

# THE DIONYSIAN AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE: CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE YOUNG NIETZSCHE TO THE MODERN FANTASTIC

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“L’inexpliqué nous séduit, surtout l’inexplicable.” (Montorgueil 319)<sup>1</sup>

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## THE DIONYSIAN VISION OF *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY* (1872)

In 1872, Nietzsche released *The Birth of Tragedy*, his first published work on the philosophy of art. Much more than a simple aesthetic treatise, *The Birth of Tragedy* presented a critique of modern German culture and a reflection on the relationship between art and life, as well as an attempt to identify an antidote for what Nietzsche regarded as modern decadence. A central dimension of the book was Nietzsche’s perspective on the origin of the Greek tragedy, which argued for the importance of its reinterpretation in the context of modernity. *The Birth of Tragedy* (henceforth *BT*) raised many of the concerns that Nietzsche would later reformulate and refute but to which he would ultimately return. Nietzsche himself considered this work to be an early exploration of his philosophical intuitions, as he acknowledged in his prefatory essay “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” (henceforth “ASC”), which he published fourteen years after the original edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Among the key philosophical explorations was the concept of the Dionysian, which Nietzsche used to frame his attack on Christian morality, on the “hatred of the ‘world,’ a curse of affect, fear of beauty and sensuality, a world beyond, invented in order better to slander this world” (“ASC” 9). The Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* later came to be regarded by critics as an early formulation of an anti-Christian attitude, challenging the morality that Nietzsche considered as contaminating Western culture through its refusal to cel-

brate life as worth living in itself, rather than as a preparation for death.

The harsh criticism that Nietzsche himself directed at his early work does not invalidate the value of many of the ideas he presented. One of the most innovative aspects of *The Birth of Tragedy* was its comparative method. The study of Greek Antiquity, specifically of Greek tragedy, was superimposed onto the philosopher's contemporary period in order to develop a critique of the present. Nietzsche's combination of metaphysics, cultural anthropology, and philosophy was met with resistance from his peers, and yet the transcendence and transgression of traditional boundaries between academic disciplines and methods that characterize *The Birth of Tragedy* renders this work a model of comparative literary thinking. In *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi refer to *The Birth of Tragedy* as "a major early example of comparative study as a mode of oppositional cultural criticism, blending linguistic, literary, and philosophical analysis to pose a stark challenge to the moral norms, and the intellectual protocols, of his day" (27). Following Nietzsche's comparative spirit, this article offers an interpretation of the Dionysian as the foundation of fantastic literature, the latter understood here as an aesthetic phenomenon that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century as a critique of rationalist optimism.

The main thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy* is apparent from the first sentence of this work. The opening passage contains some of the most important concepts, indebted to Schopenhauer, concepts to which Nietzsche, in an echo of the Wagnerian style of motif recurrence, later returns:

We will have achieved much for the discipline of aesthetics when we have arrived not only at the logical insight but also at the immediate certainty of the view that the continuing development of arts is tied to the duality of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*: just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, which are engaged in a continual struggle interrupted only by temporary periods of reconciliation. (BT 19; emphasis in original)

A key thesis of this book concerns two fundamental and opposing impulses in the understanding of artistic practice: the Dionysian and Apollonian. As the work develops, it becomes clear that these antagonistic concepts define the essence not only of art but also that of the human being. The young Nietzsche understands art as a human metaphysical activity; the Dionysian and Apollonian are thus vital forces. The existence of the world is justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, which forms another of the book's main theses. In the paragraph quoted above, the two Greek gods are mentioned for the first time, with this reference integrated into the general context of aesthetics. Apollo and Dionysus transcend the boundaries of their own historical context. Nietzsche uses the gods as a paradigm through which to diagnose the disease of excess of rationalism that dominates modernity. Rediscovering the Dionysian, Nietzsche argues, could be a means of overcoming the cultural malaise and moral decline into which modern Europe had been plunged.

The first paragraph of *The Birth of Tragedy* also illustrates the compositional tech-

nique that structures the book: the articulation of theses through binaries. The two artistic divinities, Apollo and Dionysus, and their corresponding vital impulses, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, are aligned with the oppositional pairing of intellect and intuition and with other dichotomous relationships that feature throughout the work: appearance versus essence, plastic art versus music, sleep versus drunkenness.<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche argues that the drives (*Triebe*) of human nature are in permanent tension: this tension is complementary and productive, or even “reproductive” or “generating,” if we refer to Nietzsche’s analogy with sexual reproduction in the paragraph quoted above. Human beings should thus embrace being formed by both the Dionysian and the Apollonian forces, without suppressing either of them, as modernity has done with the Dionysian.

