The Writing of the Dionysian:
A Dithyramb to Writing Sites—for Fellow-Rhapsodizers

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Abstract

This project—“The Writing of the Dionysian”—does not simply mean to write about “the Dionysian” alone; it also means to write about the notion of “writing” (écriture) and the sites of writing that “the Dionysian” initiates or helps shape. However, this project does not attempt to address what “writing” or “the Dionysian” essentially is, or to make of it a workable definition or methodology. It proposes to explore writing sites and the “I” at the writing site through two figures of thought—“the Dionysian” and “writing”—in the critical writings of Nietzsche, Barthes, Blanchot, Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari. This project is about a god, a god who dances to the beat of the heart laid bare and drunk with effervescence wine in a Nietzschean “bright, glittering, mysterious Southern sky,” not shadowed by any dialectical, idealistic, or nihilistic systems of thought, but quite boldly given over to the affirmation of the dice-throw, of the intransitive event of writing.

Keywords
Barthes, Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Derrida, Dionysian, Nietzsche, writing

Still, the effect of the book [The Birth of Tragedy] proved and proves that it had a knack for seeking out fellow-rhapsodizers and for luring them on to new secret paths and distancing places.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

What is writing? What is a writing site? What is the Dionysian? What is Dionysian writing? What is this “writing of the Dionysian”? The title of this project, “The Writing of the Dionysian,” pays homage to Maurice Blanchot for introducing the concept of writing and for his book The Writing of the Disaster. The expressions “the writing of the Dionysian” or “the Dionysian of the writing,” like “the writing of the disaster” or “the disaster of the writing,” have a “motionless instability.” As Ann Smock notes in her “Translator’s Remarks” to The Writing of the Disaster, these expressions “reverse, turn back, re-turn without cease, but
as though they were ceaselessly that they reached a point of no return” (ix). This project—“The Writing of the Dionysian”—thus does not simply mean to write about “the Dionysian;” it also means to write about the notion “writing” (écriture) and the sites of writing that “the Dionysian” initiates or helps shape.

This project is driven by a desire, a passion, a passionate desire. This is a desire that exceeds, overflows, not a desire of lack or of nostalgia that seeks to gain and amend. The desire to write is not the desire to represent but the desire to be writing (écriture), writing this very desire. The desire to write disquiets me and moves me to write: the desire to become Nietzsche’s “fellow-rhapsodizer,” the desire to write with a “maenadic soul,” (“ASC,” Sec. 3), the desire to “dance with words,” to “dance with the pen”¹—the pen being very much like the thyrsus, which works wonders, but also inflicts pain. This desire urges me to sing, but not speak, on my way to the sacred realm, a distancing place no one knows where, an “elsewhere.”

This project situates itself against the background of the concepts of Man, of self, of reflection, of perception, of consciousness, of Being as it develops from Descartes, to Hegel, and finally to Heidegger. It inhabits a site opened by the rupture of “death” and “end”: the “death of God” and the “end of Man.” The Dionysian of Nietzsche helps open up this site occupied by God and Man and brings affirmation into play with a certain Dionysian laughter, a certain dance, and a certain nomadic wandering. Nietzsche in Thus Spoke Zarathustra says that “man is something that shall be overcome.” Blanchot, after Nietzsche, in The Infinite Conversation, also remarks that “man is something that must be surpassed;” “man must overcome himself” (57). To overcome man is to overcome the desire of going beyond, of using contradiction and negation for an “affirmation” that maintains what it does away with and places us back within the horizon of dialectical discourse. Far from debasing man, humanism, or humanity in general, the end of man is the end of the concept of man, the end of the idea of man as a concept, the end of the weight, the gravity of the concept of man. The disappearance of man makes man more conscious of the making of man and of the writing site.

¹ Twilight of the Idols. “What the Germans Have Lost,” Sec. 7.
This project does not aim primarily to conceptualize or theorize. It does not attempt to address what “writing” or “the Dionysian” is, or to make of it a workable definition or methodology. It proposes to explore writing sites and the “I” at the writing site through two figures of thought—“the Dionysian” and “writing” (écriture)—in some critical writings of Nietzsche, Barthes, Blanchot, Bataille, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari. This project is also provoked by a drive, a drive to will the concept as mask, as metaphor. Sarah Kofman, in Nietzsche and Metaphor, elaborates “the metaphorical drive” (74) in man in Nietzschean terms. To play with concepts as metaphors is, in a sense, “to will illusion, mask, appearance, surface” (78). Nietzsche himself discusses this metaphorical drive in the essay “On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense.” He writes:

The drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive…. This drive continually confuses the conceptual categories and cells by bringing forward new transferences, metaphors, and metonymies. It continually manifests an ardent desire to refashion the world which presents itself to waking man, so that it will be as colorful, irregular, lacking in results and coherence, charming, and eternally new as the world of dreams. (PT 89)

To metaphorize the concept is to eliminate the difference between the concept and the metaphor. To will the concept as metaphor makes the intellect the “master of deception” (PT 90). To carnivalize the concept in the Saturnalian fashion is to “be guided by intuition rather than by concepts” (PT 90). To be intuitive is to write metaphorically and to suffer intensely, to forget actively, and to celebrate endlessly the Saturnalia of concepts as metaphors. To take concept as metaphor is also intended “to express an exalted happiness, an Olympian cloudlessness, and as it were, a playing with seriousness” (PT 91). This project—“The writing of the Dionysian”—flourishes in the exuberance of metaphors through which the joyous, overfull Saturnalian life deceptively manifests itself.

