Nietzsche and Van Gogh: Representing the Tragic

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In a letter dating from 1882, Van Gogh writes: “I do not wish to express in my landscapes and in my figures a kind of sentimental sadness, but a tragic grief.” Is it possible to understand Van Gogh’s art and his view of the tragic through the famous Nietzschean concept? How can this concept be applied outside of tragedy to plastic art in general and to painting in particular? What aspects of Van Gogh’s art can be called “tragic” in the Nietzschean sense?

From 1869, Nietzsche speaks of “the tragic age of the Greeks,” or of “tragic mankind”; he himself uses this concept even outside of art. The strictly and narrowly dramatic definition of the tragic, for example, “a victory won through defeat,” requires not only language but a narrative sequence, a series of events, a development in time. The extension of the concept to painting, i.e., to a space carrying lines and colors, implies a broadening and a displacement of its meaning. Even the larger definition given at the beginning of The Birth of Tragedy—“the Apollinian elucidation of the Dionysian”—must be completed.

But the widening of the concept of the tragic seems to raise a contradiction of principles. Plastic art, in effect, the art of the sculptor as well as of the painter, is strictly speaking non-tragic, because it is cut off from its Dionysian and primordially musical origin.

“Plastic art,” writes Nietzsche, “pursues a totally different purpose
[totally different from the goal of music]: Apollo overcomes through it the suffering of the individual by means of this glory of light which he puts around the eternity of the phenomenon; beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life, and through a lie, pain in a certain sense is erased from the face of nature. This somewhat Schopenhauerian passage, insisting on the suffering that underlies the world, shows why plastic, Apollinian art seems to be excluded from the tragic: it is too illusory, too strictly linked with mere pleasure, too superficial. In Apollinian art appearance seems to be eternal, and this illusion Dionysian art seeks precisely to destroy or to make relative.

Dionysian art, instead of forgetting suffering in general and in particular the pain that goes along with the fall of the individual, includes it in joy, transforms it into “tragic joy” (a completely anti-Schopenhauerian view of course): “that joy may arise from the annihilation of the individual can only be understood by starting from the spirit of music.” The mysterious “spirit of music” is precisely the compenetration of pleasure and pain, which can be musically understood as the relationship between harmony and dissonance.

Plastic art is “naive” in the sense that it believes in a preestablished harmony between nature and man. The painter is called “the Apollinian artist of the dream,” whereas the musician or the lyrical poet is “the Dionysian artist of intoxication.” The tragic artist is supposed to be both and at the same time: he is “the artist of dream and of intoxication together.” What is the meaning of this togetherness? Is the tragic present as soon as we have a simultaneity and a balance between the two fundamental artistic drives? It does not seem that this sole condition suffices to define the tragic.

The only painting ever analyzed by Nietzsche, The Transfiguration, by Raphael, gives precisely a good example of a simultaneity of the Apollinian and the Dionysian, which is not tragic, and is even anti-tragic. The suffering of the possessed child in the lower part of the painting as well as the vision of the transfigured Christ in the upper part are mere appearances which allow the spectator to grasp the “mutual necessity” of the two worlds. But these two visions manifest the separation between the two dimensions rather than their conflict. A more complete definition of the tragic requires more than the phenomenalization (or the projection into an image) of the terrifying ground of the world.

Such a definition comes much later in The Birth of Tragedy in section 22, where Nietzsche describes the strange feeling of joy that seizes the spectator of the tragedy at the moment of the hero’s death, when the Apollinian world breaks down. “He [the spectator] beholds the transfigured world of the stage, and yet he negates it; he sees the tragic