

Part I



Ancient & Modern

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Revitalizing Romanticism; or, Reflections on the Nietzschean Aesthetic and the Modern Imagination

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The tragic artist is *not* a pessimist – it is precisely he who *affirms* all that is questionable and terrible in existence, he is *Dionysian* ...

(Nietzsche 2003 [1889], 49)

We must constantly give birth to our thoughts out of our pain, and nurture them with everything we have in us of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate and catastrophe. Life to us – that means constantly transforming everything we are into light and flame, as well as everything that happens to us.

(Nietzsche 2001 [1887a], 6)

The world as work of art that gives birth to itself.

(Nietzsche 1967, 419)

In 1941, the Harvard academic Crane Brinton claimed that Friedrich Nietzsche's followers could be divided into two groups: the "gentle" Nietzscheans, for whom human life was dedicated to understanding the nature and function of illusions; and the "tough" Nietzscheans, for whom human life was the attempt to engage with, struggle against, or concatenate, a myriad of energies. All the same, both groups, interested in the complexity of human beliefs and thoughts, not with standards of verification and validity, concluded that art was the key creative response to an intrinsically alien universe (Brinton 1941, 184–185).¹ If Brinton's "tough" model gets most of the attention in what follows, then this is because the Nietzsche it articulates, who equates the term "life" with the idea of the diversity of the world, was an important reference point for a number of modern artists, writers, and commentators. Many of these figures were sympathetic to the principal critical assertions of Romanticism: that human life was a perpetual struggle to understand the division within being; that art arises from the experience of living in a body; and that the imagination, as condition of perpetual reflection, confirmed the creative authority of the cultural activity known as myth. As I will argue below, these conceptualizations allowed Nietzsche to become the "strong enchanter" for those individuals whose analytical interests and critical procedures obliged them to converse with Romanticism.² This relationship is

punctuated by three broad concepts, each of which was attractive to different artists and artistic communities: first, the idea that the mind, as active process, embellished, enriched, or completed the world in the process of picturing it; second, the idea that philosophical thought should concentrate on the aesthetic life of humanity; third, the idea that the systems of science and technology threatened the sensuous subject by questioning the value of cultural life. The logical outcome of these conceptualizations, as formulated by the first-wave of Nietzschean creators, was that the creative artist is involved in a perpetual struggle to create mental compositions, intuited truths, and dynamic world-pictures; and that Nietzscheanism was destined to become the prism by which modern art should be understood.³

The history presented in this chapter is necessarily partial and investigative, not definitive. It endeavors to outline a picture of a heterogeneous whole, a set of diverse ideas, phenomena, and groupings brought into contact, and forming a meaningful system, by the critical category “Nietzschean.” The chapter is at once descriptive (it notes main themes and issues) and critical (it explains the nature, scope and impact of these themes and issues); it is not a guide to Nietzsche’s reputation in modern culture.⁴ In short, it looks at the artistic and cultural tradition to which Nietzsche gave rise. As outlined here, Nietzsche’s views on culture and life are identified as symbiotic, as they were for the majority of his original auditors and exegetes. Although they found his writings both dazzling and challenging, many commentators reassured themselves that his critique of industrial modernity – what Nietzsche called the “struggle against the ... mechanistic nitwitization of the world” – was foreshadowed by Romantic culture, which resisted the reduction of value to reason (Nietzsche 2014 [1886], 158). Reading Nietzsche, then, allowed artists and thinkers to return to a major preoccupation of Romantic discourse: the belief that social modernity, through its valorization of commerce and manufacture, had shrunk and enfeebled the physiological and cognitive bases of life; robbed it of a culture rooted in mythos, the creative energy that raises art to the status of reality. As will be seen, Nietzsche functioned as a cultural catalyst: he enabled star-struck admirers to insist that the most pressing concern of art was the realization of the subject’s sublime potential through the development of critical energy and kinetic power, pre-requisites for the appearance of living culture. Nietzsche, as these commentators conceived him, allowed the modern subject to identify and intensify the heroic vitalism needed to sustain life.⁵

Being Vital

The terms of this critical engagement of Nietzsche explain his significance and effectiveness in European cultural circles around 1900. Three responses can be noted at this point. First, his intellectual cosmopolitanism was exciting for artists, thinkers, and critics who equated creative activity with the ideal of universal culture. Second, his understanding of society as collective ontology, the idea that beliefs and consciousness can be explained by reflecting on what is meant by human beingness in different social settings, satisfied those individuals, groupings, and movements dedicated to spotlighting the psychological bases of art production. In turn, these propositions functioned as the critical armature whereby Nietzsche’s interests were summarized as continuations of Romantic discourse, where the aesthetic is categorized in terms of spontaneous power and creativity: the desire to see life as the subject sees itself seeing.⁶

Universalism, aesthetic life, and imaginative act: these overlapping concepts indicate the complicated ways in which Nietzscheanism and Romanticism commingled in the workings

of different modern cultural communities. Nietzsche, as audited by representatives of these various groupings, was at once champion of the individual human psyche and angelus figure pointing to a new understanding of human energy as the key to collective identity and psycho-social coherence. Nietzscheanism, as it developed over time, became the obsidian mirror by which Romanticism revealed itself to modern thought. As will be demonstrated, some figures believed that Nietzsche was a Romantic because he was committed to overcoming old ways of seeing, being and acting. Others saw him as a liberating visionary heralding a world vitalized by an aesthetic dedicated to remodeling inherited concepts of mental activity. Still others found a psycho-explorer and messianic leader whose genius was the association of culture with the need to face incarnate inexhaustible struggle, to define the self as something seeking a condition of immanent togetherness through inwardness. At the same time, Nietzsche was celebrated for other reasons: his writing was dazzlingly alive; he argued for an art of radiant joy in living; he was intoxicated by the burning spirit of the universe.⁷

