

Aesthetic Dimension of the Concept of War in Nietzsche's Thought

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Abstract:

The article aims to approach the theme of war in Nietzsche's philosophy from an aesthetic and artistic perspective, distancing itself from the ideological and political interpretations that have reduced his notion of war to its military or bloody dimensions. The author argues that Nietzsche offers a different understanding of war—one that views it as an existential and artistic experience where the concepts of struggle, heroism, and suffering intersect as aesthetic values contributing to the creation of the creative human being and the artist.

The article draws on Nietzsche's texts, particularly *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Dawn*, and *Twilight of the Idols*, to show that war, for Nietzsche, is not a struggle for survival but a struggle for the birth of the genius and the artist. War represents both an inner and outer conflict aimed at achieving self-overcoming and unleashing creative forces—much like the heroic struggle and noble suffering embodied in Greek tragedy.

Keywords: Nietzsche, War, Aesthetics, Art, Creativity, Tragedy, Heroism, Suffering, Self-overcoming

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study addresses, as is evident from its title, one of the most complex issues that has occupied and continues to occupy, an important place among the concerns of researchers and those interested in Nietzsche's thought in general, without their arriving at definitive, conclusive outcomes that determine its dimensions and backgrounds; this seems to be due to the intersection of the theme of war in Nietzsche's thought with numerous and diverse fields of knowledge, some of a particular psychological nature, some of a general social nature, and some of an intellectual character, which makes the task of settling the subject of war for Nietzsche extremely difficult. This, in our view, has had a positive effect on most studies concerned with the subject of war in Nietzsche's thought, which have attempted to approach this subject in its multiplicity, that is, from multiple and different intellectual angles, and this allows us to judge swiftly that Nietzsche's thought in general, and the theme of war in particular, can never be confined to a single dimension or interpreted within a unilateral reading. However, the perceptive reader, alongside those positive, multidimensional readings, will quickly notice specific, obscure and vacillating readings with which the subject of war in Nietzsche's thought has been treated, and the ideological readings of this subject in his case are the most significant proof of what we say. By ideological readings, we mean those that have reduced the subject of war in Nietzsche to the narrow political and military sphere. Hence, these arbitrary ideological readings, which

depict war in Nietzsche as merely a bloody event between states and peoples, reveal a perspective that is tantamount to the misunderstanding to which his other ideas and fundamental concepts, such as the "will to power" and the "overman," have been subjected.

What further strengthens and reinforces the credibility of this belief is what we observe of the unilateral reliance, on the ideological readings of the subject of war in Nietzsche, upon the first aphorism in which the latter addressed the issue of war, namely, the aphorism entitled "On War and Warriors" (*De la guerre et des guerriers*), found in Nietzsche's celebrated work, thus Spoke Zarathustra. Although the apparent ideological meaning that this aphorism may display is not in dispute, no one, nevertheless, contests the existence of later aphorisms through which Nietzsche would revisit the issue of war and devote to it a second writing that opens the field to possible interpretations and to its relation, in his thought, with civilisational critique, values, desire, self-surpassing, and creativity.

In this attempt, then, we believe that the subject of war in Nietzsche may be approached in another manner, especially after the completion of his aphorisms and texts, with their aims realised, and after it became possible to consult his archive in its entirety without omission.

This raises questions concerning the German philosopher's approach to war, from the standpoint of its being an aesthetic possibility.

2. 1- War as Conflict:

In a letter dated fifteenth of November 1887, that is, two years before the solitary philosopher's madness, Nietzsche concludes his letter from Rome to his friend Malwida von Meysenbug, saying: "However, what goal for humanity is more exalted than this goal which we impose upon it: the goal of engendering the genius and the artist; this is the purpose of every war, every conflict, every heroism, and every suffering. In addition, in no case whatsoever the increase of the herd."¹

In her commentary on this letter, Malwida von Meysenbug indicates that Nietzsche, in this final phase, chose the very principle he had expressed in his first phase, namely, "that the fundamental idea of every conflict, whatever its form, is to impel within us and outside us the birth of the philosopher-artist and thereby to work towards the completion of nature."²

If we take into account what the three representations of war in Nietzsche's aforementioned letter comprise literally as follows: conflict (conflit), heroism (Héroïsme), and finally suffering (Souffrance), and if we also take into account Malwida's conclusion, which summarises the aim of every conflict for Nietzsche as being not a struggle for survival, as some are wont to relate "Nietzsche to Darwin," but a struggle whose goal is the birth of the philosopher-artist, can we not, therefore, repose the principal questions of the subject of war within the problems of aesthetics in Nietzsche? How, then, is the relationship among conflict, heroism, suffering, and beauty established?