For Nietzsche, classical Greek tragedy is the most representative dramatic phenomenon in which the tension between the Dionysian and the Apollonian is displayed. In music, he argues, Wagner’s genius stands out as offering a new musical language that enables the return of the Dionysian impulse to the composer’s contemporary context, curing modernity of the Apollonian lethargy in which it has been immersed. While Nietzsche would later retract this thesis, it is his search for transgressive art forms that align with the Dionysian, rather than his changing view on Wagner’s music, that is relevant here. In the sections that follow, I argue that the literary fantastic is an illustrative example of the Dionysian force that Nietzsche prescribes for the modern human. Indeed, for Nietzsche, the art that best represents the Dionysian drive is music (the chorus in the pre-Socratic Greek tragedy) and not literature. While it is not my intention to boldly claim that the modern literary fantastic is a “Dionysian form,” the next sections argue that Nietzsche’s view on the Dionysian can enrich the analysis of the forms and structures of this narrative paradigm.

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## THE DIONYSIAN AND THE FANTASTIC: TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE THEORY

### APPROACHES TO THE FANTASTIC

The understanding of the fantastic that predominates in the Anglo-American academic spheres tends to embrace all forms of nonmimetic literature, such as fantasy, mythological literature, the marvellous, surrealism, magical realism, and science fiction. In contrast, my approach to the fantastic here reclaims a historically-specific view and a distinctive aesthetic expression of the supernatural that differs from those other similar categories. This narrow approach is sometimes known by the French term *le fantastique*, following the line of thought developed by French scholars Pierre-Georges Castex, Roger Caillois, Tzvetan Todorov, Irène Bessièrè, and Roger Bozzetto, and later adopted in other studies, such as those by scholar David Roas.

These thinkers present theorizations of the fantastic as a subcategory of nonmimetic narrative forms, rather than as the umbrella term. The distinctive characteristic of the fantastic, they argue, is the presentation of the supernatural as an ontological conflict. Literary texts belonging to the fantastic feature exceptions in a realistic narrative world, such as monsters or ghosts. In other words, fantastic texts are those that build a realistic context that operates according to the physical and logical laws of our world. In this context the supernatural irrupts into and transgresses the norms of that which is considered physically possible. It is portrayed and perceived, both intradiegetically and extradiegetically and by both characters and readers, as something impossible, incomprehensible, and illogical.

What is of essence here is the adjective *impossible*, particularly relevant for my argument on the Dionysian as applied to the fantastic. Compared to other nonmimetic narrative forms, such as fantasy fiction, the fantastic presents the supernatural as something that does not belong to the realistic fictional world: it features an exception that escapes the logic and physics of literary realism. The fantastic is always a conflict, a tension and collision between the rational and the irrational: it provides the aesthetic means of expressing the impossible. The characters exposed to these fantastic occurrences are ordinary beings in recognizable towns, such as modern Berlin in E.T.A. Hoffmann's short stories "Ritter Gluck" (1809) and "Das öde House" (1817), Paris in Honoré de Balzac's novel *La peau de chagrin* (1831), Madrid in Benito Pérez Galdós's Christmas tale "La Princesa y el Granuja" (1877), and London in the haunted houses described by Charlotte Riddell in *Weird Stories* (1882). These settings and figurations of the supernatural are formally, structurally, and symbolically very different from the speculative worlds invented in the fantasy works of *Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

This principle of breach of inner logic is illustrated in the beginning of Mrs. Henry Wood's "Reality or Delusion?" (1868), a story telling of the haunting by a ghost that appears to its former lover, and in several passages from Edgar Allan Poe's tale of mesmeric hypnosis, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845):

This is a ghost story. Every word of it is true. And I don't mind confessing that for ages afterwards some of us did not care to pass the post alone at night. Some people do not care to pass it yet. (Wood 50)

I now feel that I have reached a point of this narrative at which every reader will be startled into positive disbelief. It is my business, however, simply to proceed. (Poe, "The Facts" 412)

For what really occurred, however, it is quite impossible that any human being could have been prepared. (Poe, "The Facts" 414)

These paragraphs show that the narrator is about to explain something he regards as an impossibility, hence the emphasis on its veracity and the implication that readers will find the story hard to believe. As further examples, the passages quoted

below from Rosa Chacel's "Fueron testigos" ("They Were Witnesses," 1952) refer to a strange event that happened to an ordinary man in an unnamed city: while out walking, his body is—for no explicit reason—unexpectedly glued to the pavement and slowly dissolves into the street until he disappears completely. The quotations below demonstrate how passersby perceived this event with incredulity:

[...] las preguntas de aquellos hombres, que no lograban entrar en la comprensión total del hecho, se perdían sin respuesta, como meros ademanes de una realidad ineficiente. [...] Efectos ilógicos, al parecer, imprevisibles desde cualquier punto de vista exterior. (Chacel 134)<sup>3</sup>

Narrative passages that focus on the exceptional nature of the events that are about to be told are very frequent in fantastic stories. The discursive presentation of the supernatural as a problematic exception is in stark contrast with, for instance, tales of anthropomorphic animals located in fantasy worlds in which it is taken for granted that animals would have the capacity of human speech. The supernatural element in fantastic literature is instead presented as a conflict within the fictional world: not only a moral violation, but also an ontological and epistemological impossibility.

