blue ...' ('The unwilling seducer') ['schoß ein leeres Wort zum Zeitvertreib / Ins Blaue ...' ('Der unfreiwillige Verführer')]. Poetry, simultaneously, gestures towards a potentially contained meaning and a world beyond, as its 'empty word' vaporizes meaninglessly into the 'blue' that the poem conjures into being. This evanescent sense of the power of language and poetry, for Nietzsche, is anticipated by Shelley's notion that poetic 'words / Are as the air'.²³ For Shelley, the strength of poetic language resides in its weakness, its resilience in its own fragile imaginings, which evaporate as vitally and intangibly 'as the air' we breathe. Words, like the shimmering insubstantial presence of Venice and the city's captivatingly fleeting music, observed by Nietzsche, are as 'Golden drops [which] swell / Over the trembling surface' ('I stand on the bridge') ['goldener Tropfen quoll's / über die zitternde Fläche weg' ('An der Brücke stand')] of the lagoon. In Nietzsche's 'I stand on the bridge', the outwardly observed unreality of Venice melts into the

²¹ See James Luchte, ed., *The Peacock and the Buffalo: The Poetry of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 36–8. All quotations from Nietzsche's poetry are taken from this parallel text edition and reproduced in English and German. Any alterations to the English translations in this edition are indicated in square brackets in the main body of the text. I am indebted to Michael Mack for his considerable assistance with and advice about the subtleties of the German language.

²² See Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

²³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound, Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (1977; New York: Norton, 2002), II, i, 109, p. 237. Nietzsche writes in a letter, dated 28 August 1877, 'Very recently I spent a veritable day of consecration reading *Prometheus Unbound*. If the poet is not a real genius, I do not know what a genius is....' See *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Christopher Middleton (1966; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), p. 164. Hereafter *SLN*.

‘radical subjectivity’²⁴ of the observer’s inward ‘soul’ [‘Seele’] that – recalling the ‘gondola song’ [‘Gondellied dazu’] – ‘Sings to itself’ [‘sang sich’] in a self-enclosed twilight reverie.

When Nietzsche incorporated this Apollonian-Dionysian moment of poetic reverie into his quasi-autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, he emphasized the tragic joy of not knowing ‘how to distinguish between tears and music’. Venice, for Nietzsche, becomes a synonym of both ‘music’ and a form of ‘happiness’ touched by ‘a shudder of faintheartedness’ (*EC*, [7], p. 64). By recalling Shelley’s own sense that ‘words / Are as the air’, Nietzsche’s ‘stringed instrument’ [‘Saitenspiel’] of the soul is ‘plucked invisibly’ and perceptibly by an imagined musician’s fingers in ‘I stand on the bridge’. Consequently, the soul’s internal serenade finds an external correspondent in the gondolier’s song, which ‘Trembles with colourful happiness’ [‘zitternd vor bunter Seligkeit’], as outer and inner states blur indeterminately, in the Venetian twilight. This fascination (also shared by Shelley and Byron) with the quality of Venetian light extends beyond the gloaming as poetic *topos*.

Sight and sound, colour and meaning are at the very heart of what Nietzsche thought made for great writing, which places the onus on the reader to be both receptive to and perceptive of shifts in rhythm, tone, and nuances of sense. It was one thing for the writer to give a virtuoso performance, but quite another for the reader to be a connoisseur who is refined enough to be attuned to the subtle changes in metrics, modulations, and moods of a composition.²⁵ Nietzsche encapsulates this notion in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he writes:

That one must be in no doubt about the syllables that determine rhythm that one should feel the disruption of a too-severe symmetry as intentional and as something attractive, that one should lend a refined and patient ear to every *staccato*, every *rubato*, that one should divine the meaning in the sequence of vowels and diphthongs and how delicately and richly they can colour and re-colour one another through the order in which they come....²⁶

In ‘I stand on the bridge’ Nietzsche’s sense of, and sensitivity to, sound and colour (and re-colouring) traces a temporal and spatial movement from ‘brown night’ [‘brauner Nacht’] to ‘dawn’ [‘Dämrung hinaus’] but, more importantly, shows the contingent relations between the invisible and visible worlds; between those inward and outward modes of being that impinge upon the world and a world that impinges upon those modes of being. Poem and world are not only fashioned out of but constituted from their trembling ‘colourful’ shifts in shade, tone, and feeling that act as a broker between subjective and objective worlds.

²⁴ See Michael O’Neill, Mark Sandy, and Sarah Wootton, ‘Introduction’, *Venice and the Cultural Imagination* (London: Chatto, 2012), p. 1.

²⁵ For an excellent discussion of Nietzsche on ‘Moods’ and writing see Stanley Corngold, ‘Nietzsche’s Moods’, *Studies in Romanticism* 29 (1990): 67–90.

