

**Douglas Burnham and Martin Jesinghausen**

*Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy: A Reader's Guide.*

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This book is part of a rapidly growing series from Continuum, the aim of which is to provide 'clear, concise and accessible introductions to classic works of philosophy' for 'undergraduate students' and 'anyone who needs to get to grips with a philosophical text' (ii). Burnham and Jesinghausen (B&J) state that their book 'does not aim to summarize or replace *The Birth of Tragedy*'; instead, they 'imagine readers with both books open, side by side' (1). Their purpose is to help students (and others) read the *Birth* in depth.

Chapter 1 deals with a number of intellectual influences on the young Nietzsche. B&J not only mention the well-known and acknowledged influences—i.e., Kant, Schopenhauer, Wagner, Schiller, and Goethe—but they also discuss several important figures that Nietzsche never credits in the *Birth*. Amongst the better known are Hölderlin and Heine, and amongst the lesser known are Friedrich Creuzer and Heinrich von Kleist. Chapter 1 covers at least sixteen such figures in five pages, so the cursory treatment might turn off some scholars. Nevertheless, the chapter helpfully functions as a kind of *dramatis personae* for student readers. Additionally, it serves to remind readers that '*The Birth of Tragedy* has not dropped from the skies...' (5).

Chapter 2 previews the key themes. It begins with Nietzsche's association with Wagner, before moving on to a more sustained discussion of the form and structure of the *Birth*. B&J note, for example, that Nietzsche employs metaphor, repetition, and variation in overlapping waves of argument. They rightly warn the reader that 'rather than aiming at clarity and logical development, Nietzsche ... employs irony and rhetorical tricks, plays with the reader, and approaches and then backs away from key subjects like an accomplished seducer' (10). Making sense of the *Birth* will thus involve struggling free from obscurities. This concern with Nietzsche's style, highlighted up front, is a preoccupation that B&J handle skillfully throughout the remainder of the guide.

Chapter 3 is the most important chapter—and by far the longest at 139 pages. It begins with an exegesis of 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism' before working through each of the twenty-five sections of the *Birth* paragraph by paragraph. B&J offer an illuminating and detailed reading of Nietzsche's views about music, myth, symbolism, and Wagner. Their frequent cross-referencing between sections of the *Birth* keeps the reader on track without sacrificing any of the text's complexity. Rather than attempting to recap the entire chapter—which would entail running through the whole of *The Birth of Tragedy*—I shall confine my discussion to just three general points.

First, one strength is that B&J emphasize the interdependence of the two halves of the *Birth*. They say, for example, that it is 'like a diptych of two panels' (11). The first

panel is Nietzsche's more familiar account of the Apollonian and Dionysian forces as they manifest themselves in ancient Greece before being repressed by the third, Socratic, force (BT §§1-13). The second panel (BT §§14-25) deals with a rebirth of tragedy under modern conditions. Having come through this history, we moderns cannot simply return to a 'preconscious' (i.e. pre-Socratic) Greek life. Instead, Nietzsche looks to Wagner's music drama as a 'vehicle to achieve the tragic depth of existence, but born *from within consciousness*' (12, my emphasis). Some commentators—Kaufmann comes to mind—emphasize the first half of the book to the exclusion of the second. According to B&J, this is a mistake. The whole purpose of the historical investigation is to uncover possibilities for present-day cultural renewal. At its root, then, the *Birth* has a very contemporary concern: 'The problem posed for us moderns is the opposite one to that encountered by the Greeks. Whilst they had to tame the Dionysian—to make it productive in the domain of culture—we have to find a way to break open the ever tightening straightjacket of modern culture by letting ourselves get back in touch again with the primeval life forces of Dionysian sensuality' (13).

Another merit is that B&J pay keen attention to Nietzsche's style throughout their commentary. In explaining the form of the book, for example, they offer a fascinating discussion of Nietzsche's techniques, which derive from applying Wagner's musical ideas to philosophical composition (108-11, 136). Instead of following the path of a strict, logical treatise, 'the development of ideas (in the *Birth*) occurs through slight shifts of nuance and angle, so that the argument forms one long and "undulating line" ... with *leitmotifs* thrown in as landmarks of meaning' (110-11). This goes some distance to explaining the difficulty that first-time readers face. However, B&J respect this form by alerting the reader when one argument is being picked up after it had been dropped much earlier. Over and over, B&J remind the reader of recurring *leitmotifs*. Their extensive cross-referencing is especially helpful here. The overall result is that B&J never exempt readers from the hard work of grappling with Nietzsche's 'labyrinthine' discussion. In short, they never resort to simple caricatures.

Finally, B&J importantly draw connections between the *Birth* and Nietzsche's mature philosophy. This is especially true of their detailed discussion of 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism' early in Chapter 3, but it also applies to their treatment of the main text throughout. This feature may be more immediately helpful to students with some background in Nietzsche's philosophy, but it could prove useful to beginning students in a course devoted to Nietzsche's development. For example, in their discussion of the interdependence of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives, B&J claim that 'the drives cannot be reckoned with other than as a pair, even if they deny one another' (33). Such antagonism propels cultural history, and with Socrates, consciousness attempts to prevail over these conflicting instincts (95). As B&J remark, 'The central message of *The Birth of Tragedy* is that the denial of opposites entails the downfall of the human race' (34). They note that the fruitfulness of conflict remains a central preoccupation throughout the remainder of Nietzsche's career, as does the specific case against Socrates and traditional philosophy (see, e.g., *Twilight of the Idols*). B&J draw similar connections to Nietzsche's mature philosophy in their treatment of 'genealogy' (e.g., 48-9) and '*Bildung*' (130-32).

Chapter 4 provides a very concise summary of the *Birth's* reception and influence. B&J state that the *Birth* had lasting effects on Freud, modernism, psychological approaches to culture, anthropology, and post-modernism. In each case, the discussion is brief, but the chapter gives direction to students who can then follow up with independent research. B&J's guiding aim, after all, is to help the reader through the text of the *Birth*. The book concludes with two pages of study questions for seminar discussion or paper assignments. Finally, the bibliography of further reading is comprehensive; the important English texts are all cited, as well as key German ones. The index is standard.

B&J have done a fine job. Their guide is clearly written, comprehensive, and accessible. It respects Nietzsche style, and it never oversimplifies. I would certainly recommend that instructors teaching *The Birth of Tragedy* consider assigning this guide to assist their students with reading Nietzsche's text in depth.

**Jeff Lawrence**  
North Island College