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It is possible to identify a specific point in history in which this narrative form emerges: as paradoxical as it may sound, it is the late Enlightenment period that saw the rise of the fantastic. Growing industrialization and scientific discoveries, increasing instability of and dissatisfaction with absolutist regimes in Europe, and the threat of imminent civil revolutions led to a questioning of the ideals of the Enlightenment through the supernatural. As the nineteenth century unfolded, a wide variety of literary works offered a type of fantastic that moved away from the often-encountered places of the Gothic-romantic, such as the haunting in a remote, enchanted castle. Contemporary tropes and settings were incorporated into the list of traditional motifs. These renovated tropes prioritized the depiction of a morally-corrupting urban environment, as seen in *La peau de chagrin* or in *La femme au collier de velours*; the ethical limits of creation, in *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; the transgression of sexual taboos, in *Dracula*; and, inspired by a fascination with Mesmer's and Lavater's experiments and later by Freud's psychoanalytical research, expressed our rational limitations in our attempts to understand the unexpected behaviour of the human mind. Mesmerism and hypnotism begat fantastic plots that reflected the occult practices in vogue at the time and their interrelation with the mysteries of the mind, as captured in Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." Maupassant's fantastic fiction, with its many mentally unstable characters whose fantastic experiences derived from unexplainable aspects of consciousness, was very successful in reflecting this fascination with the mysteries of the human mind. Maupassant rendered this succinctly in the final sentence of his story "La chevelure" ("The Lock of Hair"): "L'esprit de l'homme est capable de tout" ("La chevelure" 146).<sup>4</sup>

## THE VEIL OF LITERARY REALISM

The understanding of the fantastic as a narrative form featuring a problematic coexistence between the possible and impossible, the rational and irrational, finds historical and aesthetic parallels with Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian impulses. The disease that Nietzsche diagnoses as inherent to modernity—an aspect that takes centre stage in the second part of the book—has its roots in the hegemony of the *logos*. For Nietzsche, although the supremacy of reason and the repression of the Dionysian can be identified in the writings of Socrates and Plato, it was in the nineteenth century that this phenomenon crystallizes. The “hyper-development of reason,” as Diego Sánchez Meca puts it, constitutes the greatest pathology from which the modern being suffers: “The individual splits internally and all her strength is now concentrated, exclusively, on understanding and on her thirst for truth, while her instincts are increasingly weakened, losing almost completely the power to act” (324 *Obras Completas* 26). Nietzsche reiterates that just as the Greeks had to find ways to dominate the Dionysian, the modern human has to learn to reconnect with this lost impulse. This reconnection with the Dionysian would facilitate the return to a totality, or to a primordial unit, and thus help in overcoming the increasing fragmentation, mechanization, and mercantilism generated by the rise of modern capitalism and industrialization.

Nietzsche's criticism constitutes an attack on the superiority of enlightened reason, on the primacy of the rational against instinct and on scientific positivism. This aspect is stated in the portrait Nietzsche presents of the enlightened man in Chapter 18 of *The Birth of Tragedy*:

The whole of our modern world is caught in the net of Alexandrian culture and takes as its ideal the *theoretical man* who is equipped with the highest powers of knowledge, works in the service of science, and whose archetype and progenitor is Socrates. All our means of education have originally this ideal in view: every other form of existence has to struggle laboriously upwards alongside it, as tolerated but not intended forms of existence. In an almost terrifying sense the man has long been found here only in the form of the scholar; even our poetical arts have had to develop from scholarly imitations and in the main effect of the rhyme we recognize still the emergence of our poetic forms of artistic experiments with a non-indigenous, genuinely scholarly language. (BT 97; emphasis in original)

Further in the same chapter, Nietzsche reiterates his criticism of enlightened optimism, which rested “on the *aeterna veritates*,” had believed “that all the enigmas of the world could be known and fathomed, and had treated space, time, and causality as utterly absolute laws of the most universal validity” (BT 99). There are parallels between the modern fantastic and the hegemony of rational models developed in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The fantastic was an aesthetic form that sought to overcome, or at least to counterbalance, the predominant model offered by literary mimetism during the nineteenth century, a dominance as attested to by, for instance, the vogue for urban realist novels across European cultures. This literary realism was nourished

by the confidence in a stable extratextual reality that could be faithfully represented, a naive art, to use Nietzsche's terminology, which sought to offer "an embarrassing counterfeiting of reality" (BT 45). In expressing his low opinion of the "reverence for the natural and the real" (BT 44), Nietzsche drew the comparison with "the region of the wax museum" (BT 44).