These attitudes were elaborated most fully in Europe, where numerous individuals discovered in Nietzsche a way of meshing philosophy, psychology, culture, and history to question traditional models of consciousness, perception, social development, and the history of ideas.⁸ He intrigued or dazzled important literary figures, thinkers, and composers: Gabriele D'Annunzio, Guillaume Apollinaire, Antonin Artaud, Hugo Ball, Georges Bataille, Gottfried Benn, Ernst Bloch, Georg Brandes, Martin Buber, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Frederick Delius, George Egerton, Havelock Ellis, Stefan Georg, André Gide, Julius Meier-Graefe, T. E. Hulme, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, D. H. Lawrence, Percy Wyndham Lewis, Gustav Mahler, Thomas Mann, F. T. Marinetti, A. R. Orage, Georg Simmel, George Bernard Shaw, Richard Strauss, August Strindberg, Ferdinand Tönnies, H. G. Wells, Heinrich Wölfflin and W. B. Yeats. "Nietzscheanism," or the idea of "Nietzschean" art, fascinated leading artists: Aubrey Beardsley, Henri-Gaudier-Brzeska, Giorgio de Chirico, Le Corbusier, Henri Edmond Cross, Max Ernst, Hannah Hoch, Augustus John, Wassily Kandinsky, Gustav Klimt, Max Klinger, František Kupka, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, André Masson, Edvard Munch, Charles Ricketts, Luigi Russolo, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Giovanni Segantini, Henry van der Velde – and many others.⁹ A number of these individuals believed that Romanticism provided the critical resources for grasping the nature of Nietzsche's thought; and most European avant-garde art movements and groupings, from *fin de siècle* Symbolism to Expressionism, Futurism, Vorticism and Dadaism, grappled with his theories, adapted his ideas to fresh critical settings, or insisted on thematic affinities between themselves and his writings. This is not the place for a full-blown assessment of the cogency of these interpretations, many of which identified Nietzscheanism as the successor movement of Romanticism, but it is important to stress that by linking Nietzsche to Romanticism commentators could see his brilliant readings of Hamlet and Beethoven in terms of the Romantic project: the never-ending search for those new spaces which self-creating art brings into being.¹⁰

As these remarks indicate, Nietzsche provided the stimulus for different models of representing existence: he compelled his readers to occupy the imagination; he commanded his admirers to see the world as luminous and crystalline; and he heralded a new age of individual liberation through unfettered aesthetic creativity. "Nietzsche" was another way of describing a number of processes whereby art, criticism, and cultural discourse tried to identify new values for living in the world. And what united these strands of thought was the conviction that Nietzsche's goal was the generation of systems of representation dedicated to aestheticizing the universe.¹¹

This last point, which affirms the ontologically generative power of art, strikingly illustrates the nature of turn-of-the-century engagements with Nietzsche, many of which argued along the lines that he was a neo-Romantic, whose antirationalist vitalism defined the will as the source of dynamic impulse.¹² Equally important, Nietzsche's celebration of agonal existence could be used as a check on Darwin's anti-providential view of history. Physical liberty, spontaneity, and cultural growth were to be the key terms:

For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity or perception to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: *intoxication* ... The essence of intoxication is the feeling of plenitude and increased energy ... In this condition one enriches everything out of one's own abundance: what one sees, what one desires, one sees swollen, pressing, strong, overladen with energy.

(Nietzsche 2003 [1889], 82–83)

This concept of energy, as promulgated by Nietzsche, gave shape and structure to modernist readings of Romantic aesthetics (Rosenblum 1975, 128–219). At the center of this encounter was the idea that human creative power, as incarnated in the Dionysian dynamic, is the principal means by which the artist-seer emancipates himself from the alienating objectivity of technology, science, and industry. With Nietzsche, it was agreed, critical thought remained alive; it pointed to a world where human life would renew itself in ecstatic union with earth, nature, world, or universe. In this context the “vitalist” Nietzsche, who set out to align will, feeling, and outer world, was taken to affirm the critical reality of the Romantic sublime, which was at once archetypal (arising from shared physiological norms) and individual (arising from subjective psychological conditions).¹³ The Dionysian, Nietzsche states, is

...the terrible *awe* which seizes upon man, when he is suddenly unable to account for the cognitive forms of a phenomenon ... [It is] the blissful ecstasy which rises from the innermost depths of man ... [In this] glowing life ... not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but Nature which has become estranged, hostile or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her prodigal son, man ... [He] now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like to the gods, whom he saw walking about in his dreams. He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art; in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the Primordial Unity.

(Nietzsche 1927 [1872], 3–4)

Here, and throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Dionysian art is rooted in a pre-rationalist world of earth and body: it is a way of delineating a universe made radiant through surplus energy. The Dionysian represents, Nietzsche argues, the materialization of the unity of being, but this process, which he calls a “festival of the earth,” reveals that the world is not designed for human life. Hence “terrible awe”: the Dionysian means more than facticity; it is Nietzsche's term for confirming existence as an abyss with neither center nor end (Nietzsche 1927 [1872], 1–29; Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 54).

This is the viewpoint of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1885).¹⁴ In this widely translated epic prose-poem, Nietzsche remodels the image of the prophetic-outsider, a familiar figure in the art, literature, and music of Romanticism, as a forest-loving perpetual “wanderer,” who longs to live the “sense of the earth!” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 10, 12). Zarathustra's philosophy is something that happens to the body in the process of its life. It is the

recognition that there is no beyond on the other side of sensory perception. This is the truth given to Zarathustra: to know being in a state of perpetual becoming; to accept change, to live it ecstatically, is his gift to humanity; to see a world where the human is a “bridge and not a goal” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 13). In Zarathustra’s view, the sensuous world is described via haptic forcefulness, an enhanced feeling of life, a perpetual openness to the transfiguring potentiality of world energy: “I say to you: one must still have chaos within, in order to give birth to a dancing star ... You must want to consume yourself in your own flame: how could you want to become new unless you have first become ashes!” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 15, 56).

