

Nietzsche and Montaigne: Dionysian Pessimism

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Friedrich Nietzsche's writings are replete with attacks on past philosophers—Socrates, Plato, Kant and Hegel: all these are subject to his censure. Even Arthur Schopenhauer, whose philosophy is of fundamental importance to Nietzsche and whom he greatly admired, is not immune from criticism: Schopenhauer's philosophical pessimism is persistently mocked in Nietzsche's later work. With this in mind, Nietzsche's unswerving reverence for Michel de Montaigne appears all the more remarkable. Whenever Nietzsche mentions Montaigne in his writing, his comments reveal a profound admiration. Considering Nietzsche's esteem for Montaigne, one would expect to find discussions of Montaigne's *Essays* pervading his work; yet Nietzsche's explicit engagement with Montaigne amounts to no more than a few remarks scattered throughout his corpus. As a consequence, the impact of Montaigne's thought on Nietzsche has, hitherto, received scant scholarly attention. But the *Essays* exerted a profound effect on Nietzsche and the paucity of direct reference to Montaigne in his work belies a substantial implicit influence. The aim of my paper is to address this lacuna in the literature by making evident the importance of the *Essays* to the development of Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche's embrace of Montaigne in "Schopenhauer as Educator", the third of his *Untimely Meditations*, marks a fundamental turning point in his thought and is essential to understanding his mature philosophy. I argue that Montaigne is a key inspiration for Nietzsche as he begins to conceive of a counter ideal to Schopenhauerian pessimism—what he calls Dionysian pessimism.

The significance of "Schopenhauer as Educator"

No thinker is more important to Nietzsche's early philosophical development than Arthur Schopenhauer. At the outset of his philosophical life, Nietzsche tells us, he came to the writings of Schopenhauer in a state of "need, distress and desire", and discovered a body of work that he felt had been written just for him (1874, p.133). Nietzsche's first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), is suffused with Schopenhauerian ideas and terminology, with extensive quotations from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1844). *The Birth of Tragedy* is concerned, in part, with setting out a path to the reinvigoration of German culture, "a renewal and purification of the German spirit", which Nietzsche believed to be in a state of ossification and decay (1872, p.97). This project takes centre stage in his next work, *Untimely Meditations* (1874), and in "Schopenhauer as Educator", the third *Meditation*, Nietzsche puts forward Schopenhauer as an exemplar to his contemporaries. For Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's example, owing to his "dignified distance" from the culture around him, points the way to new and transfiguring cultural goals, free of the forces of money-making and the demands of the state.

What is notable is that, unlike *The Birth of Tragedy*, “Schopenhauer as Educator” contains little or no actual reference to Schopenhauer’s philosophical ideas. In fact, from *Untimely Mediations* onwards, Nietzsche becomes progressively more scornful of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, even if he continues to admire Schopenhauer the man. In *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), one of his final works, Nietzsche describes Schopenhauer as “the last German of any consequence”, yet at the same time condemns his philosophy as a “nihilistic...devaluation of life” (p.90). In a note from 1887, Nietzsche has this to say: “Around 1876 I was terrified to see all I had desired hitherto *compromised*...I grasped that my instinct went in the opposite direction from Schopenhauer’s” (1901, p.521). This comment is particularly revealing, not only in suggesting how much Nietzsche feared distancing himself from the philosopher who had originally inspired him but also in showing the singular importance of *Untimely Meditations*, the final section of which had been published in that very year. It is evident that, for Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, and especially “Schopenhauer as Educator”, marks a decisive turning point in his thinking and is essential to understanding the origins of Nietzsche’s mature philosophy.