The fantastic emerged in the final decades of the eighteenth century with the Gothic novel and consolidated its literary role during the nineteenth century as a reaction and aesthetic alternative to the rational values of the Enlightenment. In the words of Roger Caillois, one of the first scholars to provide a comprehensive theorization of the fantastic, this narrative arose as "compensation for an excess of rationalism" (23). Remarkably, many writers who were widely known for their realistic fiction—including Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas, Benito Pérez Galdós, Emilia Pardo Bazán, and Guy de Maupassant—experimented in parallel with the fantastic in some of their novels and particularly in short stories that they published in periodicals such as *Le Globe* and *La Revue de Paris* in France, *El Artista*, *Semanario Pintoresco Español*, *El Siglo XIX*, and *El Panorama* in Spain, and *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, both edited by Dickens, in Great Britain. The tropes and themes that the supernatural offered in these works suggested that these writers were searching for new aesthetic forms that broke the prevailing molds of mimetic literature. Contrasting with the emphasis on representation and explanation (readability) that characterized the realistic literary mode—the Apollonian spirit—the fantastic of the nineteenth century was inspired by a Dionysian force. It provided a vehicle for the articulating of the unintelligible and the irrational. Aligned with the Nietzschean metaphor of the tearing of the veil (BT 24-26), the fantastic exposed everything that remained veiled to our experience: the monstrous, the horror of that which escaped our reason. The receptors of the supernatural were often hypersensitive melancholic characters with perceptive qualities that transcended those of ordinary people and that bordered on madness. As the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" puts it: "have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses?" (Poe, "Tell-Tale" 319). The supernatural in nineteenth-century fantastic narratives was frequently presented as something that exceeded or transcended human understanding, revealing dimensions that rational perception could not reach and unveiling alternative realities that coexisted with our material impressions of the real. The initial paragraphs of Fitz-James O'Brien's 1859 short ghost story "What Was It?" offer a clear example of the recurrent emphasis in fantastic literature on the limitations of rational discourse in the understanding of the extraordinary events about to be told:

It is, I confess, with considerable diffidence that I approach the strange narrative which I am about to relate. The events which I purpose detailing are of so extraordinary a character that I am quite prepared to meet an unusual amount of incredulity and scorn. I accept all such beforehand. I have, I trust, the literary courage to face unbelief. I have, after mature consideration, resolved to narrate, in as simple and straightforward a manner as I

can compass, some facts that passed under my observation, in the month of July last, and which in the annals of the mysteries of physical science, are wholly unparalleled. (25)

Several pages later, the narrator refers to a spectral apparition in a similar manner, emphasizing the logical impossibility: “Things were in this state when an incident took place so awful and inexplicable in its character that my reason fairly reels at the bare memory of the occurrence” (27).

326 The Dionysian tearing away of the veil is explicit in the recurrent fantastic trope of the masquerade ball. In allowing his/her mask to drop, an unwelcome, supernatural guest, generally one embodying death, exposes the horror of a confrontation with some metaphysical truth. The work of French author Jean Lorrain is notable for its use of the theme of the mask in this manner, as in his famous collection *Histoires de masques* (1900) and especially in “Les Trous du masque” (1895). In the latter, the protagonist realizes at the masquerade ball that not only is he surrounded by characters who are dead behind their masks, but that he is in fact one of their number. In his study of Lorrain’s themes of masking, Robert Ziegler argues, “the attraction of the mask is information undisclosed, the appealing feature of the narrative is *la chose inénarrable*, the unrelatable element fomenting audience conjecture, image manufacture that makes them co-creators of the story” (32). In many of his fantastic tales, and very clearly in the fantastic short story “L’un d’eux” (“One of Them”), Lorrain presents the seductive and transgressive power of masks as literary symbols of the unknown: “Le masque, c’est la face trouble et troublante de l’inconnu” (5)<sup>5</sup> and “symbole vivant d’un mystère innomé et d’une énigme pressentie” (7).<sup>6</sup>

The act of unveiling something that is usually hidden to our everyday perception is embedded in the etymology of the word *monster*, which comes from the Old French *monstre*, closely related to the verb *montrer*, in Spanish *mostrar* (to show), and the Latin root *monere* (to warn). This reference to unveiling and revealing something horrific also corresponds with the etymology of the fantastic. The noun *phantastikos* is related to the Greek *phantos* and *phainein*, which respectively mean *visible* and *to show*. The verb *phantazein* means *to make visible*, suggesting that the fantastic relates to the action of expressing something occult. This, in turn, leads to another key element of this comparative analysis of the Dionysian and the modern literary fantastic: the concept of boundary, limit, or limitation.

### THE BEYOND: LIMIT AND LOGOS

For Nietzsche, Apollo was the classic epitome of moderation and beauty. The Apollonian comes from and appeals to reason; it embodies the representation, “the god of all plastic energies” (BT 21) that every human being needs to comprehend the world. This representation is not possible without order, metric, rhythm, balance, and definition. Dionysian art, instead, arises from and appeals to madness and inebriation, and involves excess and monstrosity. As the liberation from the rational dimension constraining us, the Dionysian allows the human being to break the

chains of everyday life and access states in which we lose the notion of individualization and control: “the collapse of the *principium individuationis*” (BT 22). In a metaphysical dimension, the Dionysian is darkness, chaos, and the lost primordial unit. On the epistemological plane, the Dionysian points to a deeper awareness that concentrates “everything fearful, evil, enigmatic, destructive, disastrous at the basis of existence” (“ASC” 7).