Many early twentieth-century intellectuals used such pronouncements to convert Zarathustra and Nietzsche into nature-mystics, mountain-men, or cosmic types, whose true subject was the rhythmic vitality of the animate universe. This was not, of course, unsurprising, as a similar vision of creation occurs in Romanticism, where Blake, Coleridge, Friedrich, Keats, Schelling and Shelley identify aesthetic life as the true criterion of human value.¹⁵

The Dionysian Creator

To arrive at such a description, where Nietzsche signifies the purity or value of the inner world, is only half the story. The neo-vitalism prevalent in symbolist and modernist circles – the view that art, properly conceived, is the means of concentrating on dynamic life-forces – could be reconciled with the image of Dionysus as subject of perpetual self-creation. We can develop this insight by noting the interconnectedness of the varied reflections on Nietzschean matters around 1900. For instance, by equating the homogeneous with the Apollonian principle and the heterogeneous with the Dionysian principle, Nietzsche established a critical framework in which “Classic” and “Romantic” values came into contact. “Nietzscheanism,” as it was configured or imagined in cultural circles, was a way of speaking out against the massified world of technocratic modernity, where raw life was imprisoned beneath socialized experience and its codifying forms. A number of related terms – “rhythm,” “rhythmic vitality,” and “vital energy” – were used to describe the various projects for connecting structures of existence to systems of representation.¹⁶ Many of these terms would be used to reassess the “modernity” of earlier artists.¹⁷

As noted above, vitalism was the dominant paradigm within which Nietzschean ideas were calibrated around 1900. We see a version of the vitalist model at work in Charles Ricketts’ complex design (1892) (Figure 1.1). Ricketts, the first British artist to have responded to Nietzsche’s writings, adheres to *The Birth of Tragedy* paradigm by granting primacy to aesthetic experience, and by making flux, rapturous vision, and rhythmic vitality the subject matter of his work.¹⁸ What is striking about this unusual composition is the combination of shaping and vitalizing forms. On one level, Ricketts depicts different examples of movement, different stages of growth and development. Ricketts pictures the spiritual form of Shelley, or his emanation-doppelganger, the wanderer-poet in *Alastor* (1816).¹⁹ This androgynous form occupies a dark-column, and stares into transfiguring light. The bottom third of the image is like a diagrammatic representation of crustal elevation: the release of energy from the core of the dynamic earth forcing new patterns and forms to struggle to the surface of things. The Shelley figure inhabits a space that is at once a terrace with steps, and a protean world of geothermal wonder made from a flurry of arabesques and flames. Armoured forms emerge from the inky floor of this fluidic and atomistic world; crustal dynamism breaks beyond the horizon line and orients vision to the



SHELLEY.

(Drawn by C. Ricketts.—See Sonnet opposits, by Theodore Watts.)

FIGURE 1.1 Charles Ricketts, Illustration to accompany Theodore Watts' poem, for the Shelley Centenary (1892). Published in *The Magazine of Art* (1892) Volume 16. Source: Private Collection.

Shelley figure, who seems to embody the magical quest of Romanticism: the idea that the outside world will be romanticized once all appearances become one with personal feeling; and that the sensitizing power of art arises from the struggle to make visible the primordial forces that act upon and transform the world of appearances (Abrams 1953, 31–102).

The relationship between vision and creativity is the starting point of an image where the Shelley figure implies both transcendence *and* absorption, the movement upwards into pure spirit and downwards into the dynamism of emergent life. What we see, then, is a creating spirit for whom nature is a creative form, an image that “ends” with celestial glorification, the angelic choir, but “starts” with constant physical transformation, the blobs of a close-grained world. The image is not confined to the depiction of a single process; instead, it shows two zones: the Dionysian vitalism of teeming nature, and the Apollonian calm of achieved cultural forms. In other words, Ricketts provides a compositional framework in which sensory perception becomes a vehicle for the relationship between mind and nature, a theme connecting the Nature Philosophy of Romanticism to the life philosophy of the Nietzschean modernists.

More pointedly, this design, caught between incarnation (the dark physicality of matter) and numinous energy (the radiant shaft of light), speaks to the neo-Romantic version of the Nietzsche cult in two important ways. First, the association of the aesthetic with phantasmagoria and primal experience: the conflation of pleasure and pain, is a continuous theme in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche argues that artistic creativity results from a struggle to control raw matter and convert naked terror into aesthetic form (Nietzsche 1927 [1872], 1–34). Second, the association of cosmos and mind makes this world a world-picture, an inward space with its own images, a space where the Shelley figure becomes the complete subject for whom inner perception, thought and being are one.

This leads to another issue that deserves attention: the specific representation of light and darkness. In fact, the image of light is overrun with dark, brutal, and crushing forces. What Ricketts describes is a world of sensory impressions, a world obliged to include diverse forms, proto-things, most of which remain inchoate shapes cloaked in the dark foreground. As with Nietzsche’s account of the Dionysian aesthetic, Ricketts outlines a world of boundless energy, a supersensualized realm, in which the barriers between self and not-self are being dissolved. A whole strand of thinking, what would come to be known as Nietzscheanism, is embodied by the Shelley figure who intuitively knows the cosmos through the body, and in those swirls, blobs, and arabesques whose insistent presence confirms the rapturous nature of the organic world as a place of continuous vitality and syncopated rhythm.²⁰

A similar vision of Nietzschean culture was advanced in a set of brilliant articles by Havelock Ellis published in *Savoy* (1896).²¹ Ellis, who moved in the same circles as Ricketts, was a founder member of *The Progressive Association*, established in 1882 with a plan to preach the gospel of humanity and cultural cosmopolitanism. Ellis’ Nietzsche, “one of the greatest spiritual forces which have appeared since Goethe,” views culture as “unity of artistic style in every expression of a people’s life.” Ellis refers to Nietzsche’s Dionysian sense of the “vital relation of things,” which confirms his “philosophy was the inevitable outcome of his own psychic constitution.” In all, Nietzsche’s thoughts are “born of his pain; he has imparted to them of his own blood, his own pleasure and torment” (Ellis 1915, 83).²²

These matters, where the aesthetic is a constellation of forces associated with the task of higher self-creation, or defined in psychophysiological terms, were central to other

developments of the Nietzsche vogue as expressed in “Nietzschean” art. Accordingly, the second part of this chapter looks at other manifestations of this aesthetic of the body, starting with Gustav Klimt, the most distinguished member of the Secession group in turn-of-the-century Vienna.