This project does not intend to emphasize the rich varieties of Dionysiac mysteries and cults in the context of ancient Greek religion and literature. It is about a god, a god who dances to the beat of the heart laid bare and drunk with effervescent wine in a Nietzschean “bright, glittering, mysterious Southern sky” (WP, Sec. 1051), not shadowed by any dialectical, idealistic, or nihilistic systems of thought, but quite boldly
given over to the affirmation of the dice-throw, of the intransitive event of writing. It is not meant to make obscurity pass into the category of the clear and the known. It is about the repetition of “writing” in discourses and differential disseminations in modern critical theory. It is not intended to make Nietzsche understood, but to make Nietzsche passionately and excessively felt—for fellow-rhapsodizers.

I. The Dionysian

I was the first to take seriously, for the understanding of the older, the still rich and even overflowing Hellenic instinct, that wonderful phenomenon which bears the name of Dionysus: it is explicable only in terms of an excess of force.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

“The Dionysian” is a notion made popular by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he focuses upon the symbiotic opposition of the Dionysian and the Apollinian. These two principles are bound together, “involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations” (*BT*, Sec. 1). Nietzsche claims that only the interaction between the Apollinian and the Dionysian, each opposing and yet enhancing the other, can achieve the artistic ideal and the highest culture, which he designates as “Attic tragedy.”

The Birth of Tragedy does not stop only at elaborating a view of tragedy; it goes on to achieve a radical analysis of consciousness itself, focusing upon “the perpetual strife” between the two principles and their collective opposition to Socrates, the theoretical man. Of the two principles, the notion of the Dionysian gathers momentum and recurs throughout Nietzsche’s work with ever-changing resonances, whereas the notion of the Apollinian almost disappears totally after *The Birth of Tragedy*. As a notion throughout the entire corpus of Nietzsche’s work, the Dionysian is far too volatile to remain confined to this work. Eventually the potent power of the Dionysian, by means of Nietzsche’s “excessive” interpretation, goes over the historical

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2 At the end of section 21 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes that “the intricate relation of the Apollinian and the Dionysian in tragedy” can be characterized by “a fraternal union of the two deities”: “Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo: and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and of all art is attained.”
boundaries of its era and exerts great influence on (post)modern critical theory.

The Dionysian is an excessive figure of thought, a figure in excess of the metaphysics of presence, a figure that disrupts the limits that delimit the individual subject, and a figure that violates the *principium individuationis* of the Apollinian. The theme of the Dionysian in “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” expresses Nietzsche’s later conception of the inward pathos of human life, gives value to human beings’ propensity toward passion and excess in life, and celebrates the affirmation of life as exuberant and joyful in spite of suffering and cruelty. With the Dionysian worldview, “the existence of the world is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon” (“ASC,” Sec. 5). No longer opposed to the Apollinian nor combined with the Apollinian against the Socratic dialectic as in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Dionysian is now contrasted with the Crucified, which stands for “hatred of ‘the world,’ condemnation of the passions, fear of beauty and sensuality, a beyond invented the better to slander this life, at bottom craving for the nothing, for the end, for respite, for “the Sabbath of Sabbaths”” (“ASC,” Sec. 5)

By emphasizing the Dionysian aesthetic vision of life, Nietzsche calls into question all of life’s moral interpretations. For him, “life is something essentially amoral” (“ASC,” Sec. 5). As he admits, the thesis of the Dionysian vs. the Crucified is already hidden in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Perhaps the depth of this antimoral propensity is best inferred from the careful and hostile silence with which Christianity is treated throughout the book” (“ASC,” Sec. 5). In one way or another, the Dionysian inherits Nietzsche’s hatred of moral asceticism which, to him, is a decadent vision of life. Beyond good and evil, Nietzsche proposes to say yes to life, to affirm life in spite of its inescapable pains, sufferings, anguish, and contradictions, and to sing, to dance, to laugh without false illusions and mechanisms of escape. He then calls this aesthetic and amoral vision of life Dionysian. As Nietzsche writes:

> It was against morality that my instinct turned with this questionable book, long ago; it was an instinct that aligned itself with life that discovered itself a fundamentally opposite doctrine and evaluation of life—purely artistic and *anti-Christian*. What to call it? As a philologist and man of words I baptized it, not without taking some liberty … in the name of a Greek god: I called it Dionysian. (“ASC,” Sec. 5)

Indeed, the Dionysian, to use Derrida’s words, does not represent “the saddened,
negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play,” but “the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” \((WD\ 292)\). The affirmation of the Dionysian is not the affirmation that opposes itself to negation or nihilism. It is an active affirmation, an ultimate extravagant Yes to life, unlike the many vengeful, slavish, decadent moralities Nietzsche has identified: Christianity, the philosophies of Plato, Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel and all of idealism. In \(Ecce\ Homo\), Nietzsche vehemently endorses the Dionysian affirmation: “a formula for the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence” (“The Birth of Tragedy,” Sec. 2). Indeed, the notion of the Dionysian offers an alternative perspective by which to look at the question of suffering and death, and always sustains a dynamism of motion and change. It wrestles with systems of thought that impose guilt, lack and nostalgia on human beings.

