

NIETZSCHE'S GREEK *THEORIA* AND SPECTRAL ELEVATION

John Mandalios

ABSTRACT: This paper argues Nietzsche conceived knowing not as a contemplative 'spectator' who distances himself from experience or the surfaces of the world. Instead, the knower engages the festival of knowing which unfolds the spectra of worlds through which *Logos* is transformed and made transformative.

KEYWORDS: Nietzsche; Greek philosophy; epistemology; contemplative; *Theoria*

I. VOYAGER OF KNOWLEDGE

Nietzsche is most often confused with a form of anti-Platonism that elides the otherwise deep dialectical affinities that exist between them.¹ The artistry of thought and the thought of artistry are fundamentally Greek notions. The specular vision of beholding the mysteries of life known properly as *Theoria* is also fundamentally a Platonic conception. Nietzsche engages *Theoria* rather than disavows it: he practices Greek *Theoria* in defiance of German decadence. Against lowly 'modern ideas', he understands knowing not as an empty abstract act of thinking, but rather as an active joyful participation in the grand whole that comprises reality. He does not 'think' knowledge; rather, he places it within the perspective of opening-up: that is, 'creating' anew from necessity.

To possess knowledge in a noble fashion one has first to be cultivated by the

¹ This seems to be the thrust of recent attention on Nietzsche's so-called 'middle period', including *Human All Too Human*, which seeks to link Nietzsche to the Enlightenment project broadly. See P. Franco, 2011, *Nietzsche's Enlightenment: The Free-Spirit Trilogy of the Middle Period*, University of Chicago Press. For a more balanced view, see L. Lampert, 2017, *What a Philosopher is: Becoming Nietzsche*, University of Chicago Press.

festive specular events of the *Bios*² of the polis—the active ensouled structure of Greek citizens actualising their freedom. *Theoria* required a seasoned exposure to the *pathos* and *ethos* of its city and soul, mostly in the form of participating in arenas (from *theatron*, ‘theatre’) of active civic life i.e., ritual, symbolic, festive, and specular. One was absorbed, taken-up, by revelations of the divine in the regular everyday procession of *Nous*³ and *thumos*⁴ under the auspices of various assemblages of joyful belonging.

Arenas for fostering (and posturing) both competition and loyalty by means of excelling assisted in the forgetful absorption into the knowledge of *Kosmos*⁵. By means of procession and festive mingling with others, one ‘saw’ *Nous* unfold before one’s mortal eyes in the presence of actuality. The *Eina*⁶ was beheld actively through a joyful celebration of life and its beautiful forms. This was known as *Theorein* whereby a citizen strives to become *musue* (cultivated) by being *Philomusos*: the beautiful art of knowing and revealing pursued through eros and transforming the knower in the creative process.

To muse the Mind (*Nous*) was what characterised the wonderer’s contemplative gaze upon the specular shining-forth of the *Urania*: Nietzsche conceived of the voyager of knowledge within the terms of *Theoria*. In section 301 of the *Gay Science*, he says the knower is no mere ‘spectator or listener who has been placed before the great visual and acoustic spectacle that is life.’⁷ Neither as actor nor passive listener does the knower behold the splendour of the divine (divination being central to the processual nature of diverse *Theoria* activity). The mistake is to adopt the viewpoint of a purely ‘contemplative’ being, a thinking machine cut-off from his surrounds—from his *Urania*.

² Life – greater than organic, biologic life.

³ Anaxagoras’ ‘Mind’, denoting both a cosmic element and the active verb of performing ‘thought’. Distinctive from ‘my mind’.

⁴ Deriving Homericly from *θύειν*, the ‘movement of storm winds’, *thumos* entails inner conflicts, emotions, tides and waves – some affective and some cognito-intellectual. It is more archaic than *psyche* which appeared later with sages.

⁵ The ‘arrangement’ proffered by the celestial gods preceding Time, primordial Uranus and Gaea. From chaos emerged an order or rather Arrangement (defying accident).

⁶ Ancient Greek ‘what is’.

⁷ F. Nietzsche, 1974, *The Gay Science with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. W. Kaufmann, Vintage, p. 241. Hereon GS.

2. *EPISTEME EMBODIED*

Instead of an abstract, detached theoretical stance toward the splendour of the gods, the Greek Nietzsche conceives of the quintessential human activity of knowing in terms of passionate engagement or participation in the eternal flow of Becoming. What becomes by necessity (*ἀνάγκη*) is to unfold through a seeing in the form of processions that humans conduct in honour of those superior beings that encompass the Whole.