In *Ecce Homo* (1908), his philosophical autobiography and final work, Nietzsche makes this point explicitly and emphatically: “*Schopenhauer as Educator* bears my innermost history, my *becoming* inscribed within it” (p.53). He concedes that, in retrospect, far from being beholden to Schopenhauerian ideas, this work should be more appropriately entitled “Nietzsche as Educator”, such is the “*great freedom*” that “blows across” it (*ibid.*). More crucial still, Nietzsche is adamant that the voice who speaks in “Schopenhauer as Educator” is certainly not Schopenhauer but “his *opposite*” (author’s emphasis). Although he never expressly rejects Schopenhauerian philosophy in “Schopenhauer as Educator”, in his middle works, as he begins to develop his own, distinctive philosophy, Nietzsche permits himself to be openly critical of key Schopenhauerian ideas. Moreover, he eventually comes to understand his philosophy not just as being in broad disagreement with Schopenhauerian pessimism but its antithesis, and dedicated to its repudiation. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886b), Nietzsche asserts that, in contrast to the resignation counseled by Schopenhauer’s “world-denying” pessimism, he is offering “the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive and world-affirming human” (p.68). The roots of this counter-ideal may be traced back to *The Birth of Tragedy*, and more particularly, to Nietzsche’s discussion of the Dionysian.

Schopenhauerian pessimism versus the Dionysian

Schopenhauer’s bleak, thorough-going pessimism is exemplified in the claim that “nothing else can be stated as the aim of our existence except the knowledge that it would be better for us not to exist” (1844, p.605). This hostility towards existence is rooted in his metaphysics. Drawing on Kantian thought, Schopenhauer proposes that behind the phenomenal world represented to us by our senses, our life is propelled by an all-consuming will, which is the fundamental reality of our lives. Furthermore, this will is one of endless striving and desiring, never to be satisfied. In consequence, suffering is inescapable and ubiquitous; we are doomed to exist in a permanent state of need and deficiency. At times, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, by adopting unmistakably Schopenhauerian language, Nietzsche seems to endorse a kind of

Schopenhauerian pessimism. But this could not be further from the truth. As Martha Nussbaum points out, “beneath its obscuring use of Schopenhauer’s language”, *The Birth of Tragedy* is actually portraying “an affirmation of human life” (1991, p.102). For Schopenhauer, the purpose of tragic art, and the highest end of life, is a renunciation of the will and a denial of the will to life: only by ceasing to strive can we hope to be redeemed from suffering. Tragic art, in Schopenhauer’s view, brings us face to face with the sufferings of existence in order that we may accept our fate and resign ourselves to the futility of life. Nietzsche, while accepting that it is “indisputable...the only subject-matter of Greek tragedy, in its earliest form, was the sufferings of Dionysus”, draws the opposite conclusion (1872, p.51). For him, the effect of Dionysian tragedy is the feeling that “in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable” (ibid. p.39).

Consequently, implicit to *The Birth of Tragedy* is a repudiation of Schopenhauer’s vision of existence as an arena of hopeless suffering. Also, while Schopenhauer escapes direct attack in the original edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, in a revised edition, published in 1886, Nietzsche adds a new opening section entitled “Attempt at Self-Criticism”, in which he laments his previous use of a Schopenhauerian idiom and admits he lacked the “courage” to adopt a “personal” language (1886a, p.10). More significant still, he makes clear that what is at the heart of the work is a form of pessimism that is the polar opposite of Schopenhauer’s: namely, “a pessimism of *strength*...An intellectual preference for the hard, gruesome, malevolent and problematic aspects of existence which comes from a feeling of well-being, from overflowing health” (ibid. p.4). For Nietzsche, Greek tragedy had nothing to do with a doctrine of resignation, still less a denial of life. On the contrary, by means of tragic art, the Greeks triumphed over their suffering, since the essence of Greek tragedy is the Dionysian, an experience that has its basis in “desire and delight, in strength, in over-brimming health, in an excess of plentitude” (ibid. p.7). Nietzsche’s pessimism of strength is thus a radical transformation of Schopenhauerian pessimism, where suffering is conceived not as a discouragement to life but a stimulus. To gain insight into this re-imagined pessimism, we must look to “Schopenhauer as Educator”, because it is here not only that, as already stated, Nietzsche first begins to distance himself from Schopenhauer but is it also here that we can see the first flowering of his counter-ideal. For a remarkable feature of “Schopenhauer as Educator” is that, in a work supposedly dedicated to the example of Arthur Schopenhauer, it is another philosopher, Michel de Montaigne, whom Nietzsche offers as the thinker most worthy of respect and deserving of imitation.