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale and intro. Michael Tanner (1973; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), [246], p. 178.

'Colour', as Shahidha K. Bari observes of John Keats's poetics, 'yields both to subjective possession and objective fact; it ties the perceptual facility of the subject to a world that calls upon it.'²⁷ Against the 'theorem of Goethe', Nietzsche seems to have held with Schopenhauer's notion of 'colo[u]r as primarily a physiological product of the eye' (*SLN*, p. 72). For Schopenhauer, the delightful effects of colours are most acute 'when they are transparent', because they are entirely dependent 'upon the fact that light is the correlative and condition of the most perfect mode of knowledge' (*WWI*, p. 123). Nietzsche may share in this view of colour as intersubjective, but his poetry favours the disclosure of Dionysian darkness over the light of the Apollonian mode of perfected knowledge. With the deferred pronoun and subject in the opening of 'Lonely, through the dark blue', distinctions between self and world, between the moment of perception and perceived colour, break down:

Lonely, through the dark blue,
Night sky I see
Lightning strike
From brewing clouds.
Lonely stands the pine tree
Far upon the mountain.
In the red light,
Smoke drifts toward the forest.
In the distant sky lights
Rain falls silently and gently,
Sad, dreadful, in its own way. –

Einsam durch den düsterblauen
Nächten Himmel she ich grelle
Blitze zucken an den Brauen
Schwarzgewölbter Wolkenwelle.
Einsam loht der Stamm der Fichte
Fern an duftger Bergeshalde.
Drüber hin im roten Lichte
Zieht der fahle Rauch zum Walde.
In des Himmels ferns Leuchten
Rinnt der Regen zart und leise,
Traurig schaurig, eigner Weise. –

Nietzsche's deliberate verbal slippage between observing subject and observed objects (night sky, lone pine, lightning strike) fuses together the interior and exterior worlds in the stanza, which are immersed in, and felt through, those outer and inner spaces of 'dark blue'. This fusion creates an inner or emotional landscape which, reminiscent of one of David Caspar Friedrich's emotionally

²⁷ Shahidha K. Bari, *Keats and Philosophy: The Life of Sensations* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 72.

intense pictorial landscapes,²⁸ conflates the isolated watcher of night skies with the ‘lonely pine’ wounded by the ‘lightning strike’. Such emotional intensity prepares the reader for a description of the falling rain as both subjectively charged with – and objectively observed as – ‘Sad, dreadful, in its own way’.

In the remainder of the concluding section of ‘Lonely, through the dark blue’, the silent and gentle raindrops give sway to ‘tear-stained eyes’ [‘tränenfeuchten / Augen’] that speak of a ‘pain and heartache’ [‘schmerzlich, herzlich’] that is distinct from, and yet has everything to do with, the preceding landscape felt ‘through the dark blue’. By implication, the ‘You and I’ of a former relationship are, ironically, united in their shared isolation and suffering, capable only of ‘Recalling our / Forlorn hours’ [‘Verlorne Stunden’]. The negative emotional depths of those ‘Forlorn hours’ by the poem’s passage ‘through the dark blue’ of inward and outward nocturnal terrains are thrown into an ever-darkening relief by the dramatic illumination of lightning and subsequent fiery ‘red light’ [‘roten lichte’]. Finally, Nietzsche’s ‘lonely’ presences in these exteriorized and interiorized landscapes are translated into a decadent abandonment and ‘lost happiness’ [‘zerronnen Glück’].

Much of Nietzsche’s early and later poems coalesce the constitutive elements of observing self and observed world through their treatment, often in visceral terms, of colour, changing shades, and altering light. In another of Nietzsche’s early poems, ‘Remembrance’ [‘Erinnerung’], the boundaries between star gazer and night sky, between vision and actuality, are at best semi-permeable, if not, in the end, untenable:

It twitches the lips and the eyes laugh,
And still rises the vision reproachful,
From the deep, deep heart of the night –
The gentle star at my heaven’s door.
He lights up triumphantly – and the
Lips close tightly and tears flow.

Es zuckt die Lippe und das Auge lacht,
Und doch steigt’s vorwurfsvoll empor,
Das Bild aus tiefer, tiefer Herzensnacht –
Der milde Stern an meines Himmels Tor.
Er leuchtet siegreich – und die Lippe schließt.
Sich dichter – und die Träne fließt.