A key concept when outlining the dynamics between the Apollonian-Dionysian duality is that of limit or limitation. Nietzsche frames the Apollonian as “that measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder impulses, that calm wisdom of the image-creating god” (BT 21); “*moderation* in the Hellenic sense” (BT 31). The lack of limitation is thus something defective, imperfect due to its absence of balance, definition, and restriction. The Dionysian remains outside the boundaries of the logos, broadly defined as human understanding and human forms of expression. The Aristotelian moral beauty resembles the calm of the Apollonian but the unlimited and limitless, the region of monsters and of horror, belongs to the Dionysian.

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The fantastic, like the Dionysian, is also inherently related to a notion of limit or boundary. The supernatural in a fantastic text needs to evoke a boundary to subsequently transgress that boundary. In order to be presented as an impossibility or exception within a realistic framework, the fantastic implicitly builds on an ontological limit that creates the effect of realism in the text, for example, through space-time coordinates that we recognize as familiar when reading the text. This familiar (fictional) reality is then transgressed by the irruption by the impossible. As Rosemary Jackson argues, the fantastic is a narrative form essentially “preoccupied with limits” (48). Just as the Dionysian cannot exist without the Apollonian, the fantastic needs the mimetic reference to operate. This dynamic is evoked in Foucault’s famous quotation about the interdependence between limit and transgression:

the limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusion and shadows.  
(34)

The tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian was to guide Nietzsche in his (re)vision of Western history of art. The interdependence of both gods and of their associated impulses also suggests that neither of them can be eliminated. Suppressing one—and in the context of modernity, the one repressed is the Dionysian—leads to the cultural and spiritual decline that Nietzsche diagnoses as infecting the nineteenth century. The two gods belong together; they are artistic impulses that arise from nature itself: “Apollo was unable to live without Dionysus! The ‘Titanic’ and the ‘barbaric’ were ultimately as much a necessity as the Apollonian” (BT 32). The principle of reciprocity and interconnection between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits provides a key to understand the modern fantastic, in that this narrative form needs the premise of realism to operate as a transgression. Reality as it appears to us

in the literary text through the effect of mimetism (the Apollonian, the representation) is penetrated by the fantastic creature or event that disrupts the logic of the text (the Dionysian). The supernatural bursts in and exposes this effect of realism as fragile and naive, as nothing more than construction and appearance. This tearing of the veil of realism by the fantastic reveals to us the depths of the ineffable and unknowable. “The world of everyday reality” and “that of Dionysian reality” (BT 46) are counterpoints. As stated in the previous section, in contrast to other narrative forms of the nonmimetic, such as fantasy or fables, for example, the fantastic presents the supernatural as something that does not belong to the realistic fictional world, an exception to the logic of literary realism:

The fantastic tale replaces familiarity with strangeness, it places us initially in a normal world (our own) which is immediately assaulted by an impossible phenomenon—which is, as such, incomprehensible—that subverts the codes—the certainties—that we have designed to perceive and understand reality. Ultimately, it destroys our conception of the real and places us in a state of instability and, therefore, in absolute disquiet. (Roas 4-5)

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Nietzsche’s theorization of the Dionysian is aligned with the nineteenth-century fantastic as an impulse that seeks to break the boundaries of the *logos*. Modern fantastic literature is populated by statements concerning the limitations of our language when (re)presenting the supernatural: *illogical*, *unknown*, *unrepresentable*, and *unnamable* creatures and events that escape our logic. Jackson labels this rhetorical feature “rational negativity,” in that the supernatural can only be articulated “in negative terms in relation to the categories of realism: form-less, un-known, in-visible” (21). Paradigmatic of this rational negativity is the initial passage of Maupassant’s “Qui Sait?”: “Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Je vais donc écrire enfin ce qui m’est arrivé! Mais le pourrai-je? l’oserai-je? Cela est si bizarre, si inexplicable, si incompréhensible, si fou!” (334).<sup>7</sup> The first-person narrator proceeds to recount the “abnormal,” “inexplicable,” and “incomprehensible” (338) events that torment him, including witnessing his furniture come to life and leave his house. Another typical construction through negation is that of H.P. Lovecraft’s accursed city in “The Nameless City” (1921). The protagonist seeks to discover this nameless place where an “unknown world” (45) and an “unexplainable” (35; 45) ancient race lurk: “I was quite unbalanced with that instinct for the strange and the unknown which had made me a wanderer upon earth and a haunter of far, ancient, and forbidden places” (39). As his exploratory journey to the “unknown depths” (38) develops, he struggles to convey with words his discovery: “Monstrous, unnatural, colossal, was the thing—too far beyond all the ideas of man to be believed except in the silent damnable small hours of the morning when one cannot sleep” (45).