“Schopenhauer as Educator” and Montaigne

There has yet to be a thorough exploration of the relationship between Nietzsche and Montaigne in the form of a book-length study. Much of the previous scholarship touching on this area has been chiefly concerned with examining the more general subject of the importance of the French philosophical tradition to Nietzsche’s thought (Williams, 1952; Donnellan, 1982). Two more recent articles are exceptions in this regard, focusing exclusively on the impact of Montaigne’s *Essays* (1595) on Nietzsche’s philosophical thought. Jessica Berry (2004) examines the influence of Montaigne’s Pyrrhonian scepticism

on Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human* (1878). While David Molner (2010) emphasizes three other features of the Nietzsche-Montaigne relationship: firstly, how Montaigne's emphasis on the body inspires Nietzsche's notion of philosophy as part of physiology; secondly, stylistic affinities between the two thinkers; thirdly, the way in which Montaigne's figures as a model for Nietzsche's conception of the overhuman (p. 81). This paper contributes to this discussion by taking up a point made by both Williams and Donnellan, who suggest that Montaigne was a major influence on Nietzsche as he moved away from Schopenhauerian pessimism. Neither commentator, however, explains or examines this claim in any great detail. In what follows, attending closely to what Nietzsche has to say about Montaigne in "Schopenhauer as Educator", I probe this aspect of the Nietzsche-Montaigne relationship further, to determine exactly what it is about Montaigne's philosophy that prompts Nietzsche to raise him above Schopenhauer as a philosophical exemplar.

Generally, Nietzsche reserves unequivocal praise for pre-Socratic philosophers. Searching his corpus, one would be hard pressed to find equally complimentary statements on more recent thinkers (excepting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, perhaps). In that context alone, Nietzsche's comments in "Schopenhauer as Educator" regarding Montaigne merit some attention:

That such a man wrote has truly augmented the joy of living on this earth. Since getting to know this freest and mightiest of souls, I...have come to feel...as soon as I glance at him I grow a leg or a wing...If I were set the task, I could endeavor to make myself at home in the world with him (1874, p.135).

The significance of this statement, however, goes well beyond the mere fact that Nietzsche is being unusually appreciative of another thinker, particularly bearing in mind that in the preceding sentence he has asserted that he would place Montaigne above Schopenhauer "in terms of honesty". This at a time when, as W. D. Williams points out (1952, p.18), Nietzsche was still presenting Schopenhauer as his philosophical ideal. Accordingly, its importance cannot be overstated, as floating between the lines is a complete rejection of Schopenhauer's vision of existence. Montaigne would have found absurd Schopenhauer's view of human life as a realm of endless suffering, as well as his claim that we would be better off not existing at all. The Montaignean and Schopenhauerian attitudes to life and philosophy stand in direct opposition to each other. After all, in Book One of the *Essays*, Montaigne states that "A sad and gloomy mien shows that you have mistaken" the "address" of philosophy, and, furthermore, that the "most express sign of wisdom is unruffled joy" (1595, pp.180-1). Thus, Nietzsche's admiration of Montaigne announces a reorientation in his thinking. And the fact that he would go so far as to claim that he could make himself "at home in the world" with Montaigne suggests the most serious reservations toward Schopenhauerian pessimism.

Indeed, if one looks to his early notebooks, what becomes clear is that, even as Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*, he no longer held to Schopenhauer's pessimistic worldview (2009, pp. 1-9). Of course, this invites the question of why he would strive to give the contrary impression in his first two published works. In response, Alexander Nehamas suggests that, as regards these early writings, Nietzsche made "a strategic decision to proceed in a way that would not alienate" his then friend, mentor and "ideal reader", Richard Wagner (ibid. p. xxii). Wagner, a staunch Schopenhauerian, exerted a huge influence on the young