Every celebration in *Theoria* activates knowing and lights-up the *topoi* (places) of Being consequently. As an activity, knowing is caught up with the rudiments of *Bios* in which man himself is accorded the central figure of ‘creator’, and not mere spectator of the universe. Creator and creature intermingle in the state of Becoming necessary *nomoi*. Yet the tension between these polarities is not wholly demystified (‘entmystifiziert’). The ‘gay science’ of the ‘seeker of knowledge’ is no mere logical cog who has finally un-justified God. *Theoria* still envelops his very being as ‘we who think and feel at the same time’ in the act of continually fashioning something previously absent (GS 301).

Unlike the Greek spectator, the Greek knower acts more divinely—like his god—by being the creator of his world and not some fanciful contemplative kind who ponders from a distance, stands disinterested and serious⁸. As opposed to the passive, inert listener standing before the dance (*chorus*) the Greek knower embodies the artistic creation (*poiesis*) of the artist, the artistry of thought. Are we not, Nietzsche asks, precisely ‘Greek’ when we adore forms, tones and words like true artists? When we create cheerfulness out of civic festivals of *agon*?⁹ (GS Preface 4).

This links up necessarily with wander, the artist’s unwearied scaling of heights—‘roofs and spires of fantasy’— which shows no fear of heights or dizziness because ‘we ignore what is natural’ and hence are ‘moonstruck and God-struck’ (GS 59). Knowing entails being struck by the grandeur of the Whole—we experience wonderment (*phantasma*) beholding it. To *theorin* means to be awe-

⁸ Much of the *Gay Science* concerns lifting off dead seriousness from the ‘joy of knowing’ that constitutes *Wissenschaft* (not merely science).

⁹ *Agon* or contestation is the root of games, contests (eg. drama), excelling and therefore *Politismós* (culture).

struck by the beauty of *physis* (nature).¹⁰ It requires scaling heights to see the ordinary from a higher vantage-point, just like Apollo. *Theoria* is perspectival as a result: it situates lived experience in the event of one becoming who they are. Seeing or even passive wandering as feeling-experiential creatures of thought is what Nietzsche's voyager of knowledge undertakes.

The dance of creating and contemplation, *poiesis* and *skepsis* (thought), and truth and art shows a careful practical wisdom (*phronesis*) abides between them—not a dominant antagonism. Nietzsche envisages a kind of knowing that is ecstatic where the mania of *threpsikon* is played out artistically in the form of tragic wisdom. Heidegger's fundamental anti-Platonism overlooks this important overriding motif in Nietzsche's oeuvre.¹¹

Since there is an 'and' copula underlying Nietzsche's Heraclitean temperament, tragic wisdom overcomes the necessary opposition between poetry and truth, existence and justification, and nature and beauty thereby locating 'value' (or estimation) interdependently. He envisions, through *Theoria*, a weighted esteeming or estimating of the relative worth of things through this bi-fold vision of cheerful existence wherein life and nature are no longer simply given. Humankind has learned to turn *zoe* (nature) into a wondrous 'problem' now worthy of continuous examination.

Hence it is wrong to say the Greeks had adopted merely a theoretic stance in matters of knowledge. What we glean from this quasi-dialectical account of poetic-comprehension is the way *henosis* (oneness) reigns in the sundry *polla* (Many) to constitute world order. Nietzsche's world notably is characterized by these important words (of estimation): 'valuations, colours, weights, perspectives, scales, affirmations, and negations.' All are attributions or human creations: 'scales weights and valuations' all denote some sense of measure and weighing – an appraisal by the poet-thinker.

This is evident in GS 301 where he states: 'this poem that we invented' is 'constantly translated into flesh and reality', drilled into reality, and constantly internalized through different colours, perspectives and affirmations-negations.

¹⁰ Inner vision is involved here but the term originally derived from its progenitor *theatro*, a visual-audio performance. Hence Nietzsche's 'dance' derivation which is no mere metaphor.

¹¹ Heidegger errs in this regard in his limited interpretation of Nietzsche. See M. Heidegger, 1991, *Nietzsche*, trans. D. F. Krell, Harper One, San Francisco.

Before the ‘great visual and acoustic play that is life’ the poet as the ‘ongoing author of life’ stands to behold the specular view of existence.

