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Reading Nietzsche in *Swann's Way* and *To the Lighthouse*

In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche describes the difference between what he calls the Dionysian and Apollonian ways of understanding the reality of the world:

Apollo's deception: the *eternity* of beautiful form; the aristocratic legislation, “*thus shall it be for ever!*”

Dionysus: sensuality and cruelty. Transitoriness could be interpreted as enjoyment of productive and destructive force, as *continual creation*. (*The Will to Power*, 1049)

This passage illustrates Nietzsche's understanding of time as an essential element in the individual's relationship to the universe. Nietzsche understands the Apollonian mode as performing a conflation of beauty and immortality, suggested by his situating the phrase that describes the relationship between the two entities, “the *eternity* of beautiful form,” in a mere sentence fragment that entirely avoids suggesting the sort of cause and effect relationship (that is, a relationship by which eternity comes about logically *through* or *because of* beauty, or vice versa) that one usually uses in making aesthetic or moral judgments. Nietzsche's description of the relationship between beauty and immortality as “aristocratic” suggests his belief that this relationship is an arbitrary and false relationship enforced not by nature but by human authority.

The relationship between beauty and immortality is of course quite complicated, as the notion of *form* suggests. Form, in a sense, can be understood as beauty (or aesthetic judgment) extended across time. Form compares objects with one another; it comes out of the similarities and differences that can be noted among objects and it essentially reduces the multiplicity of individual entities and objects into a single trait. The beauty of an object perishes along with that

object; the beauty of a form, in contrast, exists across history, such that the beauty of the human body today can be understood as the very same beauty that the first human body possessed. It is a static and single beauty. To speak of the beauty of a body is to speak essentially of *all bodies* and thus *no individual body at all*.

Importantly, the Apollonian concept of meaning extends beyond “beauty” to include any quality by which an object might be defined in comparison with other objects and experiences. Nietzsche's choice to use “beauty” can be understood as somewhat arbitrary, since it is not the specific quality under consideration but rather the way in which that quality becomes meaningful that is important in Nietzsche's discussion.

In contrast with the Apollonian, which defines meaning by extension forwards and backwards through time, to Nietzsche the Dionysian mode comes about through the recognition of the temporality of objects and meanings. Transitoriness, the inevitable yielding of all things to time, is the result of a “productive and destructive force”-- destructive in that objects of the past are lost but productive in that it is only through the very loss of the past that the future can come about. Nietzsche locates within the Dionysian process of continual destruction and rebirth an eternal reality to replace the Apollonian “deception” of eternal beauty: “the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction” (*The Will to Power*, 1050). In a sense we can understand the Apollonian mode as being concerned with the preservation of a *quality* (such as beauty) along the axis of time and as willing to sacrifice the uniqueness of each object in the interest of preservation; likewise, we can understand the Dionysian mode as being concerned with the opposite function, a function that eliminates the uniqueness of the discrete historical moment-- essentially reducing all moments in time into a single endless moment, “the abyss of transitoriness”-- in order to explore and expand

the limitless, unique qualities of the objects that occupy it. Thus in Dionysian thought, meaningful relationships between objects are based on their shared presence in the moment and their shared interactions with the force of change that both generates and destroys.

Interestingly, and somewhat counterintuitively, Nietzsche's descriptions of these modes of thought reveal how the Apollonian effort to preserve meaning across time has the destructive effect of eliminating *individual meaning*, while the Dionysian embrace of the very transitoriness of the object and the moment opens up a wealth of new meanings based on an exploration of the ways in which these objects navigate the force of change.

Our readings of Proust and Woolf, because of the concern in their work for locating the meanings of objects and experiences as they relate to the inevitable passing of time, can be informed by Nietzsche's writings on the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

The first section of *To the Lighthouse*, entitled "The Window," explores the thoughts and experiences of various characters, paying close attention to the ways in which the characters derive satisfaction and meaning from their experiences in relation to one another. In the following passage, for example, Lily Briscoe and William Bankes share the experience of watching a boat on the water:

They both felt a common hilarity, excited by the moving waves; and then by the swift cutting race of a sailing boat, which, having sliced a curve in the bay, stopped; shivered; let its sails drop down; and then, with a natural instinct to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness-- because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast

by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest. (*To the Lighthouse*, p. 34)