writer Nietzsche—so much so, in fact, that *The Birth of Tragedy* is dedicated to him. Consequently, in “Schopenhauer as Educator”, we can understand Nietzsche as attempting to maintain a tension between two somewhat conflicting aims, that of honoring Schopenhauer’s life as a philosopher, while at the same time distancing himself from Schopenhauerian ideas. This he achieves by never overtly criticizing Schopenhauer and extravagantly praising Montaigne. Such a reading is reinforced when one considers Nietzsche’s suggestion that, along with honesty, Schopenhauer has a second quality in common with Montaigne: “cheerfulness” (1874, p.135). There is a deep irony to this claim. Schopenhauer, the famously morose figure, who insists that “this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds” (1844, p. 583), versus Montaigne, the indefatigably buoyant thinker, who claims “the soul that houses philosophy should have a spritely demeanor and happy welcoming face” (1595, p.180). Nietzsche’s embrace of Montaigne, his talk of the “joy of living” and “cheerfulness”, indicates a tacit abandonment of the main features of Schopenhauerian pessimism and prefigures the more direct repudiation expressed in “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” (1886b), by which time Nietzsche had long since broken free from Wagner’s intellectual influence.

This is not to argue that Montaigne was the root cause of Nietzsche’s turn away from Schopenhauer. Rather, it is to suggest that Nietzsche’s reading of the *Essays* gave impetus to a revolution in his thinking that was under way before he came to write “Schopenhauer as Educator”, a revolution he was well aware of, but chose not to explicitly document. In Montaigne, Nietzsche found a new philosophical exemplar, whose celebration of human existence offered encouragement to the Dionysian attitude to life he had espoused in *The Birth of Tragedy*. As other commentators have noted (Williams, 1952; Molner, 2010), based on his comments in “Schopenhauer as Educator”, one can with some justification see the Montaignean worldview as providing Nietzsche with an antidote to, and defense against, the world-denying aspects of Schopenhauer’s pessimism. Furthermore, his praise of Montaigne adds substance to the repeated claim of *Ecce Homo* that in “Schopenhauer as Educator” it is really a voice antagonistic to Schopenhauer which is given a chance to speak. But much more than this, what we see at work here truly is “Nietzsche as Educator”: he is filling out and developing his own counter ideal to Schopenhauerian pessimism, for what grounds Montaigne’s joy in living and Nietzsche’s pessimism of strength is the same thing: an affirmation of becoming.

Overcoming of the concept of being

A Heraclitean view of the world pervades the *Essays*. Montaigne is at pains to emphasize “the uncertainty and mutability of human affairs which lightly shift from state to state, each one different from the other” (1595, p.85). Like Heraclitus, Montaigne opposes the stability of being to the perpetual flux of becoming. A remarkable passage near the end of “An apology for Raymond Sebond” is nothing short of a hymn to becoming and a powerful rejection of the concept of being. It is worth quoting from it:

There is no permanent existence either in our being or in that of objects...all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly...we have no communication with being...all things are subject to pass from change to change...all things are in a never-ending inconstancy, change and flux (ibid. pp.682-3).

And if this was not enough, Montaigne repudiates the notion of being again in Book Three: “Constancy itself is nothing but a rocking to and fro...I am not portraying being but becoming” (ibid. p.907). Thus, nothing could be plainer than that the *Essays* are a celebration of transience and becoming. Indeed, Montaigne mocks Heraclitus for his inability to accept and affirm the consequences of his philosophy. Heraclitus, Montaigne tells us, owing to the terrifying uncertainty at the heart of existence “wore an expression which was always sad, his eyes full of tears” (ibid. p.339). But Montaigne, in contrast, favors the attitude of Democritus, who “never went out without a mocking and laughing look on his face” (ibid.). For Montaigne, in the face of the inevitable difficulties and sufferings of human existence, the most appropriate response to our predicament “is to be...able to laugh” (ibid. p.340). It is no surprise, then, that although having spent a great deal of the *Essays* highlighting the inevitability of change and the pain and uncertainty of human life, in “On experience”, his final essay, Montaigne issues no denial of worldly existence. His final remarks are of a piece with the tenor of the rest of his writing: “As for me, I love life” (ibid. p.1264).