The Rebirth of Vitality

Assessing the exact impact of Nietzsche on the critical development of Klimt’s art is far from easy. Over hastily, we can say that Klimt’s equation of life philosophy with immersive aestheticism parallels the argument advanced in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche announces his conviction “that art is the highest task and the proper metaphysical activity of this life” (Nietzsche 1927 [1872], “Preface”). Moreover, it has been argued, persuasively, I think, that Nietzscheanism provides an important framework for the development of Klimt’s pictorial logic (Hoffman 1999, 67–89). In particular, the tension between instinctual forces and expressive bodies – eruptions of energy and normalizing systems – the polarities explored in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, can be compared to the pictorial structure of Klimt’s early works. *Love*, 1895, represents the experience of socialized pleasure in the context of instinctual forces, a relationship expressed through the disposition of bodies as vertical and horizontal forms. Ernst Moritz Geyer uses the same compositional system in his illustration to Nietzsche’s parable “The Giant” reproduced in *Pan* (1895).²³ Here a Zarathustra-like giant, with wings, nimbus, and holding a vast image of solarized energy, presides over a landscape where ant-like academics shuttle across the foreground.²⁴

This conflict between vibrant life and codified experience, a conflict expressed in spatial and compositional terms, features in Klimt’s *Altar of Apollo*, 1886–1888 and *Altar of Dionysus*, 1886–1888, part of a decorative program for the Burgtheater, Vienna. As Werner Hofmann has implied, Klimt contrasts the humanized space of Apollonian culture, where the vertical and horizontal disposition of maenad-worshippers is unified by the life-sized bust of Apollo, with the chaotic space of Dionysian culture, where ideational distortion and loss of individuality is expressed as confusion of scale and space (Hoffman 1999, 71–73). These matters are taken further in *Tragedy*, 1897, where a begowned skeletal embodiment of Apollonian beauty holds a grotesque mask. This menacing object, which seems to struggle from the undulating gown, suggests the raw energy of life breaking into consciousness.

Ricketts, we remember, had implied that Shelley incarnates the Romantic aesthetic in the struggle to recognize the divinity of the cosmos; Klimt, by contrast, stresses immanence: there is no supersensible realm “beyond” the material world. Instead the mask, the effigy, or the grotesque form confirm the world is a world of mental representations, and that it is from such representations that we create knowledge of the universe. Or, to put it another way, what we call the universe is energy as represented in form. It is the life or force of this form that the artist struggles to picture as he stitches together different bits of “vision”: anthropological, meta-psychological, pan-cosmic, the key elements of mythos as revealed to, and reconstituted by, the creative power of the imagination.

As noted in the introduction, the ideas that constituted Nietzscheanism were heterogeneous, but the common dominator among the various Nietzschean groupings was the exaltation and affirmation of the instinctual, the idea of the life-force as shaping form in history and biology. Accordingly, the Dionysian Nietzsche, the one who argued that “everything good” is “dominated by the instinct of life,” was immensely important to the

development of modernist art and aesthetics (Nietzsche 2003 [1889], 59, 55). Roughly speaking, this accounts for the vision of Nietzsche as incendiary iconoclast advanced by Expressionism, Dadaism, and Futurism. Gottfried Benn, the Expressionist writer, sums this up in his battle cry: “Our blood cries out for heaven and earth. We want to dream. We want ecstasy. We call on Dionysus” (cited in Sokel 1959, 94).²⁵ This belief, where creativity is a type of demonic energy and ecstatic revelation, the manifestation of inner experience in cultural forms, encouraged the view that at heart Nietzsche was a messianic vitalist, and that his version of vitalism constituted a nodal point in the history of the understanding of the nature of aesthetic creativity and aesthetic experience.

Edvard Munch strikingly illustrates the workings of this model. Munch – who moved in the same circles as Georg Brandes, Count Harry Kessler, and other leading Nietzscheans, including Ernest Thiel, a rich Swedish Banker, whose donations established the Nietzsche archives in Weimar – owned an edition of Nietzsche’s *Collected Works*. Munch’s portrait of Nietzsche of 1906, commissioned by Thiel, uses the same pictorial logic as *The Scream*, 1893, one of the earliest attempts to picture a subject sensing naked terror as world loss. Munch describes this as a process of psycho-apocalypse,

One evening I was walking along a path, the city was on one side and the fjord below. I felt tired and ill. I stopped and looked out over the fjord – the sun was setting, and the clouds turning blood-red. I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The colour shrieked. This became *The Scream of the Frieze of Life*.

(cited in Hodin 1972, 48)

The source of art, then, is intuition or experience of the horror which is the ground of all existence. This cosmic dread was modified, if never completely nullified, when Munch connected the concept of hylozoism, the idea that the universe is alive, with Nietzsche’s ecstatic vision of Dionysian culture, where all life is understood in relation to an unbroken whole.²⁶ Over the course of the following decades, this neo-vitalism, where the artist sets out to capture primordial being, became Munch’s starting point in the representation of human life.

Munch was dazzled by *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which he equated with Metabolism, his own version of vitalism. Metabolism, a fusion of pantheism and non-mechanical theories of energy development and preservation, was central to Munch’s vision of creation: “to become this earth ever fermenting, ever illuminated by the sun and which lived – lived – and from my rotting body plants and trees and flowers would grow, and the sun would warm and I would be in it, and nothing would decay – this is eternity” (cited in Huber 2014, unpaginated).

Munch’s vision, where there is no rest, inertia, or solidity in nature, draws on Romantic aesthetics, where nature, as pure energy, provides humanity with images of perpetual life. Johann Gottfried Herder, the German philosopher, poet, and critic, laid the foundations for this tradition in *God, Some Conversations* (1787). Herder claimed that there is “no death in creation ... In a world in which everything changes, every force is in eternal activity, and hence metamorphosis of its organs ... Life, thus, is movement, activity, the activity of an inner force. Every living force is active and continues active” (Herder 1940 [1787], 22). Likewise, Munch’s vitalism equates artistic identity with sensuous intuition of universal forces; the capacity to align self and not-self. This vision of the eternal cycle of nature, in which the universe is alive because energy runs through it, would be conflated with his vision of a Nietzschean aesthetic in the Oslo University Murals of 1909–1914. Munch