The Dionysian affirmation as a figure of thought has vitally transformed the writing of contemporary philosophy and critical theory. As Alan Schrift observes in \(Nietzsche\ and\ the\ Question\ of\ Interpretation\), ever since Georges Bataille’s influential \(On\ Nietzsche\) in 1945, Heidegger’s two-volume \(Nietzsche\) in 1961, and Gilles Deleuze’s \(Nietzsche\ and\ Philosophy\) in 1962, French interest in Nietzschean thought has risen dramatically. Schrift sees two basic trends of the new Nietzsche interpretation which proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s: one develops from “the preceding generation’s preoccupation with Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger;” the other reflects “a heightened awareness of the style of philosophical discourse, bringing questions of literary form to bear on the content of philosophical issues” \((77)\). In the writings of Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Sarah Kofman, we can observe that these two trends exist side by side. While engaging in active dialogues with Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger and by calling their dialectical or phenomenological thought into question, these writers orient their examinations around the question of style and writing.
As many critics have recognized, Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* marks an important step in subverting the dialectical tradition in contemporary critical thinking.³ Vincent P. Pecora in his essay, “Deleuze’s Nietzsche and Post-Structuralist Thought,” argues that “it is the Nietzsche elaborated by Gilles Deleuze that becomes a pivotal figure in the reaction against this dialectical tradition…. But it is through Deleuze that the negative power of the dialectic is called so radically, so categorically, into question” (36). In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze reads Nietzsche as a radical critic of systematic, totalizing, and nihilistic modes of thought, trying to advance beyond Platonism, French rationalism, and German dialectics. Nietzsche is seen as offering an alternative theory of the tragic, becoming, difference, affirmation, and active and reactive forces. As Deleuze writes: “The sense of Nietzsche’s philosophy is that multiplicity, becoming and chance are objects of pure affirmation…. The lightness of that which affirms against the weight of the negative; the games of the will to power against the labour of the dialectic; the affirmation of affirmation against that famous negation of the negation” (*NP* 197). To affirm difference with Nietzschean Dionysianism is to give oneself over to the multiplicity of impulses, drives, desires, pathos, and affects that defy all organization into a larger, coherent or meaningful whole. The existence of the world to be affirmed is a Dionysian world of random multiplicity that is seen as absolutely different in each successive moment, as well as absolutely different from the world men would create for themselves, namely the anthropomorphic vision of the world.

Deleuze’s interpretation pits the Nietzschean against the Hegelian. It affirms the Dionysian “yes” as opposed to the dialectical “no,” Dionysian difference against dialectical contradiction, Dionysian play against dialectical labour, the Dionysian dance against dialectical responsibility, Dionysian laughter against dialectical seriousness, the Dionysian dice-throw against dialectical eschatology, and Dionysian affectivity against dialectical recuperativity. Deleuze’s active interpretation of Nietzsche’s aphorisms and fragments is illuminating. His emphases on “a feeling or pathos of power” and “the

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affectivity of forces” are particularly insightful. Here I will follow Deleuze’s lead to elaborate on the sensitive relationship between the Dionysian and the affect.

The Dionysian is always linked to a superabundance of pathos and passions, without root and without use. It inflames an affective life beyond measure and brings about excessive intellectualization that exceeds thought, logic, and reason. Nietzsche valorizes the affective life and his thought is always a “pathos of thought,” a thought affected by pathos. He substitutes the correlation of affect and becoming for metaphysical duality and essence. Nietzschean affect initiates “the innocence of becoming” (WP, Sec. 552), the free flowing of pathos without reciprocity, cause and effect. The affects of love, goodness, and pity are set against “the ascetic morality of depersonalization.” The affects are, as Nietzsche writes, “richness in personality, abundance in oneself, overflowing and bestowing, instinctive good health and affirmation of oneself, that produce great sacrifice and great love” (WP, Sec. 388).

Nietzsche proposes to use “a perspective theory of affects” to displace “epistemology” (WP, Sec. 462). As he writes, “between two thoughts all kinds of affects play their game: but their motions are too fast, therefore we fail to recognize them, we deny them” (WP, Sec. 477). Thus, between two events, between two things, it is not causality, not cause and effect which link the two points but pure affects which question the legitimacy of consciousness, subjective perception, and phenomenology in general. Socrates, the scientific man, cannot tolerate affects. The cunning Socratic dialectics privileges the identity of “reason=virtue=happiness” (WP, Sec. 432) over affects. “In fact,” as Nietzsche argues, “man does not want ‘happiness.’ Pleasure is a feeling of power: if one excludes the affects, then one excludes the states that give the highest feeling of power, consequently of pleasure” (WP, Sec. 434).

For Nietzsche, affects intoxicate. But Western metaphysics combats everything that intoxicates. Schopenhauer’s resignation of the will is a gesture which renounces affects. Western metaphysics is essentially a philosophy of sterilized preservation. It negates desires and affects, and fears the irrational, the arbitrary, the accidental as the causes of immeasurable risk and physical suffering. Western metaphysics sees reason as “an independent entity” and fails to see that it is merely a kind of affect that is
correlated to a system of relations between various passions and desires.  