Nietzsche claims that the Schopenhauerian view that “this world...is an error...this world of ours ought not to exist” stems from a “disbelief in becoming, mistrust of becoming, the low valuation of all that becomes” (1901, p.317). Nietzsche acknowledges that a world of becoming—of continual change, decay and death—is one of immense pain and suffering. In this sense, he accepts the premise of Schopenhauer’s pessimism: suffering is inescapable; pain is intrinsic to a world of flux and disorder. But he fundamentally rejects Schopenhauer’s conclusion: “I do not account evil and the painful character of existence as a reproach to it” (1901, p.206). In *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), he comments on the traditional “hatred” of philosophers toward the very “idea of becoming”, and ridicules their tendency to see “Death, change” and “age” as “objections”, “refutations even” (p.45). The form of pessimism that Nietzsche advocates is one that accepts the ubiquity of human suffering in a world of becoming yet possesses the strength to affirm and celebrate existence nonetheless. For Nietzsche, Schopenhauer was simply not psychologically “strong enough” to say “Yes” to life (1901, p.525). Throughout his writing, Nietzsche associates an unwillingness to affirm becoming with a kind of constitutional weakness, with “sickliness”. In his late works, he employs the term “decadent” to refer to those who suffer from life, who are hostile to becoming, and therefore defame earthly existence. In that context, the basis for Nietzsche’s characterization of Montaigne as the “mightiest of souls” becomes readily intelligible: Montaigne has the fortitude to affirm what Schopenhauer—and most other philosophers in the Western philosophical tradition—could only reproach and deny: Montaigne delighted in, and did not fear, a world of becoming. Montaigne eschews any notion of transcendence to a world of being. On the contrary, he revels in becoming and all that sensory experience has to offer: “I want to arrest the swiftness of its passing by the swiftness of my capture, compensating for the speed with which it drains away by the intensity of my enjoyment” (1595, p.1263).

It is thus reasonable to propose that Nietzsche’s subscription to the Montaignean vision acted as a spur to the development of his conception of a pessimism of strength—or what he would also call “*Dionysian* pessimism” (1882, p.236). In “An Attempt at Self-Criticism”, Nietzsche makes clear that he believes tragedy to have grown out of a “severe will to pessimism” (in the Nietzschean sense) (1886a, p.7). Indeed, in the revised edition to

The Birth of Tragedy, he changes the full title from *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* to *The Birth of Tragedy, Or: Hellenism and Pessimism*, so the work would have “a more unambiguous title” (1908, p.45). In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as the “Affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems”, where one comes to “*realize in oneself* the eternal joy of becoming” (1889, p.121, author’s emphasis). Therefore, “Schopenhauer as Educator”, in offering as an exemplar a philosopher who embraces becoming, can be understood as the continuation of a central aim of *The Birth of Tragedy*, what Nietzsche calls his “first revaluation of values” (ibid.): the overcoming of the concept of being and a near deification of becoming. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian is a celebration of becoming, an experience in which one glories in “incessantly changing appearances” (1872, p.80). The Dionysian, however, also forces one “to gaze into the terrors of individual existence”, for through Dionysian wisdom we come “to recognize that everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction” (ibid.).

Becoming and laughter

Jean Starobinski (1982) makes a crucial point concerning Montaigne’s thoughts on Democritus. It is not simply that Democritus favors an attitude of laughter towards life to one of tears; more precisely, it is that “Democritus laughs at the world’s folly, *but it grieves him just the same*” (p.5, emphasis added). A principal theme of the *Essays* is the natural disorder and instability of the world—as manifested in Montaigne’s extensive discussions of the brutal civil wars he is living through—and the inevitability of pain and suffering, psychological and physical. Montaigne writes movingly of his grief at the loss of his great friend Etienne de La Boétie: “There is no action or thought in which I do not miss him” (1595, p.218). And the *Essays* catalogue, in detail, the tormenting pain of his body as he experiences the ravages of old-age: “bodily sufferings...I feel most acutely...I am wrestling with the worst of all illnesses, the most unpredictable...the most fatal and the most incurable” (ibid. p.860). For Montaigne, perhaps the key statement of the *Essays* is his recognition that “Everywhere death intermingles and merges with our life”—his articulation of a kind of Dionysian wisdom (ibid. p.1251). Thus, Montaigne’s advocacy of laughter is not based on a denial of suffering or a naively optimistic vision of human existence. On the contrary, Montaigne, like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, acknowledges suffering as the central feature of our lives. But, unlike Schopenhauer and those other thinkers who see “Death”, “change” and “age” as “objections”, Montaigne wins Nietzsche’s admiration for his Democritean attitude, the capacity to affirm, time and again—notwithstanding its suffering—the joy and wonder of life.

