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PHL2084

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May 28 2021

**“The Fear of Breakdown” and The Dionysian Or: How Frederick Nietzsche Learned to Stop Fearing and Love the Dionysian**

In this paper I will give a Nietzschean account of the fear of breakdown and its relationship with the Dionysian. The application and theorization of Frederick Nietzsche’s work on the field of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis is immense.[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead of applying Nietzsche’s work to the field of psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, I aim to apply psychoanalytic concepts to Nietzsche to produce a new reading of Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian. I do not aim to intervene in the discourse of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis through Nietzsche. Instead, I want to show how applying concepts from psychotherapy and psychoanalysis can give us a better understanding of Nietzsche’s relationship with emotions and ego-loss. By examining Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian as presented in *The Birth of the Tragedy* through D.W. Winnicott’s notion of the fear of a breakdown, we get an interpretation of Nietzsche’s work that reads Nietzsche in terms of ego-formation, ego-disruption and emotional processing. D.W. Winnicott, an English psychoanalyst, defines a breakdown as a collapse of ego. Similarly, Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian describes a dissolution of ego boundaries in a subject. However, whereas D.W. Winnicott explores how the breakdown incites fear in his patients, Nietzsche describes the experience of the Dionysian as the overwhelming joy of an existence without the *principium indivuationis*—the principle that creates our sense of being individuals. In this way, the stakes of reading Nietzsche through the fear of breakdown is that doing so determines how open Nietzsche’s Dionysus is to those who are not instantaneously swept away by his intoxication. Is Dionysus only a friend to the strong-willed or can someone who fears him join his company? Though we find some answers in *The Birth of the Tragedy* to the problem of working through difficult experiences that result from a Dionysian state, a more fleshed out answer can be produced by looking at later Nietzschean concepts. By applying Bernard Reginster’s reading of Nietzsche’s will to power in *The Affirmation of Life*—where he states that the will to power is overcoming resistance to actualize a first-order desire—we can see how Nietzsche will respond to a fear of breakdown. For Nietzsche, overcoming the fear of breakdown goes hand-in-hand with the overwhelming joy of the Dionysian. Fear is not something to repress but something to overcome to embody Dionysian joy. We can push Reginster’s claims about overcoming resistance even further by looking at passages in “Book IV – Sanctus Januarius” of *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche claims to be grateful to his plights and misfortunes as they allow him to affirm life even more. Overall, analyzing a Nietzchean response to the fear of breakdown produces a psychologically-grounded reading of Nietzsche focused around the experience of joy in difficult situations and the revaluation of difficult emotions such as fear.

In “Fear of Breakdown,” D.W. Winnicott defines the breakdown as “a failure of a defence organization,” specifically, the “breakdown of the establishment of the unit self” (103). That is, the breakdown is the loss of an ego, of our sense of self. At the same time, the ego organizes itself to defend against a breakdown (103): for someone with a fear of breakdown, their ego is created as a defense against having a breakdown. The ego *fears* the breakdown but it is also created as a defense against what lies behind the breakdown.

For D.W. Winnicott, what lies behind the breakdown is a failure to process a primitive agony: the fear of the breakdown is “the fear of the original [primitive] agony” (104). This primitive agony is what a patient is protecting their ego from experiencing. The way they protect against that primitive agony often takes the form of “an illness syndrome” (104). He list a few examples of what primitive agonies are:

“(1) A return to an unintegrated state. (Defence: disintegration.)

(2) Falling for ever. (Defence: self-holding.)

(3) Loss of psychosomatic collusion, failure of indwelling. (Defence: depersonalization.)

(4) Loss of sense of real. (Defence: exploitation of primary narcissism, etc.)

(5) Loss of capacity to relate to objects. (Defence: autistic states, relating only to self-phenomena.” (104).

For D.W. Winnicott, the fear of breakdown is not a universal condition of humanity, but the result of one’s own personal history and traumas, “related to the individual’s past experience, and to environmental vagaries” (103). Some patients might experience it, while others may not (103). Clare Winnicott, D.W. Winnicott’s wife, gives an example of her patient Miss K, a successful musician who fell into a depression with a coinciding fear of breakdown in “Fear of Breakdown: A Clinical Example.” At the age of 2½, Miss K was left by her father and neglected by her mother as World War II began (C. Winnicott 353). She organized her ego to protect herself from “the trauma resulting from the complete disintegration of her world [the loss of parents and the trauma of war]” (353) by becoming a successful music student. Clare Winnicott points out that Miss Kencapsulates the primitive agony of “*falling for ever:* the defence against which is self-holding” (353).[[2]](#footnote-2) Everyone may experience a primitive agony during their development, but they will not organize their egos to protect themselves against that agony. For example, we may all have had a fear of falling forever with no ground in sight (it is a common nightmare for many of us)—however, most of us are able to process that feeling of forever falling because our caregiver provided us a safe enough environment where we could integrate such an agony into a healthy conception of our ego. Meanwhile, Miss K experienced this primitive agony at an age before her ego was fully formed and was not in a nourishing enough environment that allowed her to process that feeling. As a result, she organized her ego by protecting herself from the feeling of falling forever by self-holding. Specifically, she used her music as an anchor to stabilize her ego: “[music] provided the only continuity that she knew, and enabled her to function somehow in spite of the unpredictability and deprivation to which she was subjected” (355). In other words, Miss K was afraid of having a breakdown because she thought that if she lost her self she would be stuck endlessly falling. Her fear became the building blocks of her ego, which derived its sense of continuity from her music-playing as a defence of self-holding.