Nietzsche always maintains that there is an intertwining link between interpretation, bodily condition and affect. According to him, interpretation and our will to interpretation is “a symptom of certain physiological conditions” (*WP*, Sec. 254) and “a form of the will to power … as an affect” (*WP*, Sec. 556). It is our affects, our physiological conditions that “interpret.” It is the “pathos of distance,” or the differential affect rather than rational or dialectical thinking that brings about the revaluation of values and the art of interpretation. The differential affect is based on an affirmation of difference, of the play of active and reactive forces. For Nietzsche, all force is in an essential relation with another force. The affective force is plural, a multiplicity. It would be absurd to think of it in singular terms. For Nietzsche writes, “An overflowing wealth of the most multifarious forces and the most dexterous power of ‘free willing’ and lordly command dwell amicably together in one man” (*WP*, Sec. 1051).

Nietzsche’s affective refashioning of the activity of interpretation and thinking entails a vision of subjectivity as a bodily entity, one which appears as a locus of complex interplay between constructed social, material, and symbolic forces. The affective body becomes a transformer and relay of energy, a surface of intensities. This vision is the Artaudian vision of the body, the Body without Organs, which Deleuze and Guattari single out for elaboration in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. For Artaud, the body is a channel of intersecting cosmic forces, a channel of cruelty, and of spatio-temporal variables. It is able to affect and to be affected.

The Dionysian body is torn to pieces by the Titans. It is all limbs and fragments and yet each limb, each fragment is a piece of affect, which conveys “extreme feelings of power.” As Nietzsche writes, “the origin of religion lies in extreme feelings of power which, because they are strange, take men by surprise…. Religion is a case of *altération de la personnalité.* A sort of feeling of fear and terror at oneself—But also a feeling of extraordinary happiness and exaltation” (*WP*, Sec. 135). The extreme feeling

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4 See Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, Sec. 387, p. 208.

5 See *Anti-Oedipus*, pp. 7-16 and *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 149-66.
of power is a tragic experience, an experience that does not arouse Aristotelian pity and fear, through which one masters and contains affect or pathos. The Aristotelian catharsis is either moralistic sublimation or medical purgation (*BT*, Sec. 22), but Nietzsche’s tragic goes beyond the classic complementary of tragedy and comedy. For him, the experience of the tragic is the Dionysian affirmation *par excellence*. In the final section of *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche uses an exuberant Dionysian Yes to affirm the tragic experience and repudiates Aristotle’s conception of catharsis:

Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I understood as the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not in order to get rid of terror and pity, not in order to purge oneself of a dangerous affect by its vehement discharge—Aristotle misunderstood in that way—all terror and pity—that joy which includes even joy in destroying.

The tragic joy of the Dionysian expresses the god’s double nature, which contains the elements of pain, suffering, and cruelty as well as those of joyful affirmation of the exuberant fertility of the universal will, of the overflowing feeling of life, and of becoming one with the infinite primordial nature of existence. Here, one of Nietzsche’s lifelong themes appears. That is, the necessity for embracing both joy and suffering gladly, in what he calls *amor fati* or “the love of fate”: “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it—all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary—but *love* it” (*EH*, “Why I am so clever” 10). In other words, whereas the Apollinian dream world attempts to transcend suffering by luminous dreams, the Dionysian nourishes the capacity for suffering itself which permits us to see suffering as a legitimate part of life, as much as pleasure and exaltation.

Ecstasy and madness are the two best known affects of the Dionysian. They are two heightened affectivities that intensify the experience of life and death to the point of excess. According to Nietzsche, Dionysian worship had its origin in Thrace and Phrygia, where it was associated with orgiastic rites and drunken frenzy. Dionysian excess challenges the Apollinian principle of “nothing in excess.” In the same way it attacks the principle, “know thyself,” because what Dionysian art demands is to “forget
"The Dionysian art of intoxication dissolves the individual into the body of collective consciousness, where the self no longer has any meaning. This state of intoxication cannot be attained by moderation, by avoiding excess. The Dionysian shows life as a tumultuous flux that has no ultimate respect for anything individual or orderly. As Nietzsche describes it, “these Dionysian emotions awaken, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness” (BT, Sec. 1).

In many ways, the writings of Nietzsche and Bataille share strikingly similar concerns. Like Nietzsche, Bataille wrestles with Enlightenment reason and the mimetic principle of Western culture. He advances the alternative economy of heterogeneity, the ecstatic and explosive forces of religious fervor, sexuality, and intoxicated experience that subvert and transgress the instrumental rationality and normality of bourgeois culture. As Michael Richardson points out, Nietzsche is “the greatest intellectual influence on Bataille” and his work “provides one of the keys to Bataille’s thought” (33). As the Nietzschean Dionysian affirms life without reserve, without use, without production value, the Bataillean “general economy” celebrates expenditure without reserve, gift without return, and pure loss without recuperation. And Bataille’s economy of exuberance is very much like the Dionysian overfullness. As Bataille himself confesses, “I believe there to be a relation between the thought of Nietzsche and my own, analogous to that which exists in a community.”