It is striking that in a note from 1885, where Nietzsche explains how he guarded against the threat of Schopenhauerian pessimism, he also highlights the unique capacity of humans for laughter. Nietzsche goes much further than Montaigne, however, in offering this speculation: “Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he *had to invent laughter*” (1901, p.56, author’s emphasis). Nevertheless, in either case, laughter is taken to be the most natural and appropriate response to the uncertainty, ambiguity and contingency of the human condition—and everything else that follows from existence in a world of becoming. Nietzsche proposes that, in contrast to those who harbor only “contempt...for all that perishes, changes, varies”, one should extract happiness from

“change and destruction” (ibid. pp.317-19). Likewise, Montaigne, who holds that “It is normal to experience change and decay” (1595, p.101), rebukes the individual of “a morose and gloomy mind”, who clings to life’s “misfortunes and feeds on them” (ibid. p.953). More conspicuous still, the idea of laughter as a response to becoming is at the core of Zarathustra’s teaching to humanity in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885). Significantly, in the final section of “An Attempt at Self-Criticism”, emphasizing the centrality of laughter to the existential attitude of Dionysian pessimism, Nietzsche quotes a passage from *Zarathustra* that expounds on the sacredness of laughter. Dubbing Zarathustra a “Dionysian fiend”, Nietzsche lets him speak: “Laughter I have pronounced holy; you superior humans, *learn* from me—to laugh” (1885, p.259) Montaigne would have found such a teaching deeply appealing, since, for him, the supreme “task” of philosophy is “to make the tempests of the soul serene and to teach hunger and fever how to laugh” (1595, p.181). Thus, it is apparent that Nietzsche’s tribute to Montaigne in “Schopenhauer as Educator” does not constitute, like some passages of *The Birth of Tragedy*, idle remarks “full of the spirit of youth” (1886a, p.5), but points directly forward to vital aspects of his mature philosophy.

The innocence of becoming

For Nietzsche, Dionysian pessimism represents a progression from and deepening of Schopenhauerian pessimism. As we have seen, Schopenhauer’s pessimism is not some kind of hedonistic calculus, where the pains of human life are determined to outweigh the pleasures. Rather, Schopenhauer’s pessimism is a “moralistic” pessimism, a condemnation of existence as a whole: life has no value, we would be better off not existing, since suffering is inescapable. According to this kind of pessimism, the world, based on a particular understanding of what is good or bad, just or unjust, must be judged negatively, because human existence fails to meet a certain standard of happiness, a standard that any worthwhile existence should attain. Again, Nietzsche’s repudiation of this kind of moralistic interpretation of existence has its beginnings in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but, as before, it is in “Schopenhauer as Educator” where he first addresses the moralistic basis of Schopenhauer’s pessimism directly and issues a mild yet clear rebuke, suggesting that Schopenhauer had envisioned “a dreadful scene in a supraterritorial court in which all life, even the highest and most perfect, had been weighed and found wanting” (1874, p.182). In the Nietzschean conception, what really is at work behind Schopenhauer’s pessimism is an insidious “revenge” against existence. In *The Gay Science* (1882), he claims that Schopenhauer’s pessimism represents “an impoverishment of life”, the reaction of a suffering individual who takes “revenge on all things by...branding *his* image on them, the image of *his* torture” (p.236). By the time we get to *Twilight of the Idols* (1889), Nietzsche is offering a more mordant analysis: “Instead of saying simply I am no longer worth anything, the moral lie in the mouth of the decadent says: Nothing is worth anything—*life* is not worth anything” (p.98).