The point of working through the fear of the breakdown would be to re-organize the ego such that the patient can be more comfortable with themselves. In Miss K’s case, she found she was stuck trying to follow up her successful debut as a solo performer because “the fear of forgetting [her pieces] and breaking down was overwhelming” (C. Winnicott 355). Her music became her defence from the primitive agony she never fully worked through to the point where, if she failed at her music, she felt like she would have a breakdown.

Working through this fear of breakdown would mean to recognize “*the fear of a breakdown…* has already been experienced” (D.W. Winnicott 104). The analyst must tell the patient “that the breakdown, a fear of which destroys his or her life, *has already been*” (104). We have a primitive agony we fear, and that fear manifests in certain defences which make our egos the way they are. With the fear of the breakdown, we are simultaneously afraid of our defences breaking down but also afraid of the primary agony. Thus, an ego that fears the breakdown fears the loss of one’s ego but also builds its ego around defences against a breakdown. The breakdown already happened, that is why the ego organizes itself around defending against a future breakdown. Miss K, who was afraid of feeling like she was constantly falling, *already* experienced that falling as an infant. Yet, the patient cannot “remember” the experience because they were not a fully formed ego when they experienced the primitive agony (105). This state existed in the patient “hidden away in the unconscious” (104), which means for D.W. Winnicott, “that the ego integration is not able to encompass something” (104); that is, they have not fully understood/processed that event in their life. The analyst would bring that primitive agony into consciousness and help the patient re-experience the primitive agony. In re-experiencing the thing they are afraid of, the patient will discover their own capacity to survive a breakdown (D.W. Winnicott 105), thereby allowing them to conquer their fears. The patient who fears the breakdown “fear[s] to find what is being compulsively looked for in the future” (105)—Miss K was afraid of the future because she was afraid of messing up her music and triggering a breakdown (C. Winnicott 355). But by re-experiencing the breakdown she could understand that she had already survived the breakdown as an infant without being destroyed by it. Miss K would not have to be afraid of failing at music and thereby breaking down because she could have confidence that *even if she failed and broke down*, she would survive the experience. Of course, the analyst does not throw the patient into a traumatic situation; instead, they gradually ease the patient (D.W. Winnicott 105) into the experience they are afraid of, so the patient can learn to overcome their fears. Instead of fearing that the breakdown will happen in the future, the patient will realize that the breakdown is happening in the therapy room and that they, the patient, are doing just well by surviving it.

It is here where our investigation of Nietzsche can start. In reading Nietzsche through the fear of the breakdown, we get a generative interpretative framework to reading early Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* alongside middle and late period Nietzsche.[[3]](#footnote-3) We see that Dionysian states involve a Winnicottian breakdown, and that examining the role of fear in breakdowns in *The Birth of Tragedy* presents a reading of Nietzsche grounded in the revaluation of emotions. Although it might appear that the Dionysian is reserved for the exceptional few, reading Nietzsche’s later works onto *The Birth of Tragedy* shows us that the Dionysian is open to the fearful who want to join his company.

In *The Birth of Tragedy,* Nietzsche argues that two oppositional powers, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, shaped Hellenic theatre. Nietzsche’s interest in dissolving the boundaries between art and reality drives him to assert that these organizing forces not only shape theatre, but describe the world itself. Indeed, *The Birth of Tragedy* is not only an analysis of Greek tragedy, but an early Nietzsche’s metaphysics which makes claims about the forces that drive the world.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Apollonian is what organizes the world of appearances—it sculpts and gives form to reality (19). Underlying the Apollonian is the *principium indivuationis*—a concept from Arthur Schopenhauer which states the will to life ends up creating the individual as an agent who acts in their own self-preservation (*The Birth of Tragedy* 21). For Nietzsche, the Apollonian is “the apotheosis of the *principium indiviuationis*” (31)—it is the artistic power that posits that by “drawing boundaries between [man]” (58), “the whole world of torment” can be brought to rest “through appearance” (31). In other words, the Apollonian creates the barriers between the individual and the world; in doing this, it creates a world of appearances that the individual can perceive. By fact that the Apollonian creates limits, it also organizes reality through moderation. To navigate the world as an individual requires a degree of repressing the excess sensations of the world, producing a moderate and structured view of reality. Instead of letting reality be wildly chaotic, the Apollonian instills an order to appearances, making appearance graspable to the individual, who is also created by the Apollonian.