There are several layers of meaning working in this passage. There are, of course, the phenomena that the characters witness, the ocean waves, the sailboat, the dunes, all of which seem to exist in an objective reality. Also present are the subjective emotional experiences that these phenomena incite within the characters, namely, joy by the waves and the boat, and shortly thereafter sadness by the quiet landscape; this level of meaning exists within an individual character. Additionally, there is a way in which the comparison of the subjective experiences of the individual characters generates another level of meaning-- they feel a "common hilarity" and perform actions of response in unison ("both of them looked at the dunes far away"). The suggestion of two characters experiencing identical emotions extends, in a sense, the significance of the emotion from being contained within a single character's subjectivity to being a part of the experience of the universal human experience. At first this effect of broadening and universalizing the human emotional experience seems to be the most significant effect of the passage-- the general insularity of the characters' narration in *To the Lighthouse* has the effect of creating a sense of personal isolation that infrequent moments of genuine connection tend to relieve-- however, Lily's thoughts at the end of the passage have somewhat of the opposite effect in that they question the very value of human meaning in the first place.

Lily notices the absurdity of the fact that human beings tend to prioritize the meanings they provide or generate in relation to nature over nature itself despite nature's certainty to outlast humanity. She recognizes that, despite the seeming simplicity of the inherent meanings of the waves or the dunes (specifically, that they are not *meaningful* at all but merely *exist* beyond question or purpose) in comparison to the complex human meanings that are situated in societal,

psychological, or philosophical systems, these inherent meanings are in fact far more resilient.

The reality of the natural world is secure: man's attempts to fit nature into an ordered, subjective structure of meaning can have no effect on a world "entirely at rest."

The security of the natural world in this passage contrasts with the transitoriness of meaning that Lily and William Bankes experience. The image of the sailboat letting fall its sails indicates a completion of an action; the phrase "swift cutting race" suggests the briefness and the inevitable end of all purpose and intention-- as a race only exists by its very ending, and only in being won, and thus in being exhausted of significance, comes to be completed, so any purpose by definition exists to be fulfilled and, in being fulfilled, is at once emptied. In such a way this passage addresses one of Nietzsche's main concerns in his discussion of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the concern with time and the temporality of existence. It is a realization of the temporariness of human meaning and experience by Lily that reveals the permanent meaning of nature and the world in itself.

The middle section of Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, entitled "Time Passes" describes the changes that occur to the Ramsay family's summer house as the house stands abandoned for years after Mrs. Ramsay's death. The characters whose thoughts and actions populate the first section of the novel, "The Window," disappear for most of "Time Passes," reflecting the general concern of each section: whereas "The Window" explores how meaning is created by the human subject, "Time Passes" examines how meaning both continues and fails to function in the absence of a thinking, perceiving subject.

In spring the garden urns, casually filled with wind-blown plants, were gay as ever. Violets came and daffodils. But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of the night, with the trees standing

there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible. (*To the Lighthouse*, p. 203)

As in the previous passage, Woolf presents the objective world in great detail, naming the types of flowers growing in the garden; the mentions of “spring” and “the brightness of day” emphasize the gaiety that would be perceived by a human viewer. However, without a perceiver to comprehend and categorize them, the qualities of “stillness” and “brightness” that would be meaningful to the human mind remain “strange as the chaos and tumult of the night.” Woolf represents the universe as a dichotomy between a natural, primordial chaos that exists beyond the scope and time of human society and a meaningful but artificially constructed human reality; her use of images of darkness and light to describe the chaotic natural world and the human world respectively suggests the absolute importance of *perception* in the generation of human meaning. Darkness, after all, cannot be seen and is, in fact, defined by the very way in which it resists sight and thus prevents the generation of knowledge, while light allows for perception and thus opens the way to the creation of meaning. Thus whatever is not perceived by a human subject remains entirely chaotic, as the signs of the coming spring season in Woolf’s passage that might under other circumstances be perceived as gay and bright remains “strange.” The final image of the passage, which describes the unthinking, unperceiving trees as “terrible,” performs a subjective interpretation of the experience of chaotic reality. The narrator of this passage acknowledges the reality of a natural chaos that exists entirely outside human knowledge and is unable to resist making a subjective value judgment upon this reality, suggesting the impossibility of a true comprehension of reality by human thought; the human subject will inevitably interfere in and alter the perception of reality it renders.