Here the ‘deep, deep heart of the night’ is both desired and disavowed; its illumination by ‘The gentle star at my heaven’s door’ is a triumph of Romantic (epiphanic) illumination, as much as it threatens a collapse into a Dionysian tragic realization. Nietzsche’s enigmatic representation of the recuperative and corrosive effect of memory is, perhaps, anticipated by Shelley’s bittersweet symbiotic relationship of those ‘Odours, [that] when sweet violets sicken, / Live within the sense they

²⁸ For a detailed account of David Caspar Friedrich’s influence on Nietzsche see Picart, ‘Nietzsche as Masked Romantic’, pp. 273–91.

quicken –' ('Memory', ll. 7–8).²⁹ Similarly, Nietzsche's the 'deep heart of the night' is connected with, and disconnected from, the human heart. In a further moment of illumination (figured in the second stanza as 'the shining flames of lightning' ['Blicke glänzende Funken']), this implied human heart finds its own foundational 'trembling ground' ['zitternder Grund'] breaking apart. So, too, does the ground of Nietzsche's poem shift from the 'deep heart of the night' as a sought-after source of revelation to an obscuring, ominous presence which, as the speaker-observer attests, is 'Clouding my sky' ['Wölbt, sich mein Himmel, wehmuttrunken']. Inward and outward skies are obscured, as the capacity for visionary and physical sight is closed down along with the possibility of recollecting the reluctant 'vision reproachful' of some previous epiphany, past event, or lost scene.

These haunted and haunting metaphorical and actual landscapes recur in Nietzsche's later poetry of the *Dionysos Dithyrambs*. Zarathustra's desire for the abyss, in 'Between Birds of Prey' ['Zwischen Raubvögeln'] is, recalling 'Lonely through the dark blue', likened to a solitary 'pine tree' ['Tanne'] that 'has taken root where / The rock itself shudders and looks into the deep' ['schlägt Wurzeln, wo / der Fels selbst schauernd / zur Tiefe blickt'] and endures 'Patiently suffering, – hard, silent, alone ...' ['geduldig duldend, hart, schweigsam, / einsam ...'] The ways in which Nietzsche's poetry frequently testifies to a painful, Dionysian realization born of a more optimistic, Apollonian impulse towards revelation. Perhaps a Nietzschean recasting of Shelley's poetic mode of sceptical idealism recognized that 'Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates' (*Prometheus Unbound*, IV, ll. 573–4). Like Shelley, Nietzsche derives a certain kind of poetic dynamism from a 'creative-destructive aesthetic'³⁰ that breaks with fixed models of subjectivity. In the ironically titled *Ecce Homo* (also adopted as the title of Nietzsche's semi-autobiography), the mercurial speaker encapsulates a phoenix-like cycle of powerful self-creation and destruction:

Yes! I know where I come from!
Like an insatiable flame,
I glow and devour myself,
Everything I hold becomes bright
What I leave is like coal:
I am flame.

Ja! Ich, weiß, woher ich stamme!
Ungesättigt gleich der Flamme
Glühe und verzehr ich mich.
Licht wird alles, was ich fasse:
Kohle alles, was ich lasse
Flamme bin ich sicherlich.

²⁹ Shelley's 'Memory' and 'To –' are draft versions of the same poem; the version entitled 'Memory' was first published in Mary Shelley's edition of her husband's *Posthumous Poems* (1824). See editors' footnote, p. 469, n. 1.

³⁰ See Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), pp. 221–3.

‘My soul’ [‘Meine Seele’], as Nietzsche writes later in the *Dionysos Dithyrambos*, ‘is itself a flame: / insatiable for a few distances / blaze upwards, upwards you still glow’ (‘The fire sign’) [selber ist diese Flamme: / unersättlich nach neuen Fernen / lodert aufwärts ihre stille Glut’ (‘Das Feuerzeichen’)]. Origin of the ‘I’ is potently elemental with the capacity to transfigure all that it comes into contact with illuminative brightness. Yet the discarded remainder of ‘coal’³¹ points to the transitory nature of these moments of illumination and the high (incendiary) price that may have to be paid for such enlightenment. For all the emphasis given to the elemental creative force of ‘flame’, there is a concurrent awareness of the destructive element of fire and its own self-devouring nature. Light (‘bright’) and darkness (‘coal’) are the originator, intensifier, and destroyer of one another, nourishing each other ‘Like darkness’, as Shelley writes, ‘to a dying flame’ (‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, ll. 44–5). In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche’s poet-speaker is at once a fiery rebellious Prometheus and a darkly self-devoured Dionysus, the power of their poetic presence or utterance akin to Shelley’s notion of the evanescent brilliance of ‘the mind in creation [that] is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness’. Such ‘transitory brightness’ finds expression, for Shelley, in the subtly physical shifts in tone, and manifestations, of ‘the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed’ (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 531).

Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche the philosopher, Nietzsche as poet resists, as much as he feels, the allure of this kind of Romantic aesthetics, denouncing the poet as ‘fool’ [‘Narr’] and the art of poetry as ‘colourful speaking’ [‘Buntes redend’]:

From a colourful larval fool,
Climbing upon false broken
Words and false rainbows
Between false heavens ...