Lucie Armitt also regards the fantastic as a form that transgresses boundaries, concerning itself with “the world of the ‘beyond’ (beyond the galaxy, beyond the known, beyond the accepted, beyond belief)” (4). A passage in Emilia Pardo Bazán’s 1912 short story “La resucitada” (“The Woman Who Came Back to Life”) clearly exemplifies this troubling expression of the beyond in fantastic fiction. The tale nar-

rates the return of the undead Dorotea de Guevara and the rejection she encounters from her family members when she awakens in her coffin and comes back to life after having been believed to be dead. This painful rejection is captured in a sentence that Dorotea's husband utters in fear and disgust: "De dónde tú has vuelto no se vuelve" (43).<sup>8</sup> He refers to Dorotea as coming from the realm of the non-rational and non-human, from a beyond that should not interact with human affairs. After hearing her beloved husband pronounce this sentence, Dorotea decides to abandon her family life and return to her crypt, that domain of the beyond from whence she came.

In giving aesthetic form to the unknown, the fantastic constitutes a fracture of ontological and epistemological boundaries. This, like the Dionysian impulse, disturbs those logical presuppositions that humans establish in order to make sense of that which surrounds us. The effect sought by a text of the fantastic is often that of the fear and disorientation that results when certainties are challenged and transgressed. This finds echoes in Nietzsche's description of the Dionysian as "the tremendous *horror* which grips man when he suddenly loses his way among the cognitive forms of a phenomenal world, as the principle of reason in any of its forms appears to break down" (BT 22). The fantastic—the Dionysian impulse of modern culture—presents a rational, moral, cultural scandal. It is the tearing of the veil to which Nietzsche refers, it is the infraction, the verification of something that does not belong to our paradigm of ordered reality, a "piercing scream" (BT 32) aimed at the realism of the text. It is that which lies behind and beyond the frontiers of the real, as indicated in the title of David Roas's book.

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## THE DIONYSIAN FANTASTIC IN "LE HORLA"

"Le Horla" is one of Guy de Maupassant's most acclaimed fantastic short stories. A first version of this text was published in the Parisian periodical *Gil Blas* in October 1886, with an extended version following a year after in the eponymous compilation *Le Horla*. This later version is the one discussed here. "Le Horla" presents the following storyline: the entries of the narrator's personal diary, from May 8 to September 10, reveal that he has encountered his double, which he names the Horla.<sup>9</sup> This creature, described initially as an invisible presence that follows the protagonist, increasingly turns into something that horrifies and dominates the narrator. The realization of its existence followed by its persistent presence ultimately leads the narrator to commit suicide. As with the multiple dualities upon which *The Birth of Tragedy* is built, "Le Horla" follows a diptych structure. I propose a reading of this fantastic text as framed by the tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, a tension that materializes in the binomials of day/night, health/fever, known/unknown, I/not I, beauty/horror, and reason/madness.

The beginning of the story establishes the correlation between the diurnal, beauty and health. The narrator opens his story with "Quelle journée admirable! J'ai passé

toute la matinée étendu sur l’herbe, devant ma maison” (259),<sup>10</sup> and later reiterates, “Comme il faisait bon ce matin!” (260).<sup>11</sup> This first journal entry crafts a sensation of contemplative peace through orderly descriptions of the landscape, heightened by the narrator’s emphasis on how this place defines him: it is where he was born and where he has his roots. His home, an Apollonian space of certainties, gradually becomes hostile and alien, as the Dionysian gains prominence in the story.

In contrast to this positive diary entry, the subsequent May entries are dominated by the motif of his fever. This mysterious malaise that stalks the protagonist at night contrasts with his joyful mood of the first morning. The dichotomy between the comfort of the rational provided by the Apollonian and the febrile illness of the Dionysian—“J’ai la fièvre, une fièvre atroce, ou plutôt un énervement fiévreux” (262),<sup>12</sup> the “inconnaisable Puissances” (261)<sup>13</sup>—features in all the diary entries.

330 The second diary entry also introduces the narrator’s reluctance to rely on his empirical capacity to explain the world. His lack of trust in reason as satisfactorily explaining human experience forms the central axis of the plot and, as a key theme of the story, it recurs discursively throughout the text. For instance, the entry for May 12 reads:

Tout ce qui nous entoure, tout ce que nous voyons sans le regarder, tout ce que nous frôlons sans le connaître, tout ce que nous touchons sans le palper, tout ce que nous rencontrons sans le distinguer, a sur nous, sur nos organes et, par eux, sur nos idées, sur notre cœur lui-même, des effets rapides, surprenants et inexplicables? (261)<sup>14</sup>

Also, in the entry of July 2, “Il répondit: ‘Est-ce que nous voyons la cent millième partie de ce qui existe ? [...]’” (266).<sup>15</sup> Later, the entry of July 12 reads:

Comme notre tête est faible et s’effare, et s’égare vite, dès qu’un petit fait incompréhensible nous frappe! / Au lieu de conclure par ces simples mots: ‘Je ne comprends pas parce que la cause m’échappe,’ nous imaginons aussitôt des mystères effrayants et des puissances surnaturelles. (270)<sup>16</sup>

And on July 16:

Depuis que l’homme pense, depuis qu’il sait dire et écrire sa pensée, il se sent frôlé par un mystère impénétrable pour ses sens grossiers et imparfaits, et il tâche de suppléer, par l’effort de son intelligence, à l’impuissance de ses organes. (272)<sup>17</sup>