Woolf’s novel, then, can be understood as addressing Nietzsche’s concepts of the

Apollonian and Dionysian worlds as discussed in the introduction to this paper. Both passages from *To the Lighthouse* discussed above demonstrate the way in which Woolf draws meaning out of the very obliteration of objects and perceptions: Lily's perceptions and emotions are transient and the human perceptions of the house and its garden are completely eliminated, but the passing of these temporary human meanings is necessary in order to reveal a glimpse of objective truth that they cover, namely, the reality of chaos and darkness, a reality that resists human understanding: the Dionysian ocean of simultaneous destruction and creation, in which meaning only exists without shape or form. The characters in *To the Lighthouse* consistently experience what Nietzsche might describe as the Apollonian anxiety of attempting to providing structure and meaning to a chaotic world-- in a sense, this very struggle, that of the individual working to contain the immensity of the universe within his or her limited subjective experience, can be understood as the primary conflict of the novel.

Early in "The Window" Mrs. Ramsay experiences the power of the chaos of the ocean: "this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror." In this moment she recognizes a reality underneath that which she normally experiences, that of the Dionysian chaos, but it is a reality that seems to be "hollow" or without meaning. This recognition of the hollowness of objective truth poses a threat to the familiar concepts of human meaning (as, earlier in the passage, Mrs. Ramsay imagines the waves causing "the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea") and thus generates a negative sensation of fear.

It seems that Woolf fully recognizes Nietzsche's categories of Dionysian and Apollonian, recognizes, in other words, the chaotic nature of the universe upon which human beings impose, through thought and language, the artificial structures of their societies and personal

perspectives. However, Woolf engages with these categories in a different manner and with a different attitude than Nietzsche. Nietzsche expresses through his writing a desire to embrace “the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection” (*The Will to Power*, 1041) and a view of human consciousness as mere illusion caused by the appearance of causality; he writes of “the absurd overestimation of consciousness, the transformation of it into a unity, an entity: 'spirit,' 'soul,' something that feels, thinks, wills” (*The Will to Power*, 529). To Nietzsche, any assertion of the Apollonian human perspective must necessarily perform violence against the Dionysian truth. Woolf, in contrast, views the “triumph of Apollo,” the activity of human consciousness and creativity in a chaotic world, as something to be celebrated. Each of the three sections of *To the Lighthouse* explores the challenges faced by human characters as they attempt to assert their individual wills and structured perspectives upon a fluid, chaotic world. In “The Window,” the dinner party that occurs near the end of the book works as a figuration of the great conflict between structured, Apollonian human unity and the chaos of the world; “they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there” (*To the Lighthouse*, p. 147). It is upon the success of this dinner party that the characters' senses of happiness and fulfillment depends. Indeed the entire novel ends with Lily's victorious assertion of structure upon the natural world as she completes her work of art : “with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre” (*To the Lighthouse*, p. 310). The way in which Woolf aligns the human capacity to achieve personal fulfillment with the expansion and maintenance of human structures of meaning upon a chaotic world suggests that, in contrast with Nietzsche's perspective, it is in the very imposition of human subjectivity that meaning can be created. Whereas Nietzsche interprets human thought as a process that ignores and thus eliminates the uniqueness of each transient moment and of the

boundless reality occupying that moment, Woolf understands the process of generating Apollonian meaning as being more valuable than the recognition the reality of the unstructured world. Ultimately, the disagreement between Nietzsche and Woolf can be understood as being based in a difference of priority: whereas Woolf's argument uses the tendencies of human nature as a measure of value-- essentially arguing that the value of the objective world comes from its ability to serve human subjectivity-- Nietzsche prioritizes an understanding and acceptance of the inherent chaos of the universe. Woolf understands the imposition of meanings upon the world as a testament to the power, courage, and value of the human subject-- she understands human meaning to be arbitrary and artificial, but recognizes the expression of energy in the process of creating meaning as being itself a sort of absolute meaning-- while Nietzsche takes the artificiality of human meaning to be proof of its insignificance.