Aus Narrenlarven bunt herausredend,
Herumsreigend auf lügnerischen Wortbrücken,
Auf Lügen-Regenbögen
Zwischen falschen Himmeln ...

Nietzsche’s accusation that the poet is nothing more than ‘a colourful larval fool’ points to his alertness to his own literary and philosophical transformations over the duration of his writing career, as well as finding an ironic affinity with Keats’s negatively capable ‘camelion poet’.³² This theatrical break with Romantic illusion

³¹ Translated by Mark Daniel Cohen in a more poetically Shelleyan vein as ‘embers’ (p. 9). Shelley writes in *The Triumph of Life* of the Shape all Light that ‘Her feet like embers ... / Trampled its fires into the dust of death’ (ll. 387–8). See Cohen, ‘Nietzsche: A Selection of Poems in Translation’, *Hyperion* 2.4 (2007): 1–17.

³² John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958), I, p. 386.

lays bare the falsified fabrications and promises of the poet's 'colourful speaking' and opens up a decadent world of 'broken words' which luxuriates in the falsity of previously invented 'colourful' poetic fictions. This sense of having 'broken an old time / Legacy' ['Ich hab gebrochen alter Zeit / Vermächtnis'] with the Romantic figure of the child and nature characterizes one of Nietzsche's youthful poems where, writing out of despondency, the speaker-observer claims:

I can hardly see the sky anymore,
The blue [M]ay:
Wild delusions of lust and horror
Storm over me.

Ich kann den Himmel kaum mehr sehn,
Den maienblauen:
So überstürmen wilde Wehn
Mich jetzt mit Lust und Grauen.

This earlier, perhaps also staged, falling away from what could be understood as a Romantic idealism is construed by Nietzsche as an inability to sense the colour 'blue', a colour, often associated with expanses of sky or sea, and its perceptible qualities that seem to have fascinated (as we have seen) Nietzsche as poet. Nietzsche's poetic eye is drawn to the unique hue of a May sky and its distinctive seasonal quality of light that both illumines and obscures the possibility of vision and meaning. Paradoxically, the extraordinary light of 'blue [M]ay' hints at a loss of poetic vision or perception and still holds out for the possibility that not everything is lost to the destructive, decadent, stormy 'delusions of lust and horror' that crowd all about the moment when necessary, albeit false, romanticized fictions of rainbows, heavens, selfhood, and love are cast down. Poetic or otherwise, fictions no matter how fragile or falsifying make life possible, for as Nietzsche believes in *The Gay Science*, it is only 'As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *endurable* to us' (*GS*, [107], p. 163).

Equally Nietzsche attests elsewhere, the best and most authentic kind of art is 'the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life' (*WP*, III, [853], p. 452). Poetry is one such stimulant of art that, for Nietzsche, inevitably involves a 'wild and erring voyage over strange [*Fremden*] dark seas' (*UM*, p. 116). This conception of art as a precarious and potentially treacherous seafaring finds a Romantic precedent in Shelley's declaration that 'I am borne, darkly, fearfully, afar' (*Adonais*, 55, l. 492). Poetic artistry and self-discovery are enterprises that both belong to an eternal process of becoming in which life itself is shaped through art and subjectivity, as in Nietzsche's poetic experiments, emerges 'a dangerous going across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still'.³³

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 43.

By advocating, then, the potential redemption of life through an authentic art self-consciously aware of the Dionysian burden of existence, Nietzsche might easily reverse his claim about the impoverishment of Romantic art. If all life is modelled on art, then all art works must constitute illusions of varying kinds which (though they could be said in this sense to be life-denying) lead to either a Romantic or Decadent disillusionment and a confrontation with life itself.

Inflected by Nietzsche, the last poems of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats question the value of art and affirm a tragic encounter with life, acknowledging that all poetic 'masterful images ... began' in 'A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street'.³⁴ Similarly, the post-Nietzschean American poet Wallace Stevens speculates that poetry is 'the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice'.³⁵ Nietzsche may have refuted his status as a Romantic, but his poetic and philosophic legacy inspired a lineage of poets and artists, who thought of themselves as self-conscious advocates of a darker, tragic, Dionysian Romanticism. Whether by intrinsic design or extrinsic forces of fickle fortune, they, with Nietzsche, became the company of last great Romantics born out of the spirit of Decadence.

³⁴ W.B. Yeats, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', *W.B. Yeats: The Major Works*, ed. Edward Larrissy (1997; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), ll. 30–33, p. 181.

³⁵ Wallace Stevens, 'Of Modern Poetry', *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poems* (1984; London: Faber, 2006), p. 43.