Drawing on Nietzsche, and with the help of Kojève’s reading of Hegel, Bataille insists on the disruptive, excessive character of joy, death and Dionysian dismemberment, and he sees excess, waste, and expenditure as inhabiting discourses, philosophy, every kind of human activity. Bataille writes in “The Notion of Expenditure”:

… human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems assigned to it by reasonable conceptions. The immense travail of recklessness, discharge, and upheaval that constitutes life could be expressed by stating that life starts only with the deficit of these systems; at least what it allows in the way of order and reserve has meaning only from the moment when the ordered and reserved forces liberate and lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for. (VE 128)

The Dionysian that transgresses the restricted economy is according to Bataille an

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“inner experience” in which an individual—or, in the case of certain ritualized transgressions such as sacrifice, carnival, or the Dionysian festival, the community—exceeds the bounds of rational, everyday behavior, which is constrained by considerations of profit, productivity, and self-preservation. The characteristic feeling accompanying transgression is one of intense ecstasy and of intense anguish (for Nietzsche it is intense suffering). And nowhere is this heterogeneous, even contradictory combination of ecstasy and anguish/suffering more acutely present than in the inner experience of the erotic, of ecstasy, of the sacred, or of the Dionysian ritual orgy. As Bataille writes in *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*,

The orgy is not associated with the dignity of religion, extracting from the underlying violence something calm and majestic compatible with profane order; its potency is seen in its ill-omened aspects, bringing frenzy in its wake and vertiginous loss of consciousness. The total personality is involved, reeling blindly towards annihilation, and this is the decisive movement of religious feeling.  (113)

On the same page Bataille mentions the indiscriminate threat of the maenads, who in their ferocious frenzy devour their own living infants (113). In the cult of Dionysus, as in any transgressive experience, the limits of the self become unstable, sliding and drifting. Rationalized exchange and productivity is dissipated by unlimited, nonproductive expenditure; purposeful action or work is distracted by free play; the self-preserving husbandry of everyday life is infected by the excessive and contagious mystical state we associate with Dionysian ecstasy and madness—the realm of the sacred.

In the short essay “Nietzschean Chronicle” in *Visions of Excess*, Bataille points out the sacredness of Dionysian sovereignty:

The Nietzschean audacity demanding for the figures it creates a power that bows before nothing—that tends to break down old sovereignty’s edifice of moral prohibition—must not be confused with what it fights…. The very first sentences of Nietzsche’s message come from ‘realms of dream and intoxication.’ The entire message is expressed by one name: DIONYSOS. When Nietzsche made DIONYSOS (in other words, the destructive exuberance of life) the symbol of the will to power, he expressed in that way a resolution to deny to a faddish and debilitating romanticism the force that must be held sacred.  (206)

For Bataille, the Dionysian wills a self-loss in the transgression of sovereignty. Dionysian sovereignty is related to pure loss, dépense, and the impossible. It resists recognition, utilization, and reincorporation. It exceeds and risks in the senseless loss of
meaning. It is an affective force that exceeds the boundaries of a person’s “head,” of a person’s reason, a person’s consciousness, and a person’s position in the social hierarchy. The Nietzschean Dionysian is the blind spot where the all-seeing eye of consciousness looks and loses itself, where death and sacrifice constitute an irreversible expenditure, a radical negativity, and a nonrecoverable and nonrecognizable fall. Excess rather than scarcity, passion rather than critical distance, the vertiginous fall of disaster rather than the erection of a logocentric monument are what constitute the ecstatic vision of the Dionysian.

In his confrontation with Hegel, Bataille invokes the Dionysian laughter of Nietzsche to undo the principle of Aufhebung. For Nietzsche, Dionysian laughter is what kills the spirit of seriousness, the spirit of gravity, and the cult of organic interiority. As Nietzsche writes, “Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!” (Z, First Part, “On Reading and Writing”). Laughter is a light-hearted movement that tears meaning, language, thought, and conceptualization from their origin, unity, and the identity of being but without giving way to nihilism, nothingness, that too facile refuge. This laughter’s desire for destruction, dismemberment, change, and becoming is the expression of an over-full power pregnant with the future. Bataille employs Dionysian laughter as an excess of force to disrupt the master/slave dialectic and the idea of Absolute Knowledge. His laughter bursts apart convulsively within the interiorized, negated and conserved movements of Aufhebung.

The Hegelian history of the Aufhebung is a single history, a history of consciousness, identity, recognition, and appropriation. This history of “human comedy,” whose final act is the master’s flirtation with death—imaginary death in struggle with consciousness of the Other and returning as representation and spectacle—makes Bataille laugh. He ridicules this dialectic by pushing it to the edge of the abyss where there is no return, and no reserve. In “From Restricted to General Economy” Derrida mimes the movement of Bataille and attempts to deconstruct the master/slave dialectic by means of Bataille’s “laughter.” As affirmed by Derrida, “Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis
of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity…. A laughter that literally never *appears*, because it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning. And the word ‘laughter’ itself must be read in a burst, as its nucleus of meaning bursts in the direction of the *system* of sovereign operation” (*WD* 256).

Before he wraps up “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” Nietzsche urges his fellow-rhapsodizers to renounce Schopenhauerian resignation of the will and to dispatch romantic or Christian nostalgia for “metaphysical comforts” with Dionysian laughter: “You ought to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists. Then perhaps, as laughers, you may some day dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil—metaphysics in front” (“ASC,” Sec. 7). Dionysian laughter becomes a trope for Nietzsche as for Bataille, a powerful trope they use to laugh at the metaphysical will to negate life. Laughter is Dionysian. It is the very eruption of epidemic frenzy. It is into this laughter that the fellow-rhapsodizers of Nietzsche come to their joy, the joy to transpose “the Dionysian into a philosophical pathos” (*BT*, Sec.3) and the joy to say Yes to the whole gamut of life without reservation, without remorse. This Dionysian joy is a “tragic” joy which is devoid of Aristotelian terror and pity but rejoices over life’s own inexhaustibility in the affirmation of the highest type. It is also a joy of *coming*, the coming of the wine god, the coming of the desire to come endlessly, of becoming, of the eternal return, of differential repetition, and of writing (*écriture*).