3. AFFIRMATION AS WISDOM

Practical human beings, not contemplative types, generate a labyrinth of valuations and orders of rank known to them through Mind (*Nous*) and *philia* as ‘life’. Hence Nietzsche thinks of that which is intelligible to us not as natural but cultural. He says, ‘nature is always value-less— but has rather been given, granted value’ and he stresses ‘we were the givers and granters!’ (GS 301). Value-givers are symbolists; they are poets of the world that concerns human beings! Consequence: we inhabit a knowable world only known to us through our own *forms* of knowing, estimating, weighing.

Yet the eternity of self-creation needs to be secured through a cosmic process of regeneration akin to that in Plato’s *Timaeus*: the image of eternity still defines *Theoria* in its all its fullness. Then we have a heightening of the process of formation, where Forms (*Eide*) as beautiful things shape our existence and understanding. Here where colours and forms define *Ousia*¹² we also find the ‘higher human being’ with a higher threshold of what stimulates him, justifies life and enhances the soul.

A spirited affirmation is the soul of ‘la gaya scienze’: we arrive at cheerfulness having overturned nature, creating like gods, and yet still experiencing the totality of all things in all their splendor. The heightening includes a ‘more delicate taste for joy, with a more tender tongue for all good things, with merrier senses’ (GS Preface 4) and not merely the creation of more complex concepts/creations. Cultural extension through the various works (*erga*) performed in festivals and arenas of *musue*¹³ amplifies the range of human faculties and capacities widening the soul to embrace paradox, contradiction, and self-deception more comprehensively.

The Greek knower is a cheerful poet of existence because he understands ‘knowing’ to be akin to technical art (*techne*): it concerns an art of knowing how to

¹² Various as ‘nature’, ‘persisting characteristic’; essence is a late supplément, not Socratic.

¹³ From which museum is derived – ‘spectral knowledge’, involving optics or ‘eyes’ as Nietzsche would say.

make things and testifies therefore to the sculpturing of the sculptor. He does not wax happily in his own creation, but rather reigns freely in his freedom to forget things, to let things dissolve, so that the rupture of the new (time) may arise. Basking in the colours of contradiction and forms, he extends the spiritual form of life through *Theoria* and through *tragedia* (tragedy) alike. Inquiring, doubting, estimating, measuring, calculating, and composing all belonged to the activity of making *noesis* – a generative account fundamentally, even if Pythagorean-Platonism sought to mathematize them into immutable Forms.

Outside of divinity, in the realm of the mortals, where time yields finite existence, (a)portioned life is precious—it is affirmed as Life (*Bios*). It is evident, then, that whatever ‘is’ coexists along with what becomes (*genesis*), and its yielded (estimated) value. What has value must be forgotten; yet we adorn existence with beautiful meanings to screen-out the deep abyss that is mere organic life (*zoe*), so every overcoming is a negation of chaos. Striving, or the coming-forth, is the flow of time in actuality voiding chaos and creating spirit (*pneuma*). For the Greeks, spirit and awe-struckness of a godly nature are the rudiments of understanding the *logos*¹⁴ of the laws (*nomoi*). Hence, we can say that *Theoria* requires a cultural status as well as an epistemic status if the latter is not to be reduced to the contemplatives.

4. ELEVATION

What elevation does to the human is to extoll the height which he formerly only recognized in his deities. His elevation takes on a certain Apollonian shining, making being glisten in the sunlight. He then beholds its beauty as if it were independent from him when he was its author and as such affirms the danger of knowing a higher life to be more valuable. Existence, having become dangerous because of knowledge, means that wisdom is no longer antithetical to gaiety. Joyfulness and wisdom-seeking are mutually compatible sensibilities in the Greek soul—and in Zarathustra’s soul.

Each moment of knowing harbours an element of error so that truth and error wax together in *noesis*. *Sophia* (wisdom) is the developed art of understanding this

¹⁴ A complex, many-sided term: ‘narrative, account of, description, logic or cause of, ‘that which regulates all events’; and a macro-abstract object as noun: *the Logos* – an invisible force.

complexity as a Whole. Nietzsche's seeker of knowledge knows tragic wisdom and therefore eschews every dual distinction such as truth and error, and knowledge and art. Wisdom, as he understands it, is a kind of cultivation: the agrarian ploughshare metaphor properly captures the need for sowing, fertilizing, pruning, ripening, photosynthesis and harvesting the fruits of one's labours. Cultivation adds value to naked *zoe*—it adorns nature.

