he dancer’s arms flail desperately as she dances with all of her might in the clan’s ritual. She repeatedly whirls about worshipping the Earth in what she knows will be her final performance. Her hindmost leap sends her plummeting towards the ground in a lifeless heap. The members of the clan quickly catch her, lift her up, and rejoice in the blessings of spring that can now pour forth because of her sacrifice.

This climactic scene from Igor Stravinsky’s 1913 ballet *The Rite of Spring*, with its radical plot and dissonant chords, caused a public riot at its premiere in Paris. Why all the fuss? Much of the historical significance of this piece lies in its controversial interpretation. Is the dancer’s sacrifice a beautiful expression of emotion? Or is it a horrific example of collective violence? Could it possibly be both? Twentieth-century sociologist Theodor Adorno criticizes the ballet and associates it with fascism, the form of political oppression that led to the Nazi regime (“What National Socialism Has Done…” 378-379). Adorno believes that fascism thrives in an atmosphere of positivism, the belief that scientific objectivity is the only form of truth. Positivism supports the idea that “seeing is believing” and encourages an impersonal outlook on life. Modern Germany, says Adorno, seems to have adopted this philosophy of scientific Truth to the exclusion of spiritual beliefs and humanistic art as expressions of Truth: “The tie between the idea of humanism, of music as an art, and the actual outward and inward life of the people, was definitely broken [under Hitler]” (“What National Socialism Has Done…” 379).

According to Adorno, Stravinsky’s ballet supports positivism by presenting the ritual of collective violence in a dispassionate manner through the dancer’s sacrifice (*Philosophy of New Music* 111). Adorno is right that we need to be able to step back from a simplistic faith that “seeing is believing” and embrace the beauty of a more elemental Truth. But I believe that *The Rite of Spring* is beneficial to society because it affirms the priority of spiritual beliefs in communal life. The dancers are celebrating the Earth and are willing to sacrifice everything for their beliefs. Even though their sacrifice of the virgin may at first seem inhumane, there is beauty in their complete release from inhibition, issuing in a strange mixture of cruelty and liberation that can only be explained through the concept of tragedy.

Tragic Art is True Art in Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*
by Emily Cole

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The sketch of Igor Stravinsky drawn by Pablo Picasso, dated December 31, 1920. This sketch was published in the program for the 14th season of the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre de la Gaîté-Lyrique in Paris, 1921.
In order to gain a better understanding of tragedy, we must examine Friedrich Nietzsche's distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian art. Nietzsche, a nineteenth-century philosopher, compares the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus as different art forms. He describes Apollo as having a dream-like quality, inferring that Apollonian art is highly visual. Nietzsche states that we prefer this visual art form because “we take pleasure in the direct understanding of form, all shapes speak to us, there is nothing indifferent or superfluous,” implying that humans are visual, structured creatures who like things to be organized and straightforward (20). This need for order applies to The Rite of Spring because the original spectators of the ballet were living in an Apollonian state of mind. They were used to the music of composers such as Beethoven, which was structured and filled with perfectly blending harmonies. As a result, the awkward clashes and movements of The Rite of Spring came as quite a shock to the audience. They did not know how to appreciate this new style of music.

The opposite of Apollonian art is known as Dionysian art. Nietzsche describes how Dionysian art is expressed through music and dance. The artist must channel all emotions into his or her art, unconstrained by conventional forms. Dionysian art expresses a deeply held communal desire for rejuvenation in the relations between man and man, as well the relations between man and nature. Noting the dynamism of such art, Nietzsche asserts that “in order to grasp this complete unleashing of all symbolic forces, man must already have reached that height of self-abandonment which seeks to express itself symbolically through those forces” (26). In order to fully appreciate music, one must “let loose” of all inhibitions and lose oneself in a collective state of ecstasy. Nietzsche claims that “under the spell of the Dionysian it is not only the bond between man and man which is re-established: nature in its estranged, hostile, or subjugated forms also celebrates its reconciliation with its prodigal son, man” (22). When a community breaks free of its own estrangement from the rhythms of nature and comes together in celebration, a special connection is made that cannot otherwise be achieved. In The Rite of Spring, Stravinsky stages both a liberation from inhibitions and a development of communal solidarity through his use of chaotic chords to match the chaotic ritual of a virgin dancing herself to death for the good of all.