Contrast that to the Dionysian, which is chaotic, imageless, musical and intoxicating (*Birth of Tragedy* 19). The “moderation” of the Apollonian is replaced with the zeal of Dionysian intoxication. The Dionysian emerges through “the collapse of the *principium individuationis*” (22)—that is, it describes the state where “the cognitive forms” of the world begin to “break down” (22). The Dionysian bursts forward as an “intoxicated reality” which not only “pays no heed to the individual” but in fact “even seeks to annihilate the individual” (23). Thus, the Dionysian is a breakdown of our world of appearances, a breakdown of the borders between the individual and the world. The Dionysian is a loss of the self, an ego-death, it is an “annihilation of the usual limits and borders of existence” (46). For Schopenhauer, this collapse of the self is a “tremendous *horror*” (22)—a sentiment shared by those who fear a breakdown. Yet, Nietzsche calls this Dionysian annihilation an “ecstasy” (46). Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche describes the Dionysian in terms of intense pleasure: he pronounces the Dionysian process as “orgiastic self-annihilation” (115). Nietzsche writes about how once the Apollonian principle of moderation is done away with, “the ecstatic sound of the Dionysian celebration” can resound in a scream of the “*excess* of nature in pleasure, pain, and knowledge” (32). The Dionysian, thus, is not pure pleasure, but excessive sensation, which is *orgiastic*.

An example of a pleasurable Dionysian state would be a musician intoxicated by playing music. This musician would disappear into the music. Their sense of self would evaporate in the movements of the song, becoming one with the music that they are playing. The pleasure of playing would come from letting their mind disappear into the music and letting their body disappear into their instrument.

One should note that Nietzsche is not advocating for us to become pure Dionysians. The Dionysian and the Apollonian, though in opposition to each other, still need each other. Nietzsche calls the bond between the two as “a fraternal bond between both deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo, and Apollo finally speaks the language of Dionysus” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 117). The Dionysian “*needs* at the same time the delightful vision, the pleasurable appearance, for its continual redemption [the Apollonian]” (30, my emphasis): the two go hand and hand. If one experienced the Dionysus without the Apollonian redemption, they might “suddenly shatter into pieces” (113)—their “miserable shell of human individuality” could not “endure the echo of countless cries of pleasure and woe” (114) of the Dionysian.[[5]](#footnote-5) One may wonder why Dionysus needs to speak the language of Apollo, or why the excess of reality and the breakdown of borders between self and world needs to be translated back into the world of appearances and individuality. To this, we can look at Nietzsche’s statement “that he [Dionysus] *appears at all* with such epic certainty and clarity is the effect of Apollo” (59, my emphasis). Once the individual has been broken down, there is no individual to reflect upon sensations. It would not make sense to say “I” experience a great joy in Dionysian excess if Dionysian excess results in my “I” disappearing. As a result, the Dionysian creates a “fraternal bond” with the Apollonian *principium individuationis* and allows an “I” to *appear* in order to reflect and appreciate the joyful existence of the Dionysian. We can see this in the example of the musician. On the one hand, they have dissolved into the music itself, but on the other hand, there is also a sense of a self playing the music that is aware of the world of appearances: this self is what (1) experiences the joy of playing music (2) prevents the musician from randomly hitting notes and (3) allows the individual to reflect on the experience of playing music after the fact as a positive experience. The “I” that appears in this Dionysian state, however, is a markedly different “I” than the “I” that is writing a philosophy paper—this “I” is not concerned with abstract theoretical problems, but exists in connection with sensations around it. In the end, the Dionysian state teaches us lessons we bring back to our lived experience in the world of appearances, thereby enriching the entirety of our existence.

Significantly, the underlying metaphysical claim Nietzsche makes through the Dionysian is that the abyss of existence is joyful. While D.W. Winnicott will not state whether there are any positive aspects to the breakdown, Nietzsche will express an intense optimism for the Dionysian, stating that “life at the bottom of things, in spite of the passing of phenomena, remains indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 45). He will express a similar sentiment again by claiming that the Dionysian “reveals to us again and again the playful construction and destruction of the individual world as the overflow of an original joy” (129). Both these statements pose a problem: if the breakdown of the self is overflowing with “an original joy” (129), then everyone who has a breakdown should be bustling with joy in the face of it. But, as seen from D.W. Winnicott’s work and in day-to-day life, some people who have breakdowns become traumatized. Though one form of the Dionysian breakdown may be joyful, such as the case of the musician intoxicated by their music, another, such as a bad trip on psychoactive drugs, may be intensely unpleasurable. Matters get even more complicated when we consider that Dionysian activities are not one-to-one with a joyful breakdown. One musician may reach a Dionysian breakdown through music, but another musician, such as Miss K, may have a relationship with music such that they would *fear* this very Dionysian state. For Miss K, music would be Apollonian insofar as it is the mechanism that would keep her sense of self intact. Miss K had a “fear of forgetting” (C. Winnicott 354) because “forgetting”—either herself, or the music—meant forever falling into the abyss of existence.[[6]](#footnote-6) Someone like Miss K might fear that once they remove the individual, they will forever fall into a “chasm of oblivion” (*Birth of Tragedy* 46).

To respond to the “fear” of the “breakdown,” Nietzsche will “recognize how everything which comes into being must be prepared for a painful demise” and that “we are forced to peer into the terrors of individual existence” (*Birth of Tragedy* 91). Ultimately, “the struggle, the agony, the annihilation of phenomena” is “necessary to us” in order to remove the “countless forms of existence which crowd and push their way into life” (91). For Nietzsche, the Dionysian involves a breakdown of ego, but it is not limited to this breakdown. A breakdown always occurs in context: whereas a Winnicottian patient might be afraid that the breakdown is *the end,* Nietzsche shows that the breakdown is only one part of the experience of the Dionysian. The Dionysian involves a breakdown that leads to a breakthrough of joy for existence. An initial displeasure in the breakdown of the individual must occur, but this agony is necessary to remove all the appearances that crowd our experience of life and block our access to the underlying joy of existence. Nietzsche describes the pain of the breakdown as a “raging thorn” (91), which is to say, that in order to get to the joy of the breakdown, one has to go through the struggle of removing all the thorns from their body. But once that is all said and done, we will find that “the highest joy… lies at the end of the path through destruction and negation” (113). Sometimes we have to feel like we are falling to discover our wings and soar.