But we need to understand Nietzsche's gayful 'seeker of knowledge' as a person of science, art and wisdom who, importantly, is happier to function as a higher type (GS 283 & 301). He is in a higher state of being, where the heightened taste attends every activity of life. These beings, *sophistic* ones, are wrongly characterized as 'contemplatives' because they are '*thoughtfully* seeing and hearing, immeasurably more' (301). But height and seriousness of mind do not go together. The theoretic being is a euphemism (more of a Christian pious add-on than a truly Greek notion). Nietzsche's intent here is to warn of us of our tendency to 'misjudge our best power and underestimate ourselves just a bit'—which best power? He means the sophistic knowledge that is rarely or preciously retained by human nature – because of our freedom to forget (a prerequisite of culture).

Nietzsche says, 'when we catch it for a moment we have forgotten it the next', we let slip-away the fact of creative authorship in order to remain awe-struck by the god-struck vista afforded by conceptualization, by the artificial contemplatives. These he ridicules arguing we could be prouder and happier if we remembered the fundamental fact that we are the value-givers, and that nature is intrinsically value-less. Estimation as a 'weighing up' exercise involving scales is an important cognitive-emotional function of the higher ones known to Plato as 'measurers'.

5. WILL TO POWER TRANSFORMED

Derived from Apollo's use of *μετρικό* (measure) as his art (*techne*), Nietzsche can be understood as a philologist of *Theoria* who practices a kind of universe scale (*γεωμετρων*). Herein the specular view proffers a sense of the relation between things measured by their relative worth (*axia*) as they come into being but valued for their beauty. Ephemeral forms will glisten in Apollonian light, yet the illusion of mere contemplation is fractured by the higher joyfulness of knowing creatively.

Nietzsche, like Plato, understands the artistry of thought and thinks

philosophically by means of different aesthetic standards, turning the things (*logoi*) into more powerful devices of power. The ‘will to power’ is the heir to this parentage of *vis creative* and *vis contemplative*: a union of excelling (doing) with $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ ¹⁵ (thinking about). Energy is humanized and life is justified. Socrates will invent virtues and *Theoria* will give birth to modern science. Under the auspices of truth and error, the will to power expresses itself both as *Physis* (nature) and *Logos* in history. Their entwinement is the secret of Greek fire: the fusion of Apollo and Dionysos, like truth and art, brings about the miracle of tragic wisdom.

We might have been happier, Nietzsche jests, had we retained the gem of our classical heritage and seen to it that we never ‘misjudge our best power’. Our best, our excellence, lies not in being purely ‘contemplative’ by disposition, but in remaining in the truth of poetic-*philosophia*. The ‘will to power’, in other words, is itself transformed; it undergoes change and alteration, according to the vicissitudes of time.

Nietzsche introduces discernment (as a force of estimating) into the schema and imagines it to possess memory so that ‘power’ unfolds within already existing habits and practices. To discern the forgetting of the crucial fact concerning the justification of life is to enact the will to power in a specific way. The reason Nietzsche remains a philosopher to the end is because the Greek master-thinker practices *Theoria* in all its ubiquitous, labyrinthine qualities: its various colours of contradictions and paradoxes refracted into the *Ousia* of Being (*On*). He remembers his forgetfulness¹⁶ to emulate his godly-acquired powers. Nietzsche’s ‘gay science’, while post-nihilistic, is not wholly de-defied—it is not ungodly.

For Nietzsche’s final teaching makes Zarathustra’s wisdom possess the ardour of religion, as *Beyond Good and Evil* shows.¹⁷ Only those who have grasped the tragic wisdom of knowing error (or elusion)—who are *sophistic* in other words—see in the vision splendid the co-mingling of fool *and* knower, of disclosing and deception. *Anthropos*¹⁸ is fundamentally altered by his existential encounter with life as a

¹⁵ *Theoria* as above.

¹⁶ Forgetting allows the ground of becoming to (re)emerge and thus ruptures repetition which unfolds staccato-like.

¹⁷ See Lampert, *What a Philosopher is: Becoming Nietzsche*.

¹⁸ Humankind.

project worthy of beautifying. This his second life he lives cheerfully—but knowingly.¹⁹

Research Associate
School of Philosophical and Historical Studies
Monash University
mandaliosj@gmail.com

¹⁹ I wish to thank Dr Doug Magendanz for his assistance in editing this paper.