Proust addresses the relationship between perception and reality in his novel *Swann's Way*. In particular Proust explores the nature of the process by which individuals create meaningful experience. The following passage, in which the narrator Marcel describes his sexual experiences as a youth, illustrates some of Proust's ideas about uniqueness and value:

I was still, and must for long remain, in that period of life when one has not yet separated the fact of this sensual pleasure from the various women in whose company one has tasted it, when one has not yet reduced it to a general idea which makes one regard them thenceforward as the interchangeable instruments of a pleasure that is always the same. (*Swann's Way*, pp. 221-222)

Proust describes in this passage how objects and the qualities they possess come to be removed from one another. The narrator identifies two very different ways he has appreciated the sexual pleasure that women have provided for him: as a youth he understood pleasure as belonging

individually and uniquely to each of the women with whom he experienced it, while as an adult, in contrast, he experiences the different moments pleasure he experiences with each woman as being *the same pleasure*. In fact, the adult narrator is able to recognize only the uniformity of all pleasure; the women have lost their individual values and have become mere “interchangeable instruments” subordinate to the pleasure itself. Proust identifies in this passage the same process Nietzsche associates with the violence of Apollonianism: the recognition an object for its form-- the recognition of which requires comparison to other objects-- and for the attributes it shares with other objects instead of for its uniqueness and for the value of its being in and of itself. In other words, the value of a woman can be determined either by her individuality, in a Dionysian process in which case the value is located *objectively* in the woman herself and in the specific pleasure she alone can provide or, alternatively, by the extent to which she conforms to *subjective expectation*. This latter sort of value, the Apollonian value, locates the value of an object in the subject that perceives it, in a sense obliterating any inherent value contained within the object itself. In a sense, it is this process of creating Apollonian value, a value that prioritizes the perception of the human subject over the reality of the world, that Woolf is interested in exploring and, arguably, promoting in *To the Lighthouse*. In contrast, Proust in *Swann's Way* attempts to locate the meaningfulness of existence in beauty and complexity of the Dionysian world

In *Swann's Way* Proust figures the Dionysian appreciation of life as it is as a celebration, through emotional and sensory attentiveness and through description, of nature and of objects; as the above passage illustrates, this Dionysian mode is associated closely for Proust with childhood, while Apollonian categorization is associated with the adult world. In fact, Proust views the adult world, particularly the world of society, as being formed entirely of subjective

categorizations:

In the end they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, they follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice as if it were no more than a transparent envelope, that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is these notions which we recognize and to which we listen. (*Swann's Way*, pp. 23-24)

In this remarkable passage Proust demonstrates the violence of subjective perception. As Proust understands it, this violence works through replacement; over time, human beings come to replace the actual object with which they interact with their mental concept of that object. In the passage above, the actual material presence of the person under consideration, rendered in phrases like “the curve of his cheeks,” “the line of his nose,” comes to be replaced by mere “notions,” until it is only those subjective notions, and not at all the actual individual to whom those notions seem to refer, with which the narrator interacts. The subjective mind, in other words, is continually erasing actual objects and replacing them with artificial notions. To Proust, the adult conception of reality is not founded in any sort of objective reality at all, but rather in each person's individually constructed notions of reality.

Importantly, in *Swann's Way* this replacement of an objective Dionysian reality with the Apollonian *notion* is a process that occurs over time, concurrent with and related to the process of growing up from a child into an adult; based on this logic Proust locates in the experience of his childhood a sort of objectivity-- he seems to measure the value of his narrator's experiences largely by his sense of their authenticity to the objects that participate in them, the extent to which they interact with and comprehend the unique, true objects themselves and not mere perceptions of those objects. Of course, it is impossible for Proust to escape subjective

perception. In fact, he often measures the value of an object is by considering the amount of subjective memories and feelings that the object yields; the evocation of these memories and feelings, however, are distinctly treated not as a manipulation of the object by the subject's fitting it into a specific function but rather as a way in which the object comes to exert its power over the perceiving subject. In other words, in Proust, the relationship between the human perceiver and the thing being perceived is not one of domination by the subject of a submissive object; it is rather a cooperative process in which the mutual energy of the perceiver and the object come together to produce a complex and continually changing set of perceptions, memories, thoughts, and feelings

The following description of a stained-glass window demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between the human perceiver and object he perceives:

There was one among them which was a tall panel composed of a hundred little rectangular panes, of blue principally, like an enormous pack of cards of the kind planned to beguile King Charles VI; but, either because a ray of sunlight had gleamed through it or because my own shifting glance had sent shooting across the window, whose colours died away and were rekindled by turns, a rare and flickering fire-- the next instant it had taken on the shimmering brilliance of a peacock's tail, then quivered and rippled in a flaming and fantastic shower that streamed from the groin of the dark and stony vault down the moist walls, as though it were along the bed of some grotto glowing with sinuous stalactites that I was following my parents. (*Swann's Way*, pp. 81-82)