What is the joy of existence? For early Nietzsche, this bliss occurs upon the realization that we are “a *single living being,* with whose joy in creation we are fused” (*Birth of Tragedy* 91). The Dionysian “redeem[s] [man] through a mystical feeling of unity” (23).[[7]](#footnote-7) Once the boundaries of the individual are removed, we realize that the joy we feel in day-to-day life exists in a stronger, more excessive form and that we are, in part, the joy itself. It is like the sensation of looking at a sunset and thinking it is beautiful, only to find that you as a “you” disappear into that sunset. Then, you realize that you yourself are one with the sunset and one with the sensation of beauty of that sunset.

We can push Nietzsche’s account of working through the difficulties of the breakdown in *The Birth of Tragedy* further by looking at his later work. For someone who is stuck in the fear stage of the breakdown, telling them that there is joy that follows the fear is not the most assuring claim one can make to help someone overcome their fear. If you told someone afraid of playing music that music is fun and they will disappear into the music, they may agree with you that music is fun, but they would still be afraid to play it. Nietzsche will claim that the Dionysian joy wants to “convince us of the eternal joy of existence” that lies “not in phenomena but behind phenomena” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 91). But this poses the problem of addressing someone who is *not* convinced of this eternal joy.[[8]](#footnote-8) They may want to feel that eternal joy, but they do not have a philosophical framework of *how* to reach the joy of the Dionysian.

Nietzsche will point out that there is *pain* in the process of the breakdown, but how can one who fears the breakdown, break out of agony and understand that joy? Nietzsche *could* claim that those who fear the breakdown cannot understand Dionysian joy because Dionysus only reveals himself for an exceptional few. In *The Birth of the Tragedy*, we see that Nietzsche directs his thoughts on Dionysian wisdom “*exclusively* to those who, directly related to music… relate to things almost exclusively through unconscious musical relations” (113, my emphasis). He calls these people the “genuine musicians” (113). Much of the contents of *The Birth of Tragedy* detail the various figures that betray the Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies: Nietzsche is critical of Socrates (80-85), Euripides (72-73), opera not by Wagner (105), the Renaissance man (104), the Alexandrian man (100), the theoretical man (93), the New Attic Dithyramb (93), Indian Buddhism (111), and much more. One could humor themselves by looking at an index of their copy of *The Birth of Tragedy* and find that most things indexed are things Nietzsche will say betray the Dionysian and Apollonian bond. In this way, Nietzsche would have no trouble excluding those with a fear of breakdown from the Dionysian. Yet, we can open up the gates to the Dionysian to those who fear breakdowns by looking at his later work. There, Nietzsche’s praise to those willing to struggle reveals how he would include those who fear breakdowns into the exceptional few worthy of Dionysian wisdom. We can imagine that when early Nietzsche directs his thoughts to those who “relate to things almost exclusively through *unconscious* musical relations” (113, my emphasis), he means those whose unconscious are flooded by overwhelming sensations. However, we understand that those with a fear of breakdown *also* relate to “things almost exclusively through *unconscious* musical relations” (113, my emphasis)—the fear of the breakdown is a product of the unconscious (D.W. Winnicott 104) that organizes our egos and determines how we relate to the world. Those with a fear of breakdown experience an ugly side of the Dionysian, but they still experience part of the Dionysian. Our task will be to show *how* someone who has some fear over the breakdown can be in good company with the Dionysian to experience his joy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

*The Joyful Science and The Will to Power*

I want to suggest that one Nietzschean way of responding to a “fear of breakdown” is to read fear the same way Reginster reads resistance/suffering in his conception of the will to power. Before I do this, I will need to address some of Nietzsche’s views on fear. Carrying on with the reading of Nietzsche that would exclude those with a fear of breakdown from being in the company of Dionysus, we can note the places where Nietzsche would posit that people who are fearful are just weak-willed. Fear, unlike suffering, which is a noble enterprise that strengthens our will to power, is a bad thing we must get rid of. Now I do not have space to go through every instance Nietzsche discusses fear, but one fragment in *Will to Power* summarizes this view of the fearful.[[10]](#footnote-10) In *Will to Power* 221 Nietzsche writes “this way of thinking is base: fear of pain, of defilement… This is a *wretched* way of thinking” (129) and immediately after in *Will to Power* 222 he writes “The higher man is distinguished from the lower by his fearlessness and his readiness to challenge misfortune” (129). In these passages, Nietzsche states that fearing something is *wretched* and characterizes the higher man as fearless. In fact, Book V of *The Gay* Science – titled “We fearless ones” highlights the ways Nietzsche values fearlessness over fear as the nobler disposition to have in life.