These representations (Les types) include war, heroism, conflict, suffering, find a model, as Nietzsche sees it, in the art of tragedy among the Greeks; therefore, it appears that Nietzsche's preference for tragedy may be because it is the art most transparent in its imitation of the representations of war to which we have alluded above, in a purely aesthetic sense the tragedy which he describes in the preface to his early book *The Birth of Tragedy* as the most illusory and fanciful of the arts.³ Moreover, in the *Untimely Considerations*, specifically in the fourth consideration on R. Wagner at Bayreuth, Nietzsche cites a passage from a poem by Schiller regarding what poets may be obliged to do, and perhaps even Nietzsche obliges them to do so:

- "Set out on a warrior's wing

- To the highest station,

- Beyond your age,

- From far to far,

- Moreover, let a new future be drawn in your mirror. "⁴

What Nietzsche believes, it seems to us, then, is that the conflictual and the artistic must ally, just as was the case in tragedy among the Greeks, for the upshot of tragedy is: I wish to be like this hero, that is, an incitement to apply the principle of conflict and challenge even at the level of ourselves. What does the tragic artist (L'artiste tragique) communicate to us about himself? Nietzsche asks, and he answers us in aphorism no. 24 of *The Twilight of the Idols*: "Does he not affirm precisely a lack of dread before what is terrible and horrible? This

very state is a superior war (*Guerre supérieure*), and those around it honour it with the best salutations. He attains it and must attain it if we deem him an artist.”

The courage of struggling before a capable enemy, before a grave calamity, before a problem arouses terror, this state of struggle and challenge is what the tragic artist chooses and glorifies (...). Moreover, whoever is accustomed to pain, whoever seeks pain, the heroic human being celebrates his existence in tragedy.⁵ Perhaps not only in tragedy but also at the level of music, which must become imbued with struggle and heroism; if music has offered us the model of the ascetic (Christian) human being, it is now called upon to offer us the model of the combative and heroic human being (*Lutteur et Héros*),⁶ as indicated by aphorism no. 416 of the book *Aurore*, or *Dawn*.

The representations of war conflict, heroism, and suffering and their aesthetic role lead us to pose to Nietzsche the difficult question, which may itself be considered the aesthetic question of the issue of war and conflict, namely, how can the sight of the hero's tragedies and the ugliness of his fate generate aesthetic pleasure? Moreover, how will the spectator be able thereafter to say, I wish to be like this hero, despite his conflicts and sufferings? This would seem to return us to the problem of natural beauty and ethics. Suppose that, as Nietzsche reads it, the artistic beauty of Greek tragedy was transformed from concepts of morality, the absolute, and the supersensuous to models of conflict, heroism, and suffering that are adopted by the artist or the tragic hero alone. In that case, this is to transform life into

an aesthetic, artistic sanctity, exemplified by Greek tragedy through myths, the lives of heroes, and sacred divine tales, and to make the human being, who is an artist, the sole and only standard of the beautiful, rather than nature. If, for example, the sublime (*Le sublime*) for Kant is determined by the moral—aesthetic stance, then *Le sublime* in Nietzsche is determined according to the type of mode embodied by the artist in his work of art. The effect then leaves upon the recipient, that is, the spectator. For this reason, we believe that Nietzsche preferred the art of tragedy because the hero, that is, the artist, was able through it to transform conflict, for the recipient, into the sacred (*le sacré*). This is what Nietzsche appears to indicate in aphorism no. 167, again in the book *Aurore*, or *Dawn*, where he says: "Eastern or modern Asiatic or European: in comparison with the Greek, all this is characterised by mass (*la masse*) and the mode of quantitative measure as the language of the sublime, whereas in Athens, and before all this Greek architecture, one is astonished at the degree to which the Greeks know and love to express sublime things in miniature conflicts (*Des conflits réduits*)."⁷