Though Apollonian and Dionysian art may be regarded as complete opposites, no work of art can purely be one or the other. Nietzsche calls the complete fusion of these two forces a “tragedy,” which “is witness to the strength of that dual artistic drive of nature” (Nietzsche 19, 39). Tragedy expresses an innate artistic desire for humans to incorporate both Apollonian and Dionysian aspects into their work and lives. Take the example of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. Romeo and Juliet are two young people wholly in love, yet kept apart by their families. The feuding families have strived for years to remain separated, and have thus maintained an Apollonian sense of order in their social arrangements. However, when the uncontrollable passion that Romeo and Juliet have for one another forces them together, their union expresses a Dionysian sense of community and release of inhibition. The chaos that ensues, including the self-sacrifice of both lovers, exemplifies Nietzsche’s tragedy. But from this chaos rises what is generally considered to be one of the greatest love stories of all time. This example demonstrates the beauty that can result from the mixture of Dionysian and Apollonian art. Nietzsche believes that it is through the combination of Dionysian and Apollonian that true art is formed: “the genuine song is the imprint of the mixed and divided feelings of this emotional state” (37), with the emotional state being the blending of abstract ideas (Dionysian) and rational order (Apollonian). To translate a Dionysian emotion, you must be able to express it in an Apollonian manner.

Theodor Adorno’s idea of positivism is closely linked with the interpretation of Apollo-
nian art. Positivism is the belief that if something cannot be proven by scientific evidence then it does not exist, and thus could be considered an Apollonian “visual” point of view. Adorno feels this belief became widespread as a result of “the decultivation of the German middle classes, demonstrated in the field of music but noticeable in every aspect of German life” (“What National Socialism Has Done…” 376). He also states that younger generations have lost their sense of familial and moral values, meaning they have lost sight of what is important to living a well-balanced life, including an appreciation of the arts. They no longer enjoy listening to serious music and would rather waste time listening to commercialized music that is produced for the masses and has no fundamental values or meaning. Adorno believes that “musical knowledge and understanding has become the privilege of experts and professionals” (“What National Socialism Has Done…” 376). As the arts have developed into a meaningless form of entertainment, the German people’s focus has drifted to the sciences in search of universal Truth, and “the relationship between art and truth has been profoundly affected” (“What National Socialism Has Done…” 377).

This exclusive trust in science has resulted in the disregarding of beauty and validity in artistic expression. Stravinsky tries to bring this beauty to light in The Rite of Spring by expressing the importance of spirituality and passion in society. In the ballet, the pagan clan worships Mother Nature. This emotional bond between earth and human cannot be proven by scientific methods (though positivism might suggest otherwise), but the ties are there nonetheless. This visceral connection is evident in the BBC documentary Riot at the Rite, which documents the steps of the ballet’s creation from production to premiere. In the ballet itself, the clan’s jerky movements are not always synchronized, which indicates that they truly celebrate and worship the Earth in all its chaotic vitality. For example, members of the clan gather in circles at the beginning of the ballet. They jump to the beat, but each member dances slightly differently, and they do not always jump at the same time. The individuality of their motions suggests that the dance holds a different meaning to each of them. The awkward positions of their hands and feet only add to the emotional impact of the dance. If they danced in the connected and visually appealing— or Apollonian— way that normal ballet dancers do, then the dance would lose its raw purity. There is beauty in the individual freedom of their movements, their communal desire to worship Mother Nature, and their faith that She will provide for them. Believing solely by faith is the basis of all spirituality, and it is important for us as a society to realize the significance of holding convictions without scientific proof.

Although this may seem like a simple enough idea, Nietzsche explains the complexities of convictions rooted in Dionysian emotion. He claims that it is nearly impossible for a musician to properly transcribe his true feelings into a piece of music. He thinks the transition from an abstract Dionysian state of mind to a rational Apollonian state of being is difficult—and often painful— process. Jacques Riviere, a 1913 supporter of The Rite of Spring, further explains this dilemma: “A musician always has several things to say at the same time, and because he wants to say them all in their proper place, in their very dispersion, his work ceases to be a solid, a compact center sending its rays round about” (128). Riviere believes that Stravinsky’s music is so hectic because there are so many concepts swimming inside of his head, and that he struggled to express his emotions “in their proper place” through music. The instruments represent these different concepts and emotions competing to be heard and are constant flurries of change in communication. This fluidity of motion is why the music cannot retain “a solid, compact center.” By ceasing to exist as a clear, Apollonian structure, the music
seems to take on a Dionysian form through its new freedom of expression.