However, Nietzsche has a more complex relationship to fear that extends past launching diatribes against it. He considers it an instinct that we share: in *The Gay Science* 355, Nietzsche points out that our “instinct to fear bids us to know” (301) because we are afraid of the unfamiliar. By obtaining knowledge of the unfamiliar, we can dissipate our fear and make it familiar. For example, the fear of the breakdown is fearing the unfamiliar experience of porous ego boundaries. This fear drives us to learn more about breakdowns, to make them feel more familiar. Of course Nietzsche does not have the kindest things to say to scholars and lovers of knowledge,[[11]](#footnote-11) but the important point here is that fear is an instinct we have. We would not want to create a relationship with our instinct of fear wherein we repress it whenever we feel it, or try to get rid of it whenever it comes up—that is, where we fear fear itself. In fact, minimizing our confrontations with fear is the grounds for herd morality. In *Will to Power* 280 Nietzsche writes “The instinct of the herd considers the middle and the mean as the highest and most valuable… Fear ceases in the middle: here one is never alone; here there is little room for misunderstanding” (159). He suggests that it is not fear which is the problem in weaker people, but their unwillingness to face fear, or their tendency to create a world which minimizes fear. The herd, which Nietzsche is, for the most part[[12]](#footnote-12), critical of, is afraid of fear, so it tries to get rid of it. He solidifies this point in *Will to Power* 296 by writing “This whole psychology [of the herd] is a psychology of prevention, a kind of immuring out of fear” (167). What Nietzsche is signifying is that there is a particular way of dealing with fear which is life-denying.

What we want to do is think through life-affirming approaches to fear. Nietzsche echoes this notion that one can take a life-affirming approach to difficult emotions in *The Gay Science* 290, where he writes “It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until everyone of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye… Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime” (232). If fear was a sign of weakness, then Nietzsche would argue that we should incorporate our weaknesses into the art work that is our selves such that a fearful disposition “delight[s] the eye” (232). Assuming fear is a weakness, someone like Miss K should not resign herself to her weak character, but transform her fear of breakdown such that it becomes beautiful—fear becomes a source of beauty, a color in the canvas of life. Furthermore, fear may not be a weakness. In speaking positively of fear, he writes, in *Will to Power* 341 “The highest type: …. Therein the highest style: the grand style. Expression of the "will to power" itself. The instinct that is most feared dares to acknowledge itself” (187). In other words, the higher types can notice that certain instincts inspire *fear* and those that do are worthy of being explored. For example, feeling fear over the Dionysian breakdown might be the very gesture that tells us it is worthy to overcome this fear. Fear—like suffering and displeasure—may be part of what it means to be alive, and so, to affirm life means to affirm the fact that sometimes we feel fear. Trying to destroy the fear in us might end up extinguishing a full experience of life.

I want to suggest that another Nietzchean way of responding to a “fear of breakdown” is to read fear the same way Reginster reads resistance in his conception of the will to power. Reginster argues “The will to power, in the last analysis, is a will to the very activity of overcoming resistance—“the will’s forward thrust and again and again becoming master over that which stands in its way” (WP 696), or “the game of resistance and victory,” which consists of “a little hindrance that is overcome and immediately followed by another little hindrance that is again overcome” (WP 699)” (126-127). To satisfy the will to power, Reginster argues “three conditions [must be] met: there is some first-order desire for a determinate end, there is resistance to the realization of this determinate end, and there is actual success in overcoming this resistance” (136). With respect to a Nietzchean relationship to a fear of the breakdown, we can see that the end of the fear of breakdown is to stop fearing a breakdown in order to enjoy life more. This involves encountering resistance: namely facing one’s fears. In this encounter, one can either defeat their fears, or become further traumatized. Ultimately, the goal that one desires in overcoming the fear of the breakdown is to not be afraid of threats to one’s ego identity, to be able to move freely between an Apollonian stable *principium indivuationis* and the joyful Dionysian dissolve of that *principium indivuationis*. Though of course, most of us *are* afraid when our ego identity is threatened in some way or other, our relationship with breakdowns do not *necessarily* have to be this way. That said, we *commonly* have a relationship with breakdowns such that fear decreases our quality of life. A mundane example of how this is the case is to think of how much more joyful our life could be if we did not fear failures that seriously threatened our self-esteem.

With respect to Miss K’s case, we observe that she might want to overcome her fear of breakdown to enjoy life more, but to do this, she would have to confront her fears head-on and work through the various ways she self-holds through music. Working through one’s defences against fear could either end in success or failure, which might shatter one’s ego even more.[[13]](#footnote-13) Now this prospect of failure may seem less than appealing, but Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* 283 argues “the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—*to live dangerously!”* (228). He even goes so far to relate “The danger of the happiest” in *The Gay Science* 302 with risking and living “festively” (242). In *The Birth of Tragedy,* Nietzsche associates the Dionysian with the excess of the festival (24): to live in the Dionysian means to live dangerously, to dare to risk. There is risk involved in a Nietzschean approach to the fear of the breakdown—while in the Winnicottian model, risk and re-traumatization is avoided, Nietzsche advocates a dangerous relationship with overcoming resistance. This may tempt us to dismiss Nietzsche for being irresponsible, but we should note that being afraid of danger itself is a kind of fear of breakdown—we are afraid of what will happen in failure—and so, working through a relationship with danger which does not rest on avoiding it or minimizing it at all costs, will, in many ways, help one work through a fear of breakdown.