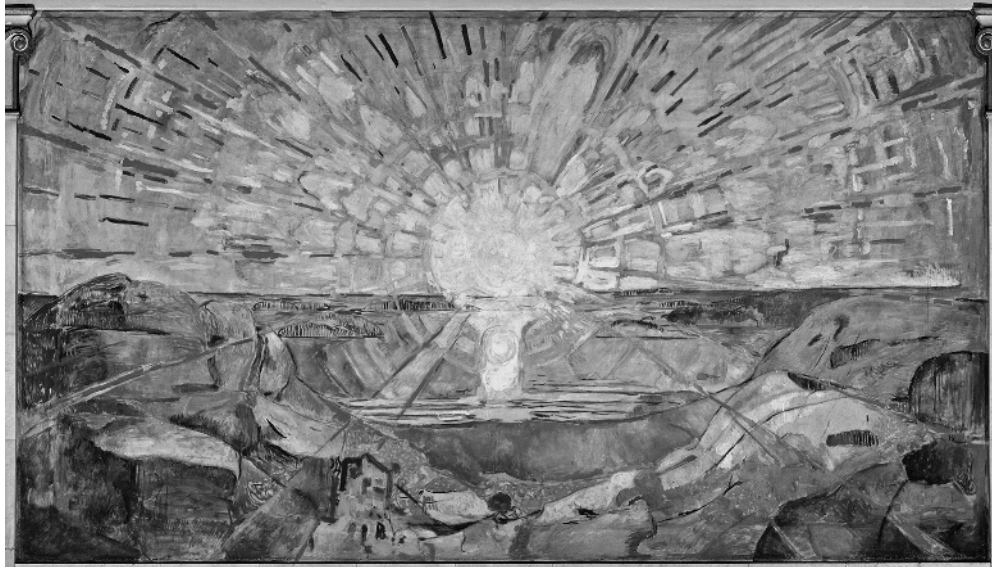


FIGURE 1.2 Edvard Munch, *The Sun*, (1909–1911). Oslo, University Hall. Source: © 2016. Photo Scala, Florence.

divided the entire decoration into two concepts: “Natural Forces” and “Humanity.” *The Human Mountain*, c. 1910, was his synthesis of these concepts.

The Human Mountain represents the zenith of Munch’s Dionysian worldview, his desire to “leap ... into his *own* sunlight” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 101). It depicts a fragment of an endless mountain composed of knotted human forms. Some figures cling to the mountainside, others become incorporated into the rock-face, but all seek the splintered rays of light emitted by the sun. What Munch creates is a crystallization of the life-force, a mountain world where the struggle of energetic life is expressed through the pulsing interplay of geometric and serpentine lines. A pictorial hymn, then, to Zarathustra’s self-vision: “Out of silent mountains and thunderstorms of pain my soul rushes into the valleys” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 72).

Munch’s fusion of the fluxional and adamantine, which recalls Nietzsche’s cosmic Dionysianism, was continued in the central panel, *The Sun*, 1909–1911 (Figure 1.2). This composition, the apogee of Nietzschean vitalism, encapsulates Munch’s dictum, “A work of art is like a crystal – like the crystal it must also possess a soul and the power to shine forth” (cited in Chipp 1968, 115). More than this, it presents the sun as the living center that gives form to the world. In other words, the human body is not the measure of all things. In place of man, a sign of full knowing, we are given an image of “solar love,” a sign of full being (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 107). Like Zarathustra, Munch’s striving for wholeness takes him away from society to the primal oneness of the universe, a universe defined in vitalistic terms: striations of light, bands of energy, irradiated lines of force.

Another figure who was powerfully affected by this line of thought was the German Expressionist architect Bruno Taut. Like Munch, Taut associated mountain ranges with the idea of eternal energy, the vision of total life expressed in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. And, as with Munch, he saw the crystal as concentrated form and dynamic equilibrium, confirmation of the universe as perpetual festival of light and life. And again, like Munch, he

made Nietzsche the prophet of this visionary vitalism, the crystalline subject of a great cult of energy. To this end, Taut went on to produce a vast project entitled *Alpine Architecture*, where he imagined human existence in terms of a chain of crystal houses dedicated to the celebration of cosmic life. The crystal cathedrals, at the summit of the Alps, were an appeal to the pantheistic vitalism found in Romanticism and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Indeed, Taut imagined nature transformed into a vast Book of Nietzsche,

[L]andscapes of Grail-shrines and crystal-lined caves ... Mountains crowned and reworked, valleys improved ... Airplanes and dirigibles carry happy people, who are glad to be free of sickness and sorrow through viewing of their work in blissful moments. To travel! And during the journey to see the work grow and fulfilled, in which all have somehow cooperated as workers in distant lands! Our earth, until now a bad habitat, shall become a good habitat.

(cited in Pehnt 1973, 81, 80)²⁷

Taut went on to envision caves spanning entire continents with glass and precious stones in the guise of “ray domes” and “sparkling palaces” (Pehnt 1973, 82). Here, as in other forms of Expressionism, we get a sense of the artist imagining projects informed by the ecstatic dynamism outlined by Nietzsche, who proclaimed, “Life wants to build itself up into the heights with pillars and steps; it wants to look into vast distances and out toward stirring beauties: therefore it requires height” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 213).

There is good evidence that this idea was widely diffused across different cultural groupings. For instance, many of the numerous unfulfilled plans to build commemorative monuments and temples presented Nietzsche as the culminating figure in Romantic vitalism, the incarnation of creative energy. As early as 1898, Fritz Schumacher’s plan for a Nietzsche temple continued the Romantic fascination with solitude, inner-reality, and revelation.²⁸ Schumacher’s design included an ecstatic Zarathustra at the summit of a temple, a heliotropic hero emerging from a sea of darkness.²⁹ Another remarkable example of this process, where the vitalized Nietzsche stands for the authority of creative reality, the world-picture of Romantic art, was put forward by Count Harry Kessler, one of the most striking figures in art and letters in early twentieth-century Germany.³⁰ Kessler imagined a colossal memorial to Nietzsche, a network of spaces and buildings dedicated to the cult of intellectual and physical energy. Aristide Maillol was to create a statue of Apollo using Vaslav Nijinsky as the subject; Henry van der Velde was to design the temple, monument, and other buildings; Gordon Craig and Eric Gill were to provide internal decoration and design; Max Klinger was to produce reliefs; and Gabriele D’Annunzio, Georg Brandes, André Gide, Gustav Mahler, H. G. Wells and other leading public intellectuals were to serve on a fund-raising committee. Kessler’s Nietzsche, a visionary vitalist, saw the universe in terms of wholeness, the wholeness of *élan*. Nietzsche meant “propulsive energy”; the exterior of the Nietzsche Memorial “must not express any goal, but rather an *idea*, or more precisely *feelings*, heroism and joy, the feelings that form the basic spirit of Nietzsche’s works ... We must ... have a great form that breathes heroism and joy” (cited in Easton 2013, 201, 572).³¹

Locus and Labyrinth: Dancing and Dreaming

An important modification of this thought, where the artist is architect of animism and perpetual vitality, creator of works through which life flows, is pressed forward powerfully by



FIGURE 1.3 Hannah Hoch, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, photomontage and collage with watercolour, 44–7/8 × 35–7/16", 1919–20. Berlin, Nationalgalerie. *Source*: akg-images/Erich Lessing/© DACS 2016.

