

Aesthetic Illumination: Life as a Work of Art

Stephen Mills

“We may very well assume we are already images and artistic projections for the true creator of art, and that our highest dignity lies in our significance as works of art — for only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Apollo is the sun: he is reason and logic. He is the calm, ordering principle of reality. He represents the principle of individuation; the individual in the vast expanse of the universe. Dionysus is the god of divine madness: he is the personification of chaos and all that is base or primal in human nature in the Greek pantheon. The Dionysian current under reality is universal and threatens to subsume the individual. According to Nietzsche, aesthetic experiences do not affirm our individuality, yet for him, existence is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. On the contrary, I would argue that aesthetic experiences do affirm our individuality and our life because they depend on the Apollonian principle, or the principle of individuation; our individuality. This principle of individuation ought to guide our behavior in order for us to become our true selves and make our lives a work of art. It is in this way that our existence and the world are justified as an aesthetic phenomenon.

For Nietzsche, in his *Birth of Tragedy*, Greek tragedy reveals the terrible Dionysian truth that the process of becoming is more real than the individual. The Dionysian undercurrent of reality threatens to subsume the principle of individuation personified as Apollo. However, if the “terrible truth” is that nature (this process of becoming) is more real than the individual, how is it

that the Apollonian principle, this individuality, emerges from the Dionysian and can come to master the Dionysian within ourselves and our immediate environment? If the insight gained through art, such as works of Greek tragedy, reveals the “terrible truth” of Dionysian change or becoming, what grounds are there to suggest that the Apollonian, which we find within ourselves, is not part of the fabric of natural change as much as Dionysus? Individuality *as such* is a part of this natural process of becoming, as is anything Dionysian. Our particular individuality may be fleeting, but the Apollonian principle that generates each individual remains. Art affirms our individuality because it shows that that which creates the individual remains through the natural process of becoming. Art affirms our individuality because it generally shows that Apollo is capable of mastering Dionysian chaos. It is through rational human behavior that Apollo can gain control over Dionysus, and this terrible truth can be kept at bay.

The metaphysics of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus reveals much about the relationship between the Apollonian, Dionysian, and life as an aesthetic phenomenon. Epicurus states that the highest good is ataraxy, or inner tranquility. Nietzsche, in many ways, viewed Epicureanism as a kind of death cult because it was devoid of this Dionysian vitality, but this is what I counter, because we ought to let the Apollonian principle take charge in order to make our life a work of art. I agree with Epicurus, not only because this inner tranquility is a consequence of letting reason take the lead and so is an element of making our life a work of art, but it is also the direction which Apollo takes us and is our spiritual destination if we let him take charge. Because there is such a thing as human nature with certain ethics built into our psychological makeup to prevent us from behaving in ways that may bring harm to us or others; actions which we *could* potentially do, this would suggest that, if we want to make our life a work of art and

live in a life-affirming manner, there are aspects of our humanity that we should *not* affirm. What is truly life-affirming involves a negation of certain aspects of ourselves in order to achieve ataraxy. This negation can be achieved by allowing the Apollonian principle of individuation to direct our actions. To achieve this ataraxy, we must either negate or bring under conscious command aspects of the Dionysian part of our nature and keep Dionysian chaos under control in the world around us (this would also suggest that there is an ethical dimension to the negation of the Dionysian as well, as rational behavior is the way in which we realize the ethics which we intuit within ourselves). For example, if you've encountered an unexpected problem, such as an illness or emergency, how do you approach it? You attempt to solve the problem through the use of your reason. The chaos of the world around you is mastered and brought under control if you solve the problem at hand. This Apollonian command undergirds the entirety of aesthetic phenomena; the process of individuation, the creation of a work of art, and our experience of our inner world and the outer world in general. If Apollo is the personification or deification of the principle of individuation, and it makes sense that we ought to act from a place of reason to keep chaos or the Dionysian at bay, we are more of an individual, are more authentically ourselves when we act from the seat of Apollo in our mind.