Following the introduction of the malaise between May 11-18, the entry of May 25 reinforces the dichotomy between light/well-being versus febrile night/nightmare. In explaining the Apollonian, Nietzsche used the image of shining and the reflection of superficial appearances. He referred to the shiny quality of appearances: shining, appearing, representing (*scheinen/erscheinen/Erscheinung* in German). The Apollonian is the world not only of representation and intelligibility but also of appearances, masks and superficial knowledge: “the Apollonian qualities of the mask [...] bright spots so to speak to heal the eyes which have been damaged by the sight of the terrible darkness” (*BT* 53). However, there is something beyond those appear-

ances, something that is only revealed to us by the Dionysian impulse. This impulse shows the non-rational depths of reality. The contrast between the Apollonian and the Dionysian features in “Le Horla” in the dual tropes of day/reason/beauty and night/madness/horror:

À mesure qu’approche le soir, une inquiétude incompréhensible m’envahit, comme si la nuit cachait pour moi une menace terrible. [...] J’allume une bougie. Je suis seul. / Après cette crise, qui se renouvelle toutes les nuits, je dors enfin, avec calme, jusqu’à l’aurore. (262-63)<sup>18</sup>

After the May entries, the theme of madness begins to dominate. The narrator’s realization that he is something beyond himself (*hors-là*) triggers a progressive deterioration of his rational faculties. This corresponds with one of the most interesting points of the story, when madness is presented as the awareness that there are inexplicable, unknown parts of the human being. Two impulses are in constant tension for the protagonist. His rational Apollonian side, “un homme, sain d’esprit, bien éveillé, plein de raison” (268),<sup>19</sup> coexists with the Dionysian dimension that hosts the

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Moi? moi, sans doute? Ce ne pouvait être que moi? Alors, j’étais somnambule, je vivais, sans le savoir, de cette double vie mystérieuse qui fait douter s’il y a deux êtres en nous, ou si un être étranger, inconnaissable et invisible, anime, par moments, quand notre âme est engourdie, notre corps captif qui obéit à cet autre, comme à nous-mêmes, plus qu’à nous-mêmes. (268)<sup>20</sup>

The final diary entries define, in what are very close to Nietzschean terms, the essence of the Horla: it is “premature destruction” (“The Horla” 74), the overexcitement of the senses, “that invisible presence” (62) that borders the experience of madness. The experience of this unknown entity, a Dionysian force that ends up invading and possessing him, challenges the rational man:

Alors je fus pris d’une colère furieuse contre moi-même; car il n’est pas permis à un homme raisonnable et sérieux d’avoir de pareilles hallucinations. (280)<sup>21</sup>

ce trouble aurait déterminé dans mon esprit, dans l’ordre et la logique de mes idées, une crevasse profonde. [...] Ne se peut-il pas qu’une des imperceptibles touches du clavier cérébral se trouve paralysée chez moi? (281)<sup>22</sup>

The dramatic build-up culminates in the narrator acknowledging the alien creature that coexists with his rational side, or, in Jackson’s terms, the existence of the “rational negativity” that conforms the “un-known, in-visible” (Jackson 21). Shaken by this awareness and horrified by the implicit Dionysian side of the self, towards the end of the story the narrator refers to a “primitive fear” (67) that has taken possession of him.

Further examples of narrative strategies featuring the Dionysian exist within the corpus of Maupassant’s fantastic narratives. For example, the night as an allegory of insanity recurs in “Lui,” a text along a similar storyline to that of “Le Horla.”

“La Nuit” reiterates many of the aforementioned features. Its diptych structure is modeled on the contrast between the bright, modern city of Paris and its still and dead nocturnal counterpart.<sup>22</sup> As the first-person narrator returns from his evening walk in the Bois de Boulogne, he is confronted with an ominously silent Paris that leads him to reconnect with his darker side. The contrast in this story between the Apollonian and Dionysian images of Paris, with the latter ultimately triumphing, is a reiteration of Maupassant’s obsession with the limits of reason and rationality, an obsession he returned to time and time again in his fantastic short fiction. The Paris of impossible stillness and darkness presents an analogy with the descent into the most incomprehensible corners of the narrator’s mind.

332 Finally, it is worth mentioning that, whereas my analysis of “Le Horla” concentrated on the monstrous dimensions of the Dionysian fantastic, other late nineteenth-century texts of the fantastic present more positive views of the Dionysian drive by emphasizing its creative energy. A good example is “La novela en el tranvía” (“The Novel on the Tram,” 1871) by the Spanish author Benito Pérez Galdós, a tale composed of seven sections, each of which portrays the protagonist on a tram circulating around Madrid. On this journey, he meets several transiting passengers that do not know each other and yet seem to be mysteriously related to the story of a murdered countess. During this trip, the narrator tries to put together the pieces of information he obtains in a cohesive manner to fully understand (and solve) the mystery of the countess’s death. The supernatural here is not embodied by the intrusion of a fantastical creature: it is centered on the uncanny connection between these disjointed stories that nonetheless seem, coincidentally, to be intertwined. The narrator’s imagination needs to establish these connections. The narrator’s friend Dionisio is the first passenger that he talks to and he initiates the story of the countess. As Walter Oliver suggests in his analysis, the name “Dionisio” might be highly symbolic. “La novela en el tranvía” can be read as an allegory for the creative process, triggered by a Dionysian drive that allows the main character to create imaginary nexus among narrative threads. In this process, like the protagonist, we are transformed into creative readers of realities.