Hannah Hoch. *Cut the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, 1919–1920 (Figure 1.3) indicates the penetration of Nietzscheanism throughout the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For Hoch, as for Hugo Ball, Johannes Baader, Raoul Hausmann, and other members of the various Dada communities, Nietzsche was the critical lodestar of all avant-garde experimentation and revolt.³²

At the locus of *Cut the Kitchen Knife* we see the headless dancer, the source of dynamic plasticity. Hoch, following Nietzsche, presents the dancer as a recursive figure, the subject made in the performance of action, the incarnation of the life-force.³³ Her dancer exists in a mechanomorphic world, as personified by Einstein, top left, who has gearwheels in his left eye. This, too, is a Nietzschean trope, as Zarathustra asks, “Are you a new strength and a new right? ... A self-propelling wheel? Can you compel the very stars to revolve around you?” A few pages later he says this of future humanity: “A higher body shall you create, a first movement, a self-propelling wheel – a creator shall you create” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 55, 61).

Chance and chaos are the key elements in Hoch’s non-space where the real is a set of colliding fragments, the disjunctions opened up by her retreat from the syntax of scale and perspective. At the center of this kaleidoscopic universe – a universe of interchangeable

things – we find an image of individuated movement, a sign of the wonder of physical presence. Hoch's dancer, then, represents a Nietzschean epiphany, a vision of a world where the body does the thinking. Hoch exalts Dionysian vitality, not Apollonian rationality; the aliveness of the body, not the perfectly proportioned form. Regarded in these terms, the dancer, who generates her own energy, is the perfect image of life as rhythmic vitality, the perfected form of vitalist culture.

Other entrées to Nietzscheanism spotlighted the relativism of vision and the uncanniness of the perceived world. Nietzsche's magical potency cast a spell on Giorgio de Chirico, pre-empting the invention of metaphysical painting, his definition of the world as a place of existential abandonment.³⁴ De Chirico's art, at once spectral and unhomey, revisits one of the themes of Romantic literary criticism, the idea that the magical life generated by art arises from the experience of estrangement from the world and its objects.³⁵ And unlike the Dadaist Nietzscheans, for whom aesthetic life is equated with the development of autonomous or spontaneous creations – the world of individuated energy battling against massified forces – de Chirico's images embody detachment, solitude, and inwardness. Instead of boundless vitalism, de Chirico pictures emptiness, stillness, and their quasi-psychoic emanations. Unsurprisingly, de Chirico said that he wanted to “live in the world as if in an immense museum of strangeness” (cited in Soby 1966, 246). This vision, where vision begins and ends in hermeneutics, draws in equal measures from Romanticism and Nietzsche.³⁶

Another manifestation of de Chirico's Nietzscheanism is his fascination with the unfathomable mystery of the labyrinth, Nietzsche's preferred image of a world devoid of locus, shelter – or absolute knowledge.³⁷ The world de Chirico pictures is at once architectonic, pathless, and disorientating: to look at it is to be confronted by something not built to human scale, somewhere indifferent to human presence. This radical nominalism, derived from Nietzsche, for whom the world is a world of different images or pictures, explains de Chirico's model of pictorial composition, where conventions of depth, plane, and perspective are dismantled. What we should call de Chirico's “perspectivism” is revealed in a world of insistent angles and orthogonals, but without legible vectors. There is, in short, nothing to determine the location of a point in space relative to another, a system of picturing that results in the replacement of the idea of environment, the humanization of space, with the articulation of spacings, the unfolding of multiple and incommensurate “situations” beyond human need. Hence the *piazza*, a traditional sign of civic pride, sociability, and hospitality, becomes a source of eternal solitude and mystery, a set of labyrinthine colonnades framed by sepulchral light.³⁸

These responses are important in our context because they call into question the claim, made by H. G. Wells, that there was a single “Gospel of Nietzsche” (Wells 1897, 244). As we have seen, the Nietzsche of the modern art world was a protean figure. For some, such as Ricketts, he was the subject of heroic vitalism, individual vision; for others, such as Klimt and Munch, he pictured the production of plenitude. All three agreed with Hoch and de Chirico that Nietzsche created a new space for the human imagination, and that Nietzscheanism was an art of dynamic self-creation.³⁹ Or, as another admirer put it, Nietzsche's “range of subjects is as wide as modern thought ... he was his age, he comprehended the mind of Europe” (Orage 1911a, 12).

Were these figures inspired by Nietzsche's ideas, or were they overwhelmed by the belief that they alone were the custodians of “Nietzschean vision”? However we answer this question it is clear that their Nietzsche, a promethean subject, was an “irresistible attraction,” whose “dazzling books” contributed to the general understanding of Romanticism's complex historical reception (Bataille 1991 [1949], 365). In all, this Nietzsche represented one

version of the mystical state: the desire to give, the boundless gifting of creation and creativity, the fusion of inner experience and universal community.⁴⁰ Here, in this image of activist creation, we get a sense of Nietzsche's impact on creative life in the modern period. For this reason alone he deserves an important place in the mythos of modern art, in the stories it tells about its origins, principles, and values.