The inner experience of the Dionysian as delineated by Bataille is echoed by the limit-experience of Blanchot. The limit-experience comes into play when knowledge exhausts its power of negation, when the dialectical teleology can push no farther, when the fragment comes into its own, when we are incapable of saying, interpreting, or expressing the impossibility of death and the fragmentation of the Dionysian. As Blanchot writes in the section “The Limit-Experience” of *The Infinite Conversation*:

> The first knowledge is knowledge of the tearing apart—the breaking up—of Dionysus, that obscure experience wherein becoming is disclosed in relation with the discontinuous and as its play. The fragmentation of the god is not the rash renunciation of unity, nor a unity that remains one by becoming plural. Fragmentation is this god himself, that which has no relation whatsoever with a center and cannot be referred to an origin.  

(157)
The Dionysian that fragments or dismembers itself is always exterior to the center, beside itself, repeating its differing and deferring, in its infinite scattering, in the exceeding of interpretation, of writing (écriture).

II. Writing

Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.

—Roland Barthes

Associated mainly with certain French writers such as Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, writing (écriture) is a notion enmeshed in a network of discourses and theories: of the linguistic, of the psychoanalytic, of the phenomenological, of the structuralist and of the post-structuralist. Developed out of the French intellectual background of the 1960s, the term gets transferred, disseminated, and circulated in an ever-expanding territory. It exceeds the confinement of its philosophical and literary contexts and reaches into different fields of thought. It makes people aware of the way in which our identities, our understanding of gender-class-and-race problematics are constructed in language. It also problematizes the representational capacities of language and exposes the impersonality of language and its materiality.

As Christine De Laihacar points out, “Barthes, Derrida and Kristeva unanimously give credit to Maurice Blanchot for having introduced ‘écriture’” (4). However, the contemporary critical use of the notion of writing dates from Roland Barthes’s extension of the meaning of the French term “écriture” in his Writing Degree Zero published in 1953. According to Barthes, writing is an intransitive verb. It insists on the radical intransitivity of the event of writing rather than its aftermath—rather than referential force or object. Writing, in its intransitive modality, gratifies no desire of the author.

7 See Barbara Johnson’s essay “Writing” collected in Critical Terms of Literary Study for reference, pp. 39-49.
From the beginning of his career, Barthes’s tendency to distance the author from what he writes is obvious. For Barthes, it is neither an author nor a narrator who produces literature. Rather, as Barthes argues in *Writing Degree Zero*, it is writing (écriture)—a set of conventions common to a particular era or genre or social group which contributes its meaning to a work without an author’s knowing it, or in spite of his effort to remain free of it. Not self-expression, nor making inwardness visible, writing signals the loss of a transcendental meaning and declares writing as a site divorced from the author, from the activity of its producer. This leads to the thesis Barthes elaborates in “The Death of the Author,” in which he declares the author dead. By the “author,” Barthes means an autonomous subject of knowing who clings to his authority and identity and deems himself the hermeneutic center and origin of meaning, unity, and consistency. The appearance of the author marks a unique moment in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences. For Barthes, “writing” begins only when the author enters into his own death. In the wake of the author’s death, Barthes has proposed a theory of writing:

> Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.  ([Image-Music-Text 142](#))

To write is to enter the impersonal site where only the material and bodily language acts, performs. Writing, thus, desacralizes the image of the author. Without origin, without ultimate meaning, writing is always plural, within a tissue of quotations, a mode of multiple writings. Barthes closes “The Death of the Author” by claiming that the birth of the reader must be at the expense of the death of the author: in other words, to allow the reader unlimited interpretative play, writing must be removed from the author’s control.⁸

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⁸ Cf. Michel Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?”. In this essay, Foucault argues for the author as a function rather than stressing writing as absence and death like Barthes and Blanchot. As Foucault maintains, “It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating (after Nietzsche) that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps by breaches, and what for the openings that his disappearance uncovers” ([FR 105](#)). For Foucault, when we examine the author function, we should pay our due attention not only to the formation of a discursive practice, its initiation and its subsequent heterogeneous transformations, but also to the necessity of the reformation, remodification, redefinition of a certain discursive practice.
Introduced mainly by Blanchot and Barthes, the notion of writing can be epitomized by Nietzsche’s question, “who is speaking?” and Mallarmé’s reply, “what is speaking is, in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness, the word itself—not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarious being” (Foucault, *The Order of Things* 305). The notion of writing becomes an aspect of the post-modernist and post-structuralist attack on origins, on mimesis, on the belief that we can explain anything by referring to where we think it comes from or to processes of cause and effect. At the same time, the notion also implies the impossibility of arriving at a final meaning or interpretation of a text.