There is a remarkable fluidity of power in this passage. It remains unclear to Marcel, for example, whether the change he notices in the brightness of the window is due to the natural

energy of the sun-- “because a ray of sunlight had gleamed through it”-- or is an effect of his “own shifting glance.” In other words, the powers of objectivity, represented here by the sunlight, and of Marcel's subjectivity are confused. Marcel never determines the cause of the change and seems, in fact, quite unconcerned with doing so; he is much more interested in the effect itself. Proust describes in exquisite detail Marcel's perception of the colorful window; by comparing the window to a “peacock's tail”-- a living animal-- and using verbs such as “quivered” and “streamed” that generate a sense of motion and energy, Proust emphasizes quite dramatically the vitality the window seems to possess. To young Marcel the window has a tremendous effect and causes him even to reinterpret his surroundings. In a reversal of the traditional Apollonian subject/object relationship, in which it is the subject that acts upon the object, fitting the object into a predetermined structure of meanings and eliminating the object's uniqueness, in this moment in *Swann's Way* it is the very object with which Marcel interacts-- the stained-glass window-- that subordinates him, using its power to remove him from the church and placing him into a “grotto glowing with sinuous stalactites.” It is almost as if the passage under consideration is a description of the combination of Marcel's perception of the window and the window's perception of Marcel.

Proust finds value in the processuality of perception, in the unexpected way that out of the brief subjective perception of a seemingly simple object can spring an infinity of experiences and emotions; this process is explored in the narrative structure of *Swann's Way*, in which sensory perceptions, emotional recollections, character portraits, and stories are continuously interwoven. In other words, to Proust meaning is generated not out a sense of direction towards a goal of structure and knowledge but rather out of an understanding of the very transience of experience and knowledge-- objects are understood as being connected not by similarity of

quality or form (a vertical, metaphorical similarity that effectively preserves a broad category or attribute over time), but by similarity of situation or context (a horizontal, metonymic similarity of being connected by place and action, of simply being *alive* and *present*, or, in Nietzsche's terms, of possessing "the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction"). This is in contrast with the way meaning is defined in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, in which, as discussed above, value is generated through the effort of the human subject to contain the object within structures of intellectual and social thought, an effort which has the effect of resisting the destructive effects of time.

Even the titles of the two novels, *Swann's Way* and *To the Lighthouse*, when we examine the significance of the image to which each title refers in the broader context of each novel, reflect the great philosophical differences between them. The title *To the Lighthouse* references a trip to the island lighthouse near the Ramsay's house, the feasibility of which is questioned throughout "The Window," that is made only near the very end of "The Lighthouse," the final section of the novel. The title *Swann's Way* refers to a path, one of two, along which the narrator takes frequent walks with his family. Both titles refer to journeys-- both novels are, after all, about the "journey" of the human subject attempting to discover the meaning of experience-- but the two journeys are remarkably different. Woolf's journey is unidirectional, a movement from one place to another, without return and with a *specific goal* in mind; perhaps most significantly, it is a journey that exists for most of the novel entirely in the future. This suggests the inherent unachievability of Woolf's Apollonian generation of meaning-- its very existent depends on the conflict between human reason and natural chaos. Proust, in contrast, embraces natural chaos and the transience of subjective thought. Proust's journey is circular; the starting point and the ending point are the same-- Marcel's home at Combray. In other words, it is a journey without a

goal (or a journey with a goal that is being constantly achieved), a journey for the pure sake of enjoyment, the significance of which is located not in a specific future destination to be reached but rather in the continually recurring present moment of the journey and in the details and pleasures to be found inhabiting that moment:

...a sound of echoless footsteps on a gravel path, a bubble formed against the side of a water-plant by the current of the stream and instantaneously bursting-- all these my exaltation of mind has borne along with it and kept alive through the succession of the years, while all around them the paths have vanished and those who trod them, and even the memory of those who trod them, are dead. (*Swann's Way*, p.259)

Thus it is apparent that Proust in *Swann's Way* and Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*, though they are both concerned with meaning and the relationship of the human subject to the world, explore the problems in markedly different ways.

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