Notes

- 1 Brinton's book, one of the best of its kind, parallels the thinking examined in this essay: "This romantic opponent of the great tradition of European rationalism could not bear his fellow Romantics" (95).
- 2 The term used by W. B. Yeats to describe Nietzsche's impact on his thinking and poetry: see Wade (1954, 379). In this letter, Sept 26 1902, to Lady Gregory, he asserts Nietzsche's Romanticism by arguing that he "completes Blake and has the same roots" (379).
- 3 See Langbehn (1890), for another version of individualism, where Rembrandt incarnates the folkic values which contest industrial modernity.
- 4 For Nietzsche's reception history see Ascheim (1992), Smith (1996), and Thatcher (1970).
- 5 It is worth noting that Nietzsche was dubbed the "Professor of energy" by French writers in the 1890s: see Forth (2001, 61–73).
- 6 These ideas were particularly noticeable in the British reception of Nietzsche. See, for instance, Orage, editor of the Nietzsche-friendly *The New Age* (1907–1923), and author of two landmark books on Nietzsche in 1911, Jackson (1907) and Ellis (1915).
- 7 See Orage (1911a, 12), where Nietzsche is compared with William Blake. See also Trodd (2012, 6–7, 185–186, 392–5, 409), for an overview of those early twentieth-century readings where Blake and Nietzsche are imagined as cultural brothers dedicated to completing the project of Romanticism via the gospel of iconoclasm and energy.
- 8 See Ratner-Rosenhagen (2012), for an overview of Nietzsche's reception in American academic and literary circles. For three examples of Nietzsche's impact on American artists, see the illustrations in Kent (1920), Rothko (2004, 36); and the discussion of Barnett Newman in Rushing (1988, 187–195).
- 9 Key engagements with Nietzschean culture and its impact on modern thought include Bataille (1992 [1945]) and Bloch (2009 [1935]). For a wider cultural overview, see Kostka and Wohlfarth (1999).
- 10 "Transform Beethoven's *Hymn to Joy* into a painting: let your imagination conceive the multitudes bowing to the dust, awestruck – then you will be able to appreciate the Dionysian ... [T]he Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have ... penetrated into the true nature of things – they have *perceived*, but it is irksome for them to act; for to act cannot change the eternal nature of things ... Knowledge kills action, action requires the veil of illusion ... But at this juncture, when the will is most imperilled, *art* approaches, as a redeeming and healing enchantress: she alone may transform these reflections on the ... absurdity of existence into representations with which man can live" (Nietzsche [1872], 4, 23). Additionally, Nietzsche had a youthful identification with Byron's Manfred: see Nietzsche (1984 [1878], 78, 135).
- 11 "All surplus poetic strength available among contemporary humans ... should be dedicated ... to showing the way to the future: – and not as though the poet, like some sort of imaginative political economist, should anticipate in his images more favorable cultural and social conditions and how to make them possible. Instead, just as artists in the earlier

- times continually composed and recomposed images of divine beings, he will compose and re-compose images of beautiful human beings and sniff out the cases where, *in the midst* of our modern world ... the beautiful, great soul is still possible” (Nietzsche 2013 [1879], 46).
- 12 Vitalism, the theory that what made matter alive was an energizing principle arising from the great chain of creation, was supported by various scientists, thinkers, and artists throughout the Romantic period. Moreover, neo-vitalist ideas were developed in many late nineteenth-century cultural networks and organizations. In Britain, the Fellowship of New Life advanced the view that nature, a dynamic whole, offered a vision of human community and energy. It is not difficult to see why some of its leading figures, such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, assimilated Nietzsche to their worldview. They could point at specific examples of “vitalism” in Nietzsche’s writings: “There is no ‘being’ behind the doing.” Nietzsche (2014 [1887b], 236. Elsewhere Nietzsche stated, “History, thought through completely, would be cosmic self-consciousness.” Nietzsche (2013 [1879], 81). Both statements could be equated with vitalist doxa promulgated by Henri Bergson and others. See Schiller (1913, 145–158), for a contemporary reading of Nietzsche as vitalist thinker.
 - 13 “The secret of Nietzsche is the secret of Dionysus ... Apollo and Dionysus ... penetrate the very stuff of consciousness and life ... life *is* conflict ... The drama of life is thus a perpetual movement towards a climax that never comes” (Orage 1911a, 25, 34, 35, 36).
 - 14 As Orage put it, “In the Superman he found the answer to the Dionysian question: How can life be surpassed.” See Orage (1911a, 78).
 - 15 Key sources include Joel (1905) and Orage (1911a). Orage asserts, “nobody who *understands* Nietzsche will doubt that behind all his apparent materialism there was a thoroughly mystical view of the world ... Blake is Nietzsche in English” (75). See also Trodd (2012, 392–393, 409, 423), for more on Nietzsche and British Romanticism.
 - 16 See, for instance, Coomaraswamy (1918, 22, 32, 155), where Nietzsche, Blake, and Whitman are taken to associate artistic vision with the rhythm of the cosmos; Middleton Murry (1911, 9–12); Holmes (1911, 1–3); Sadler (1912, 23–29); Middleton Murry and Mansfield (1912, 18–20). Huntley Carter, summarized this line of thought when he referred to the “rhythmic vitality” of modern culture, a condition in which artists put together “new pictorial material ... in light to the new deity, rhythm.” Rhythm is another way of describing “the apprehension of the Reality underlying forms of life, of things living and evolving.” See Carter (1911, 82). Rhythm is one of Julius Meier-Graefe’s master terms in his highly influential *Modern Art* 1908. Nietzsche, much-admired by Meier Graefe, features in volume 2 at 146, 164, 319.
 - 17 See, for instance, the representation of Blake and El Greco in the writings of Sir Charles Holmes, Director of the National Gallery (1920, 5, 25, 43, 66, 149); (1927, 190) and (1929, 242–243). John Cowper Powys predicted this viewpoint (Powys 1915, 76–84), where El Greco’s “ecstatic hieroglyphs” pre-empt Blake, Beardsley and Futurism. Powys’ vision of Blake as a “wandering Dionysus,” was developed in a later publication (Powys 1916), where Blake is compared with Nietzsche and El Greco at 260, 267, 271, 272.
 - 18 *The Magazine of Art*, August, 1892, 336, where it accompanies Theodore Watts’ sonnet “For the Shelley Centenary.” Ricketts designed *Lyrical Poems of Shelley* (1898) and *The Poems of Shelley*, 3 vols (1901). Yeats expresses his admiration for Shelley and Blake in a letter to Ricketts dated 5 November, 1922. See Wade (1954, 691). Ricketts’ uncomfortable relationship with Nietzsche is captured in his diary entry for 27 August 1900: “Death of Nietzsche. Years ago when I first read him I was half-frightened to find in print so many things which I felt personally ... His end is even more tragic than Heine’s ... Where I