Riviere immediately goes on to compare such a musician to “a general who presses the enemy hard at its three or four strongest points at the same time... he attacks the subject at all its essential points” (Riviere 128). This military metaphor aptly captures the intensity of music. By attacking with “three or four [strong] points at the same time,” a musician is able to clearly separate his feelings into different parts of his music. Yet while this military metaphor accurately describes Stravinsky’s ballet, Adorno would absolutely despise such a comparison. The idea of an army general going into battle is comparable to the collective violence demonstrated in the sacrifice of the virgin. He claims that The Rite of Spring shows “an antihuman sacrifice to the collective: a sacrifice without tragedy, offered up not to the dawning image of man but rather to the blind confirmation of a situation that the victim affirms either through self-mockery or self-annihilation” (Philosophy of New Music 111). Adorno believes that this communal sacrifice has numbed the clan to violence, which goes hand in hand with his fear of a fascist society.

Adorno might criticize Riviere’s concept of constant flurries of change in communication in that such a method of musical expression only results in a fragmented, choppy product with no continuous pattern. He complains of Stravinsky’s music: “problems of form, in the sense of a forward-moving whole, no longer occur at all” (Philosophy of New Music 115). Charging Stravinsky with a failed attempt at a developing idea betrays an anti-Dionysian sense of his music. Adorno further claims that by “attacking the subject” and “articulating” the different parts of the piece through specific instruments, Stravinsky imparts to the music a definite tone and little else. Stravinsky himself described his choice of instruments in tonal terms: “I have brought forward the wind instruments which have a drier tone, which are more precise” (Stravinsky 525). This matter-of-fact representation of music goes right along with Adorno’s idea of positivism. Such a fragmented and choppy piece of music, thought

Dancers in costume on the set of the 1913 production of Rite of Spring. The costumes and backdrop were designed by Nicholas Roerich. The dancers, from left to right, are Julitska, Ramberg (Marie Rambert), Jejerska, Boni, Boniecka, and Faithful.
Adorno, cannot successfully explore the universal Truths commonly expressed in art.

Although Stravinsky’s music may seem to hold no specific pattern, I believe that it fully expresses what he wishes it to say through its fluid, if discordant, communication, thus representing Nietzsche’s fusion of Dionysian and Apollonian art. It represents the confusion inside of Stravinsky’s head and his painful attempt to turn his ideas into music. When he succeeds in transferring his abstract ideas into something concrete, he gives his music that mixed feeling of both art forms.

Nietzsche believes that when art is a mixture of both Dionysian and Apollonian, then the meaning of everything becomes more subjective and blurry. This merely adds to the “pain” of art, as manifest in Stravinsky’s attempt at visualizing music. In order to better describe this pain in the fusion of Dionysian and Apollonian art, let us again use the example of Romeo and Juliet. Everything the young couple did was out of love and raw emotion, even up to their deaths. They were not thinking about the good or harm that might come out of their actions. Romeo and Juliet were only thinking about each other and each moment’s emotions. Their all-consuming love for one another led them to give up everything they knew to be together. The couple’s overwhelming despair at losing each other drove them to drastic measures. This beautiful expression of love and sacrifice has a Dionysian ring to it. Nevertheless, it is easy to see the story through an Apollonian point of view. Two teenagers who kill themselves in the heat of passion do not make for very good role models and is not an appropriate message to broadcast to the young. As Romeo and Juliet tragically demonstrate, the paradoxical blend of Dionysian and Apollonian elements reaches to the painful complexity of the human predicament.