We infer from this aphorism, then, that the aesthetic perspective in Nietzsche seems to be determinable through a vision of the grandeur of conflict, even in the most minor things, and that defining the concept of beauty according to the concept of conflict does not constitute an impediment, nor does it strip the concept of beauty of its dignity, as is manifest in the concept of beauty within Greek tragedy, where conflict was able to ally itself with aesthetic fascination, so that conflict thereby finds a dimension that goes beyond good and evil, or

beyond the "big words" (Les grands mots), as is expressed by the title of one of the aphorisms of the book *The Will to Power*, despite the reservations that have been raised about this book, where he says: "To criticise the big words I am filled with suspicion: here lies the source of my pessimism, because I have acknowledged how noble sentiments are a source of misfortune, that is, a diminution and humiliation of the human being. The expectation of the victory of any ideal (Idéal) has been a movement of retreat until today: Christianity, revolution, the abolition of slavery, equal rights, love of humanity, love of peace, true justice, all these big words had value only in conflict and never as reality but were words for display to point to something else entirely and even to point to the opposite. In addition, not to a higher life such as that presented to us by the heroes of Greek tragedies."⁸ After this aphorism, it is our right to ask: what can conflict be for Nietzsche, if not an aesthetic reflection perceived by us? The possibility of a new conflict was discovered in the art of tragedy as a mimesis of the aesthetic human being, as "Luc Ferry," one of Nietzsche's interpreters, indicates in his book *Homo Aestheticus*.⁹

3- War as Heroism: "Luc Ferry" continually indicates in his book *Homo Aestheticus* that "the whole aesthetic problematic for Nietzsche goes back to a preference for the ultraindividualist hero (Ultra Individualiste), which will lead Nietzsche, after all, to find the classical Greeks superior rather than the Romantics, and thus to restore, in a certain conception of heroism, a privilege to the artist."¹⁰ We understand from this, therefore, that the artist within Greek

tragedy stands in relation to conflict whose basis is the production of heroism, and perhaps all kinds of conflict are for the sake of the production of heroism; that is, heroism is what we ought to conceive as the value of every conflict. However, in our literature, taking care that Nietzsche, in his evaluation of heroism, poses the same question he poses to art: is it for pessimism and the rejection of life, or is it a stimulant and impetus to it? Likewise, with heroism, is it for an embrace of life, that is, an affirmation of it, or is its aim a withdrawal from life and thus a negation of it? Moreover, does this allow us to discern the concept of heroism whenever Nietzsche invokes the name of the hero?

Perhaps, in this context, we ought not to overlook that the return to the hero is not a return to one of the Greek sages or to a Romantic artist; this makes us attentive to the fact that the return to the concept of the hero is an indication of the exemplar of an artist who was able to conquer a specific condition within himself in brief, who was able to transform pessimism into optimism. However, how is this accomplished?

To understand this, we must briefly return to the concept of heroism within Greek tragedy, where it is found to be among the most important pillars upon which this artistic staging among the Greeks rests. It is closely connected to the ideas of fate (Moirai) and necessity (Ananke), as well as the dramatic events in tragedy that are founded upon conflict and suffering. The hero in tragedy is not an ordinary person but a warrior (guerrier), distinguished by possessing three positive qualities: will, courage, and resistance. Moreover, the hero's role here is not one of confrontation with opponents but rather in the heroic

struggle against fate, even when the outcome is predetermined. For tragic art, the hero recognises that his fate is determined and inescapable; however, nonetheless, he continues to resist, and it appears that this resistance is what grants the tragic work of art a heroic dimension, where the value lies not in changing fate but in confronting it with necessity, awareness, and determination.