## CONCLUSION

In his earliest work, Nietzsche offered a dual vision that combined Greek art with Schopenhauer’s metaphysics and Wagner’s musical drama, approaches from which he would retreat significantly. However, those aspects of *The Birth of Tragedy* that Nietzsche later declared failures still prove fruitful today when applied to other cultural forms. A reading of what Nietzsche presents as the aesthetic and metaphysical forces of Apollo and Dionysus allows for an understanding of the modern fantastic based on the tension between these two impulses. Like the Dionysian, the aesthetic form of the fantastic seeks to break the stability of the codes that provide order to

our experience of the world, and does so by giving shape to the impossible. My reading of “Le Horla” from the Dionysian perspective provides an illustrative example of Nietzsche’s early conceptual proposal in juxtaposition with the fantastic. The affinities between the philosophical concept of the Dionysian and the literary form of fantastic lie in both constituting a fracture of rationalism; “the breach of the known order, the eruption of the inadmissible in the midst of the unalterable legality of everyday life” (Caillois 161; my translation), to use Caillois’s definition of the fantastic. In contrast with the rational and stable qualities of the Apollonian, the fantastic pursues and embraces the Dionysian impulse that makes us distrust our reason and look *hors-là*: beyond the frames of rationalism, into the monstrous dimensions that are waiting to be revealed.

## NOTES

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1. “The unexplained seduces us; especially the inexplicable.” (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.)
2. See Llinares for a philosophical analysis of the dichotomies that structure the argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*.
3. “[T]he questions of the men, who couldn’t fully grasp what was occurring, trailed away unanswered, serving as nothing more than expressions of an inefficient reality [...] These illogical events, as such they appeared to be, were unpredictable from whichever external point of view they were regarded.”
4. “The mind of man is capable of anything.”
5. “The mask is the troubled and disturbing face of the unknown.”
6. “[A] living symbol of an unnamed mystery and an enigma foreseen.”
7. “My God! My God! So I’ll finally write what happened to me! But can I? Dare I? It is so bizarre, so inexplicable, so incomprehensible, so crazy!”
8. “People do not return from where you have returned.”
9. On the history and connotations of *Horla*, see Bury.
10. “What a lovely day! I have spent all the morning lying on the grass in front of my house” (“The Horla” 40).
11. “What a delicious morning it was!” (“The Horla” 40).
12. “I am feverish, horribly feverish, or rather I am in a state of feverish enervation” (“The Horla” 42).
13. “unknowable Forces” (“The Horla” 41).
14. “Everything that surrounds us, everything that we see without looking at it, everything that we touch without knowing it, everything that we handle without feeling it, everything that we meet without clearly distinguishing it, has a rapid, surprising, and inexplicable effect upon us and upon our organs, and through them on our ideas and on our being itself” (“The Horla” 42).
15. “He replied: ‘Do we see the hundred-thousandth part of what exists?’” (“The Horla” 48).
16. “How weak our mind is; how quickly it is terrified and unbalanced as soon as we are confronted with a small, incomprehensible fact. / Instead of dismissing the problem with: ‘We do not understand

because we cannot find the cause,' we immediately imagine terrible mysteries and supernatural powers" ("The Horla" 51).

17. "Ever since man has thought, since he has been able to express and write down his thoughts, he has felt himself close to a mystery which is impenetrable to his coarse and imperfect senses, and he endeavours to supplement the feeble penetration of his organs by the efforts of his intellect" ("The Horla" 53).
18. "As the evening comes on, an incomprehensible feeling of disquietude seizes me, just as if night concealed some terrible menace toward me. [...] I light a candle and find that I am alone, and after that crisis, which occurs every night" ("The Horla" 44).
19. "a man sound in mind, wide-awake, full of sense" ("The Horla" 50).
20. "I without any doubt. It could surely only be I? In that case I was a somnambulist—was living, without knowing it, that double, mysterious life which makes us doubt whether there are not two beings in us—whether a strange, unknowable, and invisible being does not, during our moments of mental and physical torpor, animate the inert body, forcing it to a more willing obedience than it yields to ourselves" ("The Horla" 49-50).
- 334** 21. "Then I was seized with furious rage against myself, for it is not wholesome for a reasonable and serious man to have such hallucinations" ("The Horla" 49).
22. "a profound gulf in my mind and in the order and logic of my ideas. [...] Was it not possible that one of the imperceptible keys of the cerebral finger-board had been paralyzed in me?" ("The Horla" 60-61).
23. This binary echoes Lehan's discussion of the Apollonian and Dionysian dimensions of urban detective fiction (84-91).

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