- resemble him is in my estimate of the religious instinct, women, and the crowd, admiration of the Renaissance, belief in the sacredness of laughter: laughter that saves, laughter that kills” (Ricketts 1939, 43–44).
- 19 Shelley (1816). It is worth noting that H. G. Wells yoked together Shelley and Nietzsche as prophets of the world-state in *When the Sleeper Wakes*, published in installments in *The Graphic*, 1898–1903.
 - 20 Ricketts might have had in mind Nietzsche’s thoughts on the relationship between energy and genius: “Ah, the cheap fame of the ‘genius’! How quickly his throne is erected, his worship turned into a ritual! We still remain on our knees before *energy* – in keeping with the age-old slave habit – and yet if we wish to determine the degree to which something is *worthy of being honoured*, only *the degree of reason in the energy* is decisive: we have to measure to what extent precisely this energy has been overcome by something higher and is at its service as a tool and means! But for such a measuring there are too few eyes ... And so perhaps what is most beautiful walks along in darkness and sinks, barely born, into eternal night – namely the spectacle of that energy that a genius expends *not on works*, but *on himself as a work*, that is, on his own mastery, on the purification of his fantasy, on the ordering and selection of the onrushing stream of tasks and sudden insights.” Nietzsche (2011 [1881], 270–271).
 - 21 *Savoy*, a leading organ of late nineteenth-century Bohemian culture, published illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley and essays by Yeats, both great admirers of Nietzsche and Blake. The journal was edited by Arthur Symons, the author of the pioneering *William Blake* (1907), where Blake is a prophet of Nietzschean thought. See Walker (1937, letter no. 67, October 4 1896), where Beardsley writes: “Would you be so very kind as to get me everything Henry & Co. have published by Nietzsche.” See also W. B. Yeats, “William Blake and His Illustrations to *The Divine Comedy*,” *Savoy* (1896), nos 3–5, no. 3, 41–57; “His Opinions of Dante,” no. 4, 25–41; “The Illustrations of Dante,” no. 5, 31–36. Reprinted in Yeats (1903).
 - 22 See Ellis (April 1896; July 1896 and August 1896). These were reprinted in Ellis 1915, 2nd edition, where this passage appears at p. 83. Nietzsche is transformed into a Romanticist, at p. 78, when Ellis refers to his “restless self-torment” and “sense of the abyss.”
 - 23 *Pan*, *Mercur de France*, *The Eagle and the Serpent*, named after Zarathustra’s closet companions, and *The New Age*, were key agents in Nietzsche’s German, French, and British reception.
 - 24 Ricketts used the same format in his Nietzsche-inspired poster advertising Thomas Hardy’s *The Dynasts* (1914).
 - 25 Elsewhere Benn noted, “everything that my generation discussed, dissected in its deepest thoughts – one can say suffered through; one can say: enlarged upon – all of that had already been expressed and explored, had already found its definitive formulation in Nietzsche; everything thereafter was exegesis... As is becoming increasingly clear, he is the great giant of the post-Goethean era.” See Allen (1983, 26).
 - 26 John Davidson, the Scottish poet, dramatist, and Nietzsche admirer, came to the same conclusion: “For me there is nothing immaterial; for me everything matters; for me there is nothing behind phenomena: the very ‘thing in itself’ is phenomenon; phenomena *are* the universe.” Davidson (1905, 26–27).
 - 27 Taut’s Nietzsche, a romantic, is equated with Rousseau and Whitman at p. 81.
 - 28 Zarathustra advises his admirers and followers to “Flee into your solitude ... to where raw and bracing air blows!” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 46).
 - 29 Zarathustra utters: “unsettled am I in all settlements and a departure at all gates” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 105).

- 30 Kessler, a central figure in German cultural life from the 1890s to the Weimar Republic, was one of the first Europeans to celebrate Blake. His diary entry for 18 June 1895 notes: “Went early to the South Kensington Museum and had the Blake’s shown to me ... Easily the greatest that England has produced as of yet, and one of the greatest of all time ... The pages of the prophecies ‘America’ and ‘Europe’ ... belong to the most powerful and moving that an artist has ever created. They rise above the level of a purely ornamental art to the highest heights of poetic and artistic perfection. Here for the first time artistic visions that are truly equal in grandiose fantasy to those of the Revelation of St. John. Next to these staggering images what do the collection of nudes, supposedly representing the Last Judgement, by Cornelius or even Michelangelo matter? Even Dürer must yield to Blake on this ground.” See Easton (2013, 136).
- 31 Kessler provides in-depth details of the Nietzsche memorial: see Easton (2013, 560–561, 571–573).
- 32 For a helpful overview of this engagement, see Berguis (1999, 115–139).
- 33 Nietzsche calls the Dionysian figure of the satyr “the image of Nature, and her strongest impulses, the very symbol of Nature, and at the same time the *proclaimer* of her art and vision: musician, poet, dancer and visionary united in one person.” Nietzsche (1927 [1872], 28). Zarathustra commends “the supple and persuasive body, the dancer, whose allegory and epitome is the self-enjoying soul.” He announces “all that is heavy become light, all body become dancer, all spirit become bird ... verily that is my Alpha and Omega!” (Nietzsche 2005 [1885], 165, 202).
- 34 “It is only with Nietzsche that I can say I have begun a real life.” Cited in Merijan (2014, 15). De Chirico’s multiple identifications with Nietzsche – philosophic, existential, psychological, critical and photographic – are charted by Merijan and Taylor (2002).
- 35 The vision of the experience of life as a condition of transcendental homelessness describes the vantage point in two classic texts of Romanticism and Modernism: Blake’s *Jerusalem* (1804–1820), and Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926).
- 36 Alberto Savinio, de Chirico’s brother, claimed that de Chirico’s painting “could be called *second romanticism*, or, if you will, *complete[d] romanticism*.” See Merijan (2014, 52).
- 37 ‘If we desired and dared an architecture corresponding to *our own* make of soul (we are too cowardly for it!) – then the labyrinth would have to be our model!’ (Nietzsche 2011 [1881], 124).
- 38 In a letter dated 26 January 1910 de Chirico states: “[T]he most profound poet is Friedrich Nietzsche ... I ... study a great deal, especially literature and philosophy, and in the future I am planning to write books (now I want to whisper something in your ear: I am the only one who has understood Nietzsche. All my works demonstrate this).” See Baldacci (1999, 92).
- 39 “[You must want] to *be* something new, to *signify* something new, *represent* new values” (Nietzsche 2014 [1886], 185).
- 40 See Bataille (1992 [1945], 166), where he explains Nietzschean inner experience as affirmation of life value as sovereign formlessness.

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