This rapid observation concerning the concept of heroism within Greek tragedy leads us to infer swiftly that the meaning of heroism here is not measured by material or political victory, as in traditional wars, but rather by the hero's capacity to endure pain and persist in the face of fate. It is a tragic heroism that renders the human being an immortal hero despite his finitude. Heroism may, in this context, become an aesthetic education, if we describe it with this pedagogical term, an education based on imitation and resemblance to this hero through the aesthetic emotion that allows for the establishment of communication with the model of the tragic hero and assent to his conduct, and hence imitation of him in the transition to ordinary life. For heroism in tragedy offers a simplified solution to the most difficult riddle of life, namely, death or finitude (La finitude), in such a way as to make us forget the terrifying anxiety that death suggests to us; this is what Nietzsche literally designates as "possessing the tragic sense" (*Avoir le sens tragique*) in the *Untimely Considerations*, specifically in the text "Art and Life" (*L'art et la vie*),¹¹ where Nietzsche continues in the exact text, saying: "What is intended by the presentation of heroism in the

tragedies of the Greeks is not the acceptance or nonacceptance of the hero's morality, but rather the call to challenge death by accepting fate and accepting punishment, like Prométhée, who knew all the pains he would suffer as a result of his actions, yet nonetheless performs them; heroism, therefore, lies in that it makes us distinguish and perceive a sublime (Sublime) element, rich in meaning."¹²

Nietzsche's definition of heroism is also found in aphorism no. 483 of *The Will to Power*, where he says: "Heroism in tragedy grants a sanctity to existence, that is, it makes it sacred enough to justify therein the monster of pain."¹³ Moreover, it therefore appears that Nietzsche's preference for tragedy may be because it is the art closest to this heroic human being who teaches us, in Nietzsche's language, "love of fate" (*Amor Fati*). Perhaps the "death of tragedy" that Nietzsche employs in *The Birth of Tragedy* means, according to our reading, that tragedy died as a heroic sensibility, especially after "Euripide" (Euripide) introduced into it the concept of satiric comedy, so that its subject was transformed from struggle with fate, namely, from its ascending essence to a new, horizontal essence that relies upon treating the topics of everyday life. In contrast, the tragedies of "Aeschylus" and "Sophocles" necessarily rested upon embodying the role of the hero in conflict, heroism, and suffering.

Moreover, we may not be mistaken if we point out that the end to which Greek tragedy came is the very end to which German Romanticism came, as Nietzsche discerned it. Hence, the latter had to choose between the model of the Greek hero, who struggles and returns

victorious for the sake of life, and the model of the Romantic hero, whose end is often suicide and flight from life; Nietzsche settled this choice in favour of the tragic hero.

It seems to us, then, that the return to the tragic hero had as its aim, for Nietzsche, the call to reconsider the concept of the hero and heroism alike, whereby it becomes possible for the human being to accept "love of fate." Thus, we observe with great clarity that the concept of heroism in Nietzsche surpasses ideological connotations, becoming an attitude towards life itself, since the latter is an aesthetic phenomenon worthy of being lived.

4- War and Suffering:

In this intimate relationship between conflict and heroism within Greek tragedy and in the tragic hero's confrontation with his fate, Nietzsche's position on the final representation of war becomes clear, making the latter in Greek tragedy a tragic symbol of the linkage between pain and beauty and of the hero's capacity to transform suffering into art.

Starting from the concept of suffering, it may be necessary to indicate the importance of emotions and affective influences in Nietzsche's thought, as we may understand his intellectual project aimed at returning philosophy to tragedy as one that evaluates human beings and life on the basis of affects and feelings, where it determines existence in terms of will, pain, suffering, and feelings. This is what at least aphorism no. One hundred ninety-five of Nietzsche's book *Le livre du philosophe* draws our attention to, where he says: "To understand the world from pain that is what is tragic in tragedy."¹⁴ This tragic philosophy

does not conflict with the concept of suffering but instead stands on a different plane, where suffering here pertains only to the emotional aspect. Therefore, if philosophy views the impossibility of knowing the truth of the world as nihilism, Nietzsche also sees the failure to give meaning to pain, suffering, and feelings in the human being as nihilism. Moreover, to reach that, the following question may take shape for Nietzsche: how can suffering be granted an aesthetic feeling on the basis of its physiological (physical) effect upon the recipient? For suffering is in its essence pain, as Deleuze says in his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.¹⁵