Reginster will further add that another feature of the will to power is “that its satisfaction requires displeasure” (134). To support his claim, Reginster emphasizes the following Nietzsche quote: “Human beings do not seek pleasure and avoid displeasure. [ . . . ]What human beings want, what every smallest organism wants, is an increase of power; driven by that will they seek resistance, they need something that opposes it—Displeasure, as an obstacle to their will to power, is therefore a normal fact [ . . . ]; human beings do not avoid it, they are rather in continual need of it [ . . . ]” (WP 702; cf. 656)” (133). In this passage, Nietzsche claims displeasure is a necessary component in life, and to deny that would be to deny life.[[14]](#footnote-14) If we define the will to power as the overcoming of resistance, that implies that we need something to resist—that is, we need something to cause displeasure. For Reginster, someone with a concrete first-order desire will feel resistance until they fulfil their desire. This resistance is not a bad thing, nor does it make life bad—instead, it is what gives meaning to the achievement of a goal. If we instantly got our desires, life would get boring quickly—instead, to encounter resistance and to overcome that resistance is what keeps life interesting.

How I want to apply this notion that “satisfaction requires displeasure” (Reginster 134) to the fear of breakdown is to suggest that fear is not something to be avoided. Instead of seeing fear as something which makes one’s life “bad,” one can embrace it as something which we can overcome to make life interesting. If we lived life dangerously without any fear all the time, we would never feel the stakes of danger. One of the markers of bravery is that one confronts and overcomes their fears. Without an initial fear, a brave action does not hold as much weight with respect to a person’s personal growth.[[15]](#footnote-15) Overcoming one’s fears increases one’s will to power, but one needs fears to overcome. To expand what I mean, I would like to differentiate between the word “overcome” and “get rid of”—trying to “get rid of” fear implies that it is a bad emotional state to be in that we have to move past as quickly as possible in order to live a flourishing life. Someone who wants to “get rid of” fear does not want to sit with fear or experience it. They want to dispel it because as long as they are experiencing fear, they are not living a happy life. Meanwhile, to overcome fear is to accept that one cannot live in fear for one’s whole life. One must eventually surpass fear, but the feeling of fear itself is not something which needs to be dispelled the moment it is felt. We can sit with fear, understand it as an emotion we go through, and then, when it is time, overcome it. We need not have a neurotic relationship with fear, where, whenever it pops up, we need to smack it down like a game of Whac-A-Mole. Fear is more akin to a storm which we can observe pass through our home without having to move up-state at the first flash of danger.

We can push Reginster’s analysis further and point out that Nietzsche goes so far to say that we should thank our displeasures. Reginster’s writings about the will to power primarily concerns the actualization of concrete first-order desires, which does not always describe the overcoming of fear. So while Reginster’s account of the will to power describes a particular attitude to life in order to strengthen one’s self-conception, I am using that account to understand how someone can overcome the fear of losing oneself. We see in various passages in *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche praises the overcoming of difficult emotions. Showing this in general terms implies Nietzsche will advocate the overcoming of fear (insofar as fear is a difficult emotion). It has already been shown that Nietzsche promotes a pursuit of the Dionysian. Thus, it would make sense that if Nietzsche supports the overcoming of difficult emotions *and* the pursuit of the Dionysian, then Nietzsche will support the overcoming of difficult emotions for the pursuit of the Dionysian.

Fear, like negative emotions such as suffering and displeasure, is to be welcomed in the human experience, as it gives us something to overcome. Nietzsche makes this clear in *The* *Gay Science* 295, 325, and 338. In *The* *Gay Science* 295 Nietzsche writes “at the very bottom of my soul I feel grateful to all my misery and bouts of sickness and everything about me that is imperfect, because [it allows me to] escape from enduring habits.” (237), in *The* *Gay Science* 325 he writes “But not to perish of internal distress [such as, a fear of breakdown] and uncertainty when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of this suffering—that is great, that belongs to greatness” (255), and in *The* *Gay Science* 338 he writes “the path of one’s own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one’s own hell” (269). In this volley of passages, Nietzsche links the overcoming of one’s *personal* struggles to achieving greatness (“all *my* misery and bouts of sickness” (237), “*internal* distress” (255), “the voluptuousness of *one’s own* hell” (269)). Nietzsche calls for us to grapple with our internal demons in a similar way that a fear of breakdown arises from a personal relationship with a primitive agony. Yet it is this personal grappling that allows us to achieve greatness. We should be thankful for our fears because if we had no internal distress, we would be plagued with enduring habits—that is, doomed to exist in a “permanent domicile,” (237) content with our routines with no greater aspirations in life. The fear of breakdown is the struggle we must overcome for the joys of the Dionysian. It is not a barrier to fully enjoying the Dionysian, but the very conditions to which we can bask in the Dionysian’s excessive pleasures. It is more triumphant for one to fly when they fear falling than for them to fly as if it were habit. Miss K would feel an even grander joy in losing herself in Dionysian ecstasy to music because she feared breaking down in her music playing. Not only would she appreciate the joy of the Dionysian, but she would also know that in experiencing that joy, her will to power and her sense of self would be made stronger. She would have a more expanded and mobile ego because she would rely less on music as a self-holding mechanism to keep intact a fragile ego and would become free to use her music how she wanted (C. Winnicott 355). Music could be used to lose a self as much as hold on to a self—it could be used to create a self that allows itself to be lost every now and then. Music would not have to be a raft someone would hold onto to avoid drowning, but could become a ship to explore the frontiers of the ocean. Additionally, even if Miss K never resolved her fear of breakdown, Nietzsche would still consider her great insofar as she had a fear of breakdown and had not given up on life. It is not getting rid of the fear that is the condition for this greatness, but having “[not] perish[ed]” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 255) in living with our fears. Though we may want to overcome our fear of breakdown, struggling to do so or relapsing into the fear does not make our struggle for naught. It is the courage to persist in face of the fear of breakdown, the fear of the Dionysian, to say “yes” to life instead of becoming spiteful of life that makes us great in Nietzsche’s eyes.