This notion owes its subversive and deconstructive power to Nietzsche’s critique of the subject. According to Nietzsche, metaphysics has throughout its history posited a conception of a timeless epistemological subject as the foundation of all knowledge and experience of man and the world. It posits the “I” as metaphysical core, identified as the “self” or the “soul” in religious versions. It is a view that depicts that “I” as an observer, the knower and rational perceiver of a world distinct from what there is to be known, the “object.” This “I” takes for granted a world of cause and effect. For Nietzsche, the subject “I” is always a falsification of interpretation, a doer assigned to the doing, or something invented and projected onto the thought, under the sway of grammar, the structure of subject and predicate. It is inevitably a mask, an imaginary reality acting on the stage of language and words. Nietzsche argues:

> That a thought comes when “it” wishes, and not when “I” wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject “I” is the condition of the predicate “think.” *It* thinks; but that this “it” is only a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an “immediate certainty.” After all, one has even gone too far with this “it thinks”—even the “it” contains an *interpretation* of the process, and does not belong to the process itself. One infers here according to the grammatical habit: “Thinking is an activity; every activity requires an agent: consequently—.” (*BGE* 17)

For Nietzsche, the subject “I” is based on a faith, a very strong belief, which has no certainty whatsoever. Upon critiquing Descartes’ famous formula “I think,” Nietzsche asserts that the fictional unity of a grammatical “I” is essentially constituted by “a multiplicity of subjects” whose continual, transitory and fleeting interactions are the

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him, who is speaking is only a strayed and irrelevant question. What matters is how a discourse comes about, in what mode, through what channel, what subject functions, and under what circumstance.
bases of our thought.\(^9\) The “I” as a first-person subject is not a substance but rather a site of negotiation and a locus of forces (be they material, biological, historical, metaphysical, economical, or ethical). It is a moment by moment reality which is the result of the interaction of active and reactive forces and the struggle of domination and resistance. Nietzsche questions this Cartesian “I” over and over again in his writing and he proposes to use perspectivism to displace this “old conceptual fiction” which occupies the central position in the metaphysical scene. There is no immaculate “I” but only a perspectival knowing. Nietzsche writes in *On the Genealogy of Morals* III, 12:

> Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject;” let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”…. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective “knowing;” and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be.

The “I” as the measure of things is a mere anthropocentric idiosyncrasy which needs to be overcome. To overcome the knowing subject does not mean self-annihilation. On the contrary, to expose, to tear apart the formation of the “I” joyful, full of buoyancy and the Saturnalian sense of Dionysian self-abandonment and self-dismemberment. The gay science of Nietzsche does not so much do away with the “I” as to let it go, drift, wander like the nomad god Dionysus, in the wilderness, in the space between, experiencing not what it is but what it can be. It employs fragmentary writing to multiply the subject, to proliferate the mask, and to put different perspectives into play. The Dionysian “I” is always a carnival, full of incessant voices and constant murmuring, engaging in “the infinite conversation.”\(^10\) In one sense, it wills constant shifts and plays of masks which in turn are expressions of intense affects. In another, the Dionysian “I” wills no mask, because it does not need a mask. It is always already a mask, a mask of the other, of exteriority.

For Blanchot, the Dionysian, bearing on the question of writing (*écriture*) and

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9. See *Will to Power* Section 490.

10. This is the title of Blanchot’s book. For Blanchot, “to write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking…. I bring to this incessant speech the decisiveness, the authority of my own silence. I make perceptible, by my silent mediation, the giant murmuring upon which language opens and this becomes image, becomes imaginary, becomes a speaking depth, an indistinct plenitude which is empty” (*SL* 27).
style, finds its expression in Nietzsche’s fragmentary writing and in his multifarious styles. Blanchot praises the fragmentary writing of Nietzsche and practices this style of writing himself. Blanchot’s predilection is not particularly for writers who leave “complete works” behind them (Flaubert, Balzac) but for those that leave magnificent fragments (Kafka, Nietzsche, Musil) for the future to puzzle over. The break, or rupture, demanded by fragmentary writing, implies a separation from traditional thought which tends to be frozen into systems that give us the illusion of understanding and dominating existence.

Fragmentary writing communicates the Dionysian play of affects and pathos in Nietzsche. As Nietzsche himself remarks on the interlinking relationship between pathos and the art of styles,

To communicate a state, an inward tension of pathos, by means of signs, including the tempo of these signs—that is the meaning of every style; and considering that the multiplicity of inward states is exceptionally large in my case, I have many stylistic possibilities—the most multifarious art of style that has ever been at the disposal of one man. (EH, “Why I Write such Good Books” 4)

This passage clearly shows Nietzsche’s own understanding of his histrionic talent in staging his manifold affective inward states in styles. Every twist and turn of pathos is a change of style. Thus conflicting attitudes and diverse states of mind (amor fati, will to power, the eternal recurrence, ressentiment, decadence, ubermensch, gaiety and seriousness, master and slave morality) voiced alternately in the form of flashes of insight, aphoristic expressions and proclamations, rather than the rigorous definitions of terms, sustained logical analysis and proofs of the ultimate nature of things such as appear in the form of philosophical discourses, become the characteristic marks of Nietzsche’s writings.

Dionysian writing, characterized by Nietzsche’s fragmentary style, has always maintained a distinctive dynamism. A Nietzschean fragment is not just a morsel of thought; it is thought in relation to other thoughts, a differential fragment of thought which changes and creates its meaning in different contexts. A fragment radically transforms the image of thought. It turns itself into an art of interpretation and evaluation. Moment by moment, incomplete and yet intensely poetic, a fragment is able to respond to every turn of thought, pathos, and affect. Although in form it is
insufficient and unfinished, fragmentary writing is always more, affirming nothing but this plus, this surplus of meaning and signification.