The meaning of suffering in Greek tragedy is aesthetically revitalised only when accompanied by music; otherwise, the meaning of suffering remains a mere intellectual abstraction, and thus, the aesthetic effect of feeling does not occur. For aesthetic pleasure beyond suffering to take place, there must be an actor and an audience, that is, performance and reception. Since the greatness of suffering is what distinguishes the aesthetics of tragedy, as it appears to us, this can be realised only with the conjunction of two conditions, in accordance with Nietzsche's statement in aphorism no. 12 of *The Birth of Tragedy*: "that the greatness of suffering be what inspires the one who performs the event, and, on the other hand, that it also be what inspires the one who lives the event (the recipient)." ¹⁶

From this angle, then, we can understand the mode of suffering in Greek tragedy, where what grants it a living artistic dimension is music; without the latter, it does not evoke feelings and affect. However, how is pleasure experienced when watching the pains and

sufferings presented by musical tragedies, whose model is Greek tragedy? This question finds its justification in aphorism 16 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche says: "The content of the tragic myth is, above all, an epic event that leads to the glorification of the fighting hero: what is the riddle that continually results in the presentation of the pains with which fate burdens the hero, and of the most agonising victories, or, in aesthetic terms, the ugly in a thousand forms; and that represents the preference for pain and suffering in a people at the height of its vitality? Must one not assume that here a higher pleasure is felt?"¹⁷

The acceptance of suffering on the part of the spectator does not occur, as we believe, without recourse to the Dionysian role of music, which allows us to understand that the return to Dionysus is to affirm the sanctity of suffering and pain more than to emphasise Dionysian ecstasy, for ecstasy also exists in the Apollonian. What is particular to the Dionysian appears to confer upon life an affirmative character; this is what Nietzsche indicates in aphorism four of *Twilight of the Idols*: "The word 'Dionysian' signifies all that; I know no symbolism more exalted than this Greek symbolism. The Dionysian festivals translate the deepest instinct of life, the life to come, eternal life, the way of life itself, creation as a sacred way."¹⁸

In Greek tragedy, then, the spectator can apprehend, in a felt rather than a purely abstract manner, the particulars of the performance; under the influence of music, the status of suffering and pain is transformed from mere feeling into acceptance, and thereby, aesthetic

pleasure is realised in identification with the hero—artist. Despite the suffering and pain that the hero endures, the spectator identifies with the performer, that is, the hero, and asks: How was he able to endure all this?

From all this, we conclude that aesthetic pleasure for Nietzsche is produced beyond pain; it arises from the pleasure of creation, the pleasure of the author—artist in creating the character of his heroes, and, with a return to everyday life, it becomes possible to challenge pain and suffering for the sake of life.

Nietzsche's stance towards suffering and pain seems to us to go beyond Greek tragedy as a work of art, thereby becoming a stance towards life itself; there are two kinds of suffering, as "Deleuze" continually reminds us in his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, where he indicates that "there are two kinds of suffering and sufferers: suffering from an excess of life and suffering that is indebted to life."¹⁹

5. **Conclusion:** In conclusion, we may say that Nietzsche does present the subject of war in a definitive and final manner but as a concept to which he opens dimensions, and perhaps the aesthetic dimension is one of the avenues that enables us to lessen many of the reservations about the concept of war in Nietzsche, especially those related to the political aspect and to the practical history of Nietzsche's political philosophy, burdened with Nazism. Nietzsche's aim, as it appears to us and as he intends it, is to establish a profoundly mature relation between war, art, and life, a relation realised in Greek tragedy, which alerted Nietzsche to the possibility of an

aesthetic balance that finds its expressions in the three representations of war, namely, conflict, heroism, and suffering; this approach substitutes for the role of war as a political concept and can lay for the human being the foundations of a new existence, upon which the Greeks, with the art of tragedy, built their lives, where war, in its ancient and modern Greek tragic sense, becomes for Nietzsche, perhaps the “art of healing life.”

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² Ibid., 84.

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⁷ Ibid., 1074, aph. 167.

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¹⁰ Ibid., 106.

¹¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Considérations inactuelles*, « L'art et la vie », op. cit., 149.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *La volonté de puissance*, t. 2, op. cit., aph. 483.

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