Nietzsche, the Tragic-Real, and the Exquisite Corpse of Theory

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What is at stake in the theory of tragedy is not only a determination of genre. At least since Nietzsche, theory has solicited tragedy for means by which it might experience and contain the truth of its own limits, and then, perhaps, transgress those limits, even ruin itself in the drive to transgress them, even obliterate itself in the darkness that seems to lie beyond.

One could proceed here by surveying the various theories of tragedy and, in an attempt to overmaster them, criticize them and claim to supplant them with one's own; but to do so might be merely to add to them, to their discourse, their history, without ever having witnessed the tragedy of theory itself. "The tragedy of theory": a ludicrous, pathetic, histrionic phrase, as if the theory of tragedy wished to take up for itself, for its own personae—doubtless by a kind of theft—something of the tragic aura, some trace of the dignity, the magnitude, the sublimity, and even the "death" of tragedy. To become what it beholds, or wishes to, or wishes to seem to: as if in tragedy we had encountered the Imaginary of theory. Is it not partly in order to claim such sublimity for itself, to pose theory in the eerie, indirect light of the sublime, that the theory of tragedy exists in the first place? It might be better, then, to scale down one's rhetoric and speak more cautiously of a certain relation between theory and tragedy wherein theory repeats, in however diluted and farcical a form—like the "second time" in a Marxist history—one of tragedy's most salient paradigms: the limitation of mastery itself, the necessary impossibility, for instance, of a certain general
project of knowledge that only realizes itself in realizing that it could only have failed, that its project is at one and the same time inevitable and insane, that it is fated to discover itself precisely in its own destruc-
tion. Perhaps this is the possibility that Nietzsche reaches for in the fifteenth section of The Birth of Tragedy, where he finds or imagines “science” revealing its own tragic dimension in arriving at the histori-
ical limit of its very escape from tragic wisdom.¹ But in The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche wants tragedy—Wagner!—to be reborn out of this moment, without, we might decide, having paused long enough at the end.

It is crucial to confess that, of course, from a certain perspective, there is nothing new about marking such a limit: it is there from the very beginning of “metaphysics.” Indeed, we are assured that in some sense it is metaphysics, and that it has thus far only been able to repeat itself as such, perhaps more intensely in the present, but never once going further, never once transcending itself and passing beyond. A repetition that is, as we shall see, all too easy to assimilate into the theoretical mechanism of the death drive. It is virtually a tru-
ism of a certain order of current discourse that the end of metaphys-
ics is a perpetual moment within metaphysics, just as the postmodern is a moment forever within modernity, and so on. We are no longer so willing as we imagine we might once have been to imagine a suc-
cession of historical stages, each neatly and completely replacing the other (nor were we ever, etc.). But neither are we quite willing to give up the lure of the beyond—beyond Marxism, beyond Freud, beyond metaphysics, beyond the dialectic, beyond theory. The very economics of our discourse demands that we be both within and beyond, that we continue to comment on various traditions, that they keep returning to us in our commentaries, even as there is something in the very movement of commentary that tries to supercede them, to invent some-
thing altogether new, a new school, a new idea, a new product, a new reification. Nothing, in the end, could be more metaphysical than the necessity of leaving metaphysics behind. As, doubtless, Nietzsche himself discovered. And would still have discovered, even if he had “sung.”

Any response to this predicament, this metaphysical “crisis,” or whatever one wishes to call it, will tend to reproduce the metaphysical division be-
tween here and beyond that characterizes the crisis itself. In an attempt to leave behind what would seem to be the exhausted dialectics of repression and revolution, for instance, one will introduce a division between dialectics and its beyond, which is the beyond of dialectics. And it will take this form even in the process of trying to avoid dialecticity.

Are we caught up in the same circle when we trace Nietzsche’s distinc-
tion between Socratic, Alexandrian, scientific, theoretical, optimistic man,