As for Blanchot, fragmentary writing, exemplifying Dionysian fragmentation and differential exuberance, is always a disaster. It is both writing as disaster and to write disastrously, in addition, in excess, in pieces. Writing as disaster is linked to the limit-experience, which is beyond description. It pushes things to the limit, including the limit of writing itself:

The disaster, unexperienced. It is what escapes the very possibility of experience—it is the limit of writing. This must be repeated: the disaster de-scribes. Which does not mean that the disaster as the force of writing, is excluded from it, is beyond the pale of writing or extratextual. (WD 7)

The disaster of the writing is also the metamorphosis from the personal “I” (je) to the impersonal “he” or “it” (il) of writing. The “I” who writes exposes himself/itself to the experience of impossibility in which writing becomes his/its source and its own source through him/it. The “I” who writes finds that he/it can write not by exercising personal will, but by discovering what the experience of writing compels him/it to write with all the fascination of the disaster. The “I” who writes is ruptured, fragmented, by the swerve of violence into the solitary space of literature. This is not simply an “other” space, but other than any space, radically indeterminate, both spatially interminable and temporally incessant. As Blanchot writes, “Writing is the interminable, the incessant. The writer, it is said, gives up saying ‘I’” (SL 26). No one can dwell in this space of literature, in this writing of the Dionysian, without being lost in the ecstasy of madness or in “the fascination of time’s absence” (SL 30), which, as Blanchot elaborates, “is not a purely negative mode. It is the time when nothing begins, when initiative is not impossible, when, before the affirmation, there is already a return of affirmation” (SL 30).

Ecstasy, death, outside and transgression (all in a sovereign and absolute sense) are the constant themes of writing. The “Dionysianization” of writing perceived by Blanchot is also shared by Bataille. In Inner Experience, Bataille talks about the experience of ecstasy which is a fleeting, furtive experience of felicity, of active forgetting. The writing of the Dionysian partakes in this diffuse and intense plenitude of
the inner movement, “detesting the servility of discourse” (IE 113). The universal and domesticated “I” undergoes its ecstatic sliding, drowning itself in “an empty indefinite expanse” (IE 120). The ecstatic “I” writes only the exorbitant “IT” (IE 125), unknown and disturbing at the limit of discourse which betrays what it communicates. In the essay “From Restricted to General Economy,” Derrida calls this writing “the writing of sovereignty” (WD 270), which opposes itself to “the writing of lordship” (WD 265). The writing of sovereignty exceeds and puts at stake the writing of lordship and its servility by creating “the space of writing” (WD 266) which “neither can nor may be inscribed in the nucleus of the concept itself” (WD 267). Writing, thus, is a (non)concept that defies inscription within a given set of concepts. Bearing in itself its own process of effacement and cancellation, it deviates from the subordination of logos to meaning, to mastery and presence. Through its violent operation, writing places itself in relation to an absolute non-savoir. It is the absolute excess of every epistémè, of all philosophy and of all science.

The writing of sovereignty that creates “the space of writing” is also a rhizomatic style of writing proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus. For D & G, to write is to construct a rhizome, to increase territory by deterritorialization, to use traits and cutting edges to form relays, to partake in affect-multiplicities as a series of flows, energies, movements and capacities, and to extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire “plane of consistency.” Like the nomad thought that serves as relays, linking thought to thought in a rhizomatic space, the rhizomatic style of writing is interested in making connections, in branching out straggling offshoots, and in charting the arborescent relation. As Deleuze and Guattari write, “writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come” (TP 5).

III. The Writing of the Dionysian

It is through the writing of the Dionysian that Nietzsche and post-Kojèvian French
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 intellects cross-fertilize each other. Involved in web-like rhizomatic interaction and interconnectedness, the writing of the Dionysian is allied to an overwhelmingly exuberant existence—the Nietzschean “gay science,” the Barthean “writing degree zero,” the Artaudian “Body without Organs,” the Blanchotian “space of literature,” the Bataillean “visions of excess,” the Foucauldian “outside thought,” the Deleuzian and Guattarian “rhizome,” and Derridean “arche-writing”—and fights the same foes—the Cartesian, the Kantian, the Hegelian, etc.

In writing about “The Writing of the Dionysian,” the signifying nature of language falters. Born of an interpretive textual practice, the “Writing of the Dionysian” inscribes, reinscribes, and disseminates itself in “the Mystic Writing Pad”11 and charts “a nomad space.” It puts concepts at risk in the labyrinth of words, of metaphors. “The Writing of the Dionysian,” neither Nietzsche nor the new Nietzsche thinkers nor “I,” is that which writes excessively within the scene of (post)modern critical theory. Its itinerary tour in the textual rhizome marks the radicalized Derridean “trace” which “is the erasure of selfhood, of one’s own presence, and is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance” (WD 230). “The Writing of the Dionysian” can only be described in a language of traces, repetitions and differences, and performed in a space of gaps, margins, spacings, figures, digressions, discontinuities, paradoxes, ambiguities, and physical marks within texts. Writing that exceeds the classical opposition between self-present speech and mere written signs is writing as Dionysian, the Dionysian writing, “The Writing of the Dionysian,” and the excess of its own interpretation.

Works Cited


11 Freud compares the unconscious to a “Mystic Writing Pad,” a device involving a stylus and waxed paper which enabled inscriptions to be preserved in a latent or invisible form long after they had apparently been erased from its surface. Derrida considers this device is “a good metaphor for representing the working of the psyche” and psychical writing. See Derrida’s article “Freud and the Scene of Writing” in Writing and Difference, pp. 196-231.


About the Author