However, to act from only a rational place while attempting to rid life entirely of its Dionysian aspects would be inhuman; so much of what makes life meaningful and beautiful involves what are typically considered the irrational aspects of human nature. Aesthetic experience, and the process of making our life a work of art, depends a great deal upon what is irrational within us. Plato's allegory of the chariot describes the spiritual process that leads to individuation and making our life a work of art. Apollo, the embodiment of reason, stands in his chariot, taking the reins that guide two horses; one white representing the rational or noble

aspects and one black representing the irrational, ignoble aspects of our soul. By guiding the horses to the realm of the gods, reason brings us toward truth and, by extension, our true selves.

Life as a work of art looks like unwavering authenticity; the more one acts from reason, the more one is self-differentiated, and the more of an individual one is. We see this idea of complete authenticity in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, *The American Scholar*. Indeed, the person who acts from Apollo within himself becomes what Emerson calls the *active soul*; "the one thing in the world of value is the active soul — the soul, free, sovereign, active. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed, and as yet unborn." Though not expressed in those terms, it is clear that reason is what guides this process of individuation; this path toward authenticity. It is, in most people, obstructed and unborn because it requires the continual effort on the part of reason to command the Dionysian within. We can envision Apollo guiding his winged steeds when reading Emerson's words: "the soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin." And his protege, Henry David Thoreau, put these principles into practice and described his experience away from society in his work *Walden*, where he discusses how he lived a simple, ascetic life in nature; "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

There are limits to our ability to individuate and make our lives a work of art. Contrary to Nietzsche's idea, we cannot create our own values as a part of our individuality. The idea that we can create our own values conflicts with the reality of human nature, evolution, and biology. Because reality has fixed laws, and human beings have a biological structure with common qualities that cannot be overcome, we cannot create our values any more than we can change

what a human being is. Creating values implies that they are brought into being without any kind of dependence on the biology of the human being. Making our life a work of art is limited by the fact of human nature.

However, it is also these human characteristics that lead to our individuation within these limits. We are indeed relying upon the biology that has been given to us by nature when we create. Our phenomenology and the creative act rest upon the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of nature, and these are not forces that we create ourselves. Though the Apollonian principle of individuation is something bestowed upon us by nature, though we are entirely a product of nature, acting from this place does make us more of an individual. It is a tool that we did not create that allows us to become something of our own creation.

Concerning aesthetic experiences or, indeed, our experience of and interaction with the world around us in general, the relationship between Dionysus and Apollo is well viewed as a light illuminating the dark unknown, and thus making it intelligible and manageable to the individual. This is true of the aesthetic experience of our artistic creations, as well as the process that leads to artistic creation, as both affirm our individuality due to this rational illumination. Aesthetic experiences in response to something that is not created by a human being, such as the natural world, often undergird the creative process that leads to the creation of a work of art. That the Dionysian is felt within an aesthetic experience does not mean that Apollo is not still present and illuminating our understanding of it. Take an aesthetic experience that one might have in response to a sunrise or the first snow of the season. We might have a strong emotional response to a landscape or natural event, but it is our reason that makes us cognizant of this and assigns it meaning. This aesthetic experience is filtered through our conscious, rational mind, and so it

depends upon the principle of individuation in order for us to be cognizant of it. The Dionysian is viewed and understood in the light of Apollo.

This is also true of the creative process. The creation of a work of art affirms our individuality because it is the expression of an individual consciousness or individual consciousnesses, with deliberate choices underpinning the entirety of a work's creation. The Dionysian may be channelled or sublimated in order to create a work of art, but it is conscious deliberation that informs the application of paint on a canvas or the way in which the chisel is applied to a block of marble. The work of art, regardless of the medium, is the outward manifestation of the previously mentioned interior experience, and the way in which we apprehend it through aesthetic experience involves the same process that led to its creation. If we have an aesthetic experience of a landscape, that may prompt us to create a depiction of it where the initial emotional experience is expressed through careful application of paint. Even in the work of Francis Bacon, in which we see a forceful expression of Dionysian energy, he had to first make the conscious choice to surrender his reason to the chthonic undercurrent within himself in order to act from this place.

Life as an aesthetic phenomenon involves a kind of rational scaffolding that we create within ourselves, using what nature has given to us, in the process making our being, or experience, more richly filled with mental and emotional detail, and making us freer to think and act in the world. We become both more internally and externally active; as we gain more understanding of the truth, we become more truly ourselves. This is the authenticity that is our highest dignity as human beings. This is what it means to make life a work of art.