In conclusion, D.W. Winnicott views the breakdown as the collapse of an ego. This breakdown as ego-collapse is comparable to Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian. D.W. Winnicott observes that some patients fear the breakdown—these patients organize their egos in defences that protect them from a potential breakdown, but end up diminishing their quality of life. For D.W. Winnicott, treatment for these patients involves reminding them that the breakdown already happened—by helping the patient understand that their defending themselves against something they have already experienced and survived, the patient can start organizing their ego in more life affirming ways. Nietzsche gives another account for how to view the breakdown—as part of the Dionysian. For Nietzsche, the breakdown is a joyful event—though he acknowledges there is much suffering and difficulty in the Dionysian, at the very bottom, where the *principium individuationis* dissolves, it is “indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (*The Birth of Tragedy* 45). Whereas D.W. Winnicott sees the breakdown as something to work through, Nietzsche revels in it as a site of artistic and creative possibility. In viewing D.W. Winnicott’s breakdown through a Nietzschean lens, we understand alternative modes of relating with the fear of breakdown that go past learning how to experience it again. While a reading of Nietzsche may claim that those who fear the breakdown are not worthy of the Dionysian, a closer look at his work will reveal that those willing to grapple with their fear of breakdown are already in the company of the Dionysian. In applying Reginster’s reading of Nietzsche’s will to power to understand that Nietzsche would advocate an overcoming of fear, we see that the fear of breakdown is not a barrier to the joy of the Dionysian, but is a part of what it means to exercise our will to power. Part of the experience of the Dionysian is the fear we encounter in its pursuit. If we lived dangerously without any fear, we would never feel the stakes of danger. Difficult emotions such as fear are part of life and working through these emotions are what helps lend meaning to our goal of being able to move between Dionysian and Apollonian states elegantly. In final analysis, we should thank our fears as our ability to not perish under them reveals our intoxicating greatness.