This paradox of tragedy clearly emerges in the “Dance of Consecration” — or the dancer’s solo — in The Rite of Spring (Stravinsky 525). According to Nietzsche, humankind’s communal nature is represented through Dionysian art. We are willing to sacrifice our individuality for the greater good, with everyone working together towards a common goal. The ballet itself focuses on the communal desire to sacrifice a virgin to the earth. Yet Adorno claims that Stravinsky conveys the “Dance of Consecration” in such a straightforward and impersonal manner that the sacrifice ceases to be about human emotion. In Philosophy of New Music, Adorno criticizes the solo dancer in The Rite of Spring and believes that, upon closer inspection, the “individual” in the ballet is not as distinct as one might think. He claims that the audience cannot relate to her as an individual and that her dance does nothing to reveal her inner struggle with the sacrifice she is making. It focuses purely on the whole, with no insight to her development as a character. He believes that “nothing of her as an individual is reflected except the unconscious and accidental reflex of pain” (Philosophy of New Music 119). The audience feels forced to agree with the community’s decision to sacrifice the girl because the plot focuses so much on the collective. This ties in with Adorno’s fears of the dangers of collective violence: “… if the viewer does not simply enjoy the liquidation of the young girl, he empathizes with the collective and … thereby imagines participating in the collective force in magical regression” (Philosophy of New Music 119). In other words, the audience supports the clan’s decision to sacrifice the virgin because they see the higher cause, thus numbing them to the horrific violence taking place onstage.

But Adorno’s interpretation focuses on the audience and overlooks the personal reaction of the solo dancer. In the BBC documentary Riot at the Rite, the soloist’s dance is portrayed as that of a scared teenager who knows what she must do yet tries to resist it. In this scene, you can see how she tries to escape the circle multiple times, but she is always forced back into it. She pleads to her surrounding clan members to help her out of this
hopeless situation. Both dance and music become increasingly frantic and desperate as they approach the dramatic end. The dancer’s movements become sloppier as she exhaustively continues the “Dance of Consecration.” The music continues to build upon itself by adding more drums about halfway through the scene. This adds a foreboding sense of finality to the performance. The soloist collapses to the ground several times out of fatigue, but she displays determination by getting up and continuing to dance. These characteristics exemplify Nietzsche’s paradox of tragedy in the battle between community and individuality. While the dancer knows that she must sacrifice herself to the community, she as an individual wants to fight and be free of the communal bond.

The Rite of Spring is widely considered to be a Dionysian piece because it is filled with such dissonance. However, when examined at its compositional level, we realize that it is a mere facade of true Dionysian art. Adorno’s description of its direct form of expression makes it objective and seemingly Apollonian. Yet The Rite of Spring is not true Apollonian art, either. Rather, it is a perfect example of Nietzsche’s definition of tragedy. The moral battles between religion and self-annihilation that surround the sacrifice of the ballet are Dionysian, while the musical composition and visual presentation of the ballet are Apollonian.

In Adorno’s opinion, we need more Dionysian music to break the chain of positivism in society. He explains that the avant-garde, Dionysian artists, originally had a negative reputation in that they strayed too far from conventional music. Adorno asserts that it was in fact the avant-garde who “kept faith to Beethoven’s humanism by expressing in an undiluted way the sufferings, the anguish, the fear, under which we live today... It has thus maintained the link between music and philosophical truth” (“What National Socialism Has Done...” 380). By expressing raw emotion, Dionysian music frees the audience from the straightforward, orderly style of living that Fascism imposed. Adorno believes that it is this music that “regains its real dignity by purifying it from all the remnants of romanticism which today are nothing but empty pretenses,” so that by cutting through all the clutter of conventional art, the artist is able to get to the heart of the matter (“What National Socialism Has Done...” 380). Although The Rite of Spring no longer fits in this category of true Dionysian art, I still feel that the ballet is a perfect illustration of the kind of tragic art we need to challenge our current state of positivism. Nietzsche’s concept of tragedy—the complicated blending of Dionysian and Apollonian art—shows that Apollonian art does not have to be positivistic. The Rite of Spring’s focus on spirituality and common roots reminds us that we are all human. We all come from the same place. And within each of us, the Dionysian and the Apollonian are not mutually exclusive. This kind of knowledge could undo the damage created by positivism and demolish the misconception that art must be separated into two forms, or that people must be separated into two camps.

Works Cited