Dionysian pessimism is the antithesis of this “moral lie”, eschewing any judgment on life as a whole—the Dionysian is a celebration of life, even at its most terrible—and is indicative of “a *superabundance of life*” (1882, p.234, author’s emphasis). In “An Attempt at Self-Criticism”, Nietzsche claims that *The Birth of Tragedy* “betrays a spirit which will

defend itself...whatever the danger, against the *moral* interpretation and significance of existence” (1886a, p.8). For, the disorder and suffering of a world of becoming can only be impugned in the context of an imagined world of being, but, if one truly affirms becoming, “one must admit nothing that has being...the better world, the true world...the thing-in-itself”(1901, p.377). There is simply no standard against which the world can be judged and found wanting, and the contradiction that Schopenhauer sees at the heart of existence, our doomed, Tantalus-like fate to remain eternally unsatisfied, amounts for Nietzsche to nothing more than the moral projection of his own suffering onto the world at large. Nietzsche’s Dionysian pessimism deepens Schopenhauer’s pessimism, in the sense that it represents the “disintegration of the last consolation”: the consolation that the circumstances of the human predicament are somehow wrong and indecent and that one can take revenge against life, win a kind of victory, through a rejection and denial of the will to life (ibid. p.224). Thus the aim of Nietzsche’s Dionysian pessimism is to “restore innocence to becoming”, to no longer view existence as an error, or punishment, and therefore worthy of condemnation. From the standpoint of a Dionysian pessimist, existence is blameless, “one cannot judge, measure, compare the whole, to say nothing of denying it” (ibid. p.402).

Nietzsche’s thoughts on the “innocence of becoming” and the absurdity of holding existence in disdain are in conspicuous agreement with the *Essays*. Montaigne insists that “the opinion which holds our life in contempt is a ridiculous one” (1595, p.397). Moreover, like Nietzsche, he associates such an opinion with a contemptible form of suffering: “it is a sickness peculiar to Man to hate and despise himself” (ibid.). For Montaigne, what prompts a damning judgment on our existence is a denial of who and what we are, a denial of becoming. Humanity’s peculiar sickness thus represents a longing for stability, order, constancy, for being, a “vain desire which makes us want to be other than we are” (ibid.). Montaigne also questions the coherence of the notion of a value standard by which to judge human life as a whole, mockingly suggesting that only another “creature” that enjoys an existence “richer and nobler than we do” could possibly be in a position to criticize (ibid.). He thus abstains from pronouncing a judgment on existence, either positive or negative, recognizing that the question of the value of existence has no answer; the value of life cannot be evaluated. Montaigne’s response to the question of the value of existence is this: “When I dance, I dance, when I sleep, I sleep” (ibid. p.1258). And in the face of becoming and the decay that time has wrought on his mind and body, Montaigne finds life to be “of both great account and delightful” (ibid. 1263). These are not the words of a decadent, understood in the Nietzschean sense. Here is manifest the “superabundance of life” that is the essence of Nietzsche’s Dionysian pessimism. Thus, for David Molner, what Nietzsche most admired about Montaigne and his “smiling embrace of life” (2010, p.84) was that an intimacy with suffering led him “to a love of life rather than a morality or *ressentiment*” (2010, p.86). Montaigne rejects the “moral lie” of the decadent and, unlike Schopenhauer, refuses to translate morality into reality. Both Montaigne and Nietzsche seek to overcome and move beyond the question of the value of existence: the only credible response they see is to validate and honor life.

Conclusion

Montaigne's joyful philosophy of becoming offered Nietzsche an escape from Schopenhauer's world-denying pessimism. As an exemplar, he confirmed for Nietzsche the possibility of a different kind of pessimism, a Dionysian pessimism, the affirmation and celebration of life despite its suffering. In this way, Nietzsche's reading of the *Essays* encouraged and supported his move away from a condemnatory vision of the world. And Nietzsche's unqualified praise of Montaigne in "Schopenhauer as Educator", the claim that he could make himself "at home in the world" with Montaigne, signals an acute appreciation of this fact. Moreover, Montaigne's "might", "honesty" and "cheerfulness" revealed to Nietzsche a path to the development of his own ideal "of the most high-spirited, alive and world-affirming" individual (1886b, p.68). In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche's states that when he abandoned his allegiance to Schopenhauer and ceased to be a pessimist in the Schopenhauerian sense he turned his "will to health, to *life*", into his philosophy (1908, p. 9). Furthermore, he claims that his "instinct for self-recovery forbade" him "a philosophy of poverty and discouragement" (ibid.). We can thus understand the *Essays* as providing the necessary treatment—in the form of a philosophy that promotes a love for and delight in life—for the "long period of illness" he endured as a disciple of Schopenhauerian pessimism.

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