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1. See for example, Manu Bazzano. *Nietzsche and Psychotherapy*. 1st ed. Milton: Routledge, 2019, Jared Russell. *Nietzsche and the Clinic: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, Metaphysics*. Routledge, 2018, as well as Daniel Chapelle. *Nietzsche and Psychoanalysis*. Albany, N.Y: State University of New York Press, 1993—to name a few. We even find traces of Nietzsche all over Sigmund Freud, as Paul-Laurent Assoun. *Freud and Nietzsche*. London ; Athlone Press, 2000 illustrates. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Clare Winnicott points out Miss K was also afflicted with the primary agony of a *loss of the sense of real*. A fear of a breakdown may come about from multiple primitive agonies. My example simplifies Miss K’s case study for the sake of clarity, as I am not investigating Miss K specifically. I am *not* suggesting one way of treating Miss K is through a Nietzschean revaluation of emotions—I do not aim to intervene in the discourse of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. My use of the Miss K example is philosophical. Later, I will use her fear of breakdown as a motor to inquire into Nietzsche’s work. In this way, the Miss K presented in this paper is a fictional Miss K that is constructed to best illustrate my point on the fear of breakdown. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One must acknowledge that Nietzsche moved away from his thoughts in *The Birth of Tragedy* as his writing progressed—his piece “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” points out how his later work drastically breaks with T*he Birth of the Tragedy*. Early Nietzsche was too Wagnerian, too Schopenhauerian. He only came into his own style when he broke from said figures. As a result, when writing about *The Birth of Tragedy,* I will, in the footnotes, point out when his claims are challenged in his later work. With this acknowledged, the central idea that moves this paper forward: the notion of the value in a breakdown, in the joy of a loss of a self, *is* preserved as a theme in his work. For example, in *The Gay Science* 305 Nietzsche will write “For one must be able to lose oneself occasionally if one wants to learn something from things different from oneself” (245), indicating there is a value in the occasional loss of the *principium individuationis*. As well, we see Nietzsche’s praise of losing oneself in *The Gay Science* 33 where Nietzsche writes “I love to lose myself for a good while” (55). Not only that, but the figure of Dionysus is present in his later works. Overall, the themes I pull from *The Birth of Tragedy* are themes which will be further responded to (and not discarded) in his later work. This is also why my analysis of *The Birth of Tragedy* does not include certain major themes of the work—such as the analysis of Richard Wagner—because of how wildly Nietzsche’s viewpoints on such matters change. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. My use of the phrase “early Nietzsche” is significant in my elucidation of the Dionysian. Though Nietzsche will develop this concept later in his work, the most focused analysis of the concept occurs in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Later accounts of the Dionysian will describe it as an overabundance and juxtapose the Dionysian with the Christian as opposed to the Apollonian. For example, *Will to Power* 1052 will give another account of the Dionysian read against “the Crucified” (542) while *The Gay Science* 370reads the Dionysian against the romantic and Christian (328). In order not to mix up what middle or late period Nietzsche thinks of the Dionysian, I will limit my study of the Dionysian to *The Birth of Tragedy.* The Dionysian as presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* is more aligned with D.W. Winnicott’s concept of breakdown and it allows us to trace the ways middle period Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* will emerge out of earlier claims he made. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We can draw another comparison between D.W. Winnicott’s fear of breakdown with Nietzsche’s Dionysus. T.H. Ogden writes in “Fear of breakdown and the unlived life” that the primitive agony behind the fear “*is an agony only because it occurs in the absence of a good enough mother-infant bond”* (210). This is to say, the breakdown that was already experienced results in a life-long fear over that breakdown because the infant did not have a strong enough bond to their caregiver to feel safe in overcoming that experience. In this way, the breakdown is the excessive Dionysian force while the bond with a caregiver is the Apollonian force that redeems the Dionysian and protects a subject from an overwhelming and traumatizing experience of the Dionysian. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here it should be noted that Miss K could *play* music that induces people to Dionysian states, while she herself greatly suffers in playing that music. It should also be noted that Miss K could experience these Dionysian states while playing music—however, it is not always the case that she can play music without any fear of breakdown. The subject of our analysis is how Nietzsche would respond to a Dionysian activity such as playing music when it does not come easy, when there is a fear and pressure of breakdown that could occur in playing the music which prevents someone from becoming one with the music in a joyful song to life. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Though late Nietzsche would not make such a bold claim that underneath the world of appearances there exists a mystical unity, the claim that life is joyful is an idea that exists in his later work. So although this joy is not grounded in a feeling of mystical unity, it is still a joy. In this way, the project of understanding how to get to this joyful existence through the breakdown is still relevant to an overall investigation of Nietzsche. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Convinced here means not simply holding a position to be analytically true, but living in a way that reflects this belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One possible direction a paper that explores D.W. Winnicott and Nietzsche could go in would be a reconceptualization of D.W. Winnicott’s fear of breakdown to account for the Dionysian. Though this argument may be valuable in the clinical setting, my argument is grounded mostly on producing an interpretation of Nietzsche’s work. In this way, I do not endeavor to intervene against therapeutic discourses around the fear of breakdown. Instead, I key in on how D.W. Winnicott’s theory can open up textual possibilities in Nietzsche’s work. The stakes of my argument lie in how D.W. Winnicott reveals novel ways of reading Nietzsche. Instead of reading the issue of fearing a loss of ego in purely textual terms, supplementing D.W. Winnicott to my analysis gives me a compass into Nietzsche’s work. D.W. Winnicott’s emphasis on fear in a breakdown provides a counterexample to Nietzsche’s joyful account of a breakdown, allowing me to push Nietzsche further into considering how we should relate to a fearful relationship with a breakdown. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There are many other fragments to look at, such as *Will to Power* 122, 740, 778, and 1025: all locations where he calls fear a weakness. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This critique of knowledge is apparent through his entire oeuvre: from his critique of the theoretical man in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to his critique of the scholar in *We scholars* section in *Beyond Good and Evil* to the general theme in *The Gay Science* which wants to build a more joyful mode of knowing past our current life-denying mode of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Though Nietzsche is generally critical of the herd—this critique is best illustrated in Essay One of *The Genealogy of Morality*—there are parts of his oeuvre which indicate that he sees them as necessary. In *The Gay Science* 55 Nietzsche points out “To become the advocate of the rule—that might be the ultimate form and refinement in which noblemindedness reveals itself on earth.” (117) and in *The Gay Science* 76 he writes “there actually are things to be said in favor of the exception, *provided that it never wants to become the rule*” (131). In both passages, Nietzsche points out the herd needs to exist for the noble-minded and exceptional to exist. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In Miss K’s case, it ends in success insofar as Clare Winnicott notes that “the degree of ego integration which Miss K has achieved during treatment has in fact freed her music to be used differently” (355). That is to say, Miss K did not have to rely on music to keep her sense of self from falling into a breakdown, and could, perhaps, start enjoying music in a Dionysian manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Reginster will address the objection that the claim that “the satisfaction of the will implies dissatisfaction” (135) is paradoxical. I will not have space to go into all the complexities of Reginster’s response to this objection; instead, I will proceed with outlining his argument for why satisfaction and displeasure are connected. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. To respond to the objection that I cannot equivocate fear to suffering or displeasure in our will to power, I would reply that fear appears to be a kind of suffering that could be treated as a source of resistance to overcome, *especially* if what follows overcoming that fear is the realization of the desire to embody a Dionysian joy. Additionally, as I have already shown, Nietzsche will treat fear like an instinct: it is a drive we all experience, and so, it should be organized by our will to power to give us a fuller sense of life. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)