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Olivia L. Spence
Dominican University of California

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In a Garden of Lions: a Creative Rendering Inspired by the *Three Metamorphoses*
of Friedrich Nietzsche

Olivia Spence

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Olivia L. Spence, Candidate

Date 12/13/2012

Dr. Laura Stivers, Chair

Date 12/13/2012

Dr. Leslie Ross, Primary Reader

Date 12/13/2012

Dr. Christian Dean, Secondary Reader

Date 12/13/2012

In a Garden of Lions

By Olivia Spence

Dedication:

Adi Da Samraj
Matthew and Lynnzee
JT
Robin McCloskey
Leslie Ross
Christian Dean

and

Boyd Matson:

Thank You.

Preface

A decade ago, during the summer of 2002, I read Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It made an indelible mark: even the colors and smells of that roof-top porch in Toronto where I read it all the way through still arise in the forefront of my mind every time I think of this text. Since then, I have been captivated with the writings and philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and have sought to understand this interest whenever possible. It is with this introspective eye that I have engaged this thesis project, using the last section of his text as a jumping off place and a touch point. I choose to use a story from my own childhood and to explore some of the relevant themes through visual interpretation. Inspired and cautioned by Nietzsche's suggestion that, "We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language; we barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation" (WTP, 283), I have engaged both textual language and visual language in this project. The textual part of the story is secondary however, to the visual.

My interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy is that he attempts to illuminate our presumptions and foundational belief systems in a way that is highly effective, or at least can be if we are willing to face the light of his insight with the courage of a truly critical eye—looking both at his words as well as ourselves. His ultimate goal as a philosopher is stated as a will "to...constantly transform everything we are into light and flame; everything that affects us, too—we *can* do nothing else" (GS, 6). This intentional practice of 'self-transformation', or 'self-overcoming' is a primary theme in Nietzsche's work and one that mirrors the human impulse towards growth and inevitable evolutionary process. It is my intention to engage this process through this creative project.

It is important to stress that Nietzsche's purpose is to *illuminate* our presumptions, not necessarily to conclude anything about them. I do not believe he is interested in replacing one absolute for another; To "transform into light" implies a freedom from supposition, outcome, and absolutes.

This act, in its freedom, inspires a unique individual interpretation of his work and calls for the singular responsibility for our own freedom. In keeping with this desire to illuminate—really to inspire our own self-illumination—he queries, "How many people really understand how to observe? And among the few who do understand it—how many observe themselves?" (GS, 187)

Throughout his writings Nietzsche has inspired in me the desire for self-inquiry and self-understanding by pointing in no particular direction, to a point of my own creation, my own insight. Simultaneously, I am reminded of the inherent limitations in an endeavor of this kind, one that is highly creative, and therefore highly subjective. Therefore, this is not an attempt, necessarily, to pin down answers about the nature of either a 'micro' or a 'macro' view of existence. How can one presume to define the ultimate ineffability of universal existence through one's own singular and therefore—inherently limited—perspective? "For it is selfishness to perceive one's *own* judgment as universal law. And it is a blind, petty...selfishness to boot, because it betrays the fact that you have not yet discovered yourself, have not yet created your own...ideal...for this could never be the ideal of another, not to mention of all, all!" (GS, 139).

At the same time, I use my own story because I do not want any mistaking this as assertion of “objective truth”. It reflects an in depth exercise in interpreting Nietzsche’s writings and applying their foundational impetus in my own life. This is a multifaceted exercise therefore, that encompasses issues like memory, society, morality, religion, convention, individuation, growth, dominance, innocence, critical thinking, culture, differentiation, transcendence, and acceptance.

The format of a childhood story is perfect, I hope, for this exploration. It is easily questioned, easily ‘unconventional’, withstands nothing ‘objective,’ asserts nothing concrete, at times irrational, at times emotional, and arguably completely irrelevant. It is therefore, not about the end result, but about the process of creation, of transformation, or as Nietzsche describes it—as “metamorphosis” (TSZ, 15). I endeavor only to illustrate a sliver of the entire picture, and accept the necessity for this as an ongoing process.

Nietzsche’s intention, and my intention, is, simply put, to “limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and value judgments” (GS, 189) through which we may achieve “weightlessness” (G&P, 94). He suggests that the effects of such purifying inquiry are such that:

After all these immediate consequences, its consequences for us, are, contrary to what one might expect, not at all sad and gloomy, but rather like a new kind of light that is hard to describe, a new kind of happiness, alleviation...encouragement, and dawn.....At last the horizon appears free to us again, even granted that it is not bright....The sea, our sea lies open there again; maybe there never was before such an ‘open sea’ (GS, 199).

This is, in short, the impulse and inspiration of this project. I begin with an excerpt from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I hope you enjoy it.

The Speeches of Zarathustra

On the Three Metamorphoses

Three metamorphoses of the spirit I name for you: how the spirit becomes a camel, and the camel a lion, and finally the lion a child.

To the spirit there is much that is heavy; to the strong, carrying spirit imbued with reverence. Its strength demands what is heavy and heaviest.

What is heavy? thus asks the carrying spirit. It kneels down like a camel and wants to be well loaded.

What is heaviest, you heroes? thus asks the carrying spirit, so that I might take it upon myself and rejoice in my strength.

Is it not this: lowering oneself in order to hurt one's pride?
Letting one's foolishness glow in order to mock one's wisdom?

Or is it this: abandoning our cause when it celebrates victory?
Climbing high mountains in order to tempt the tempter?

Or is it this: feeding on the acorns and grass of knowledge and for the sake of truth suffering hunger in one's soul?

Or is it this: being ill and sending the comforters home and making friends with the deaf who never hear what you want?

Or is it this: wading into dirty water when it is the water of truth, and not shrinking away from cold frogs and hot toads?

Or is it this: loving those who despise us, and extending a hand to the ghost when it wants to frighten us?

All of these heaviest things the carrying spirit takes upon itself, like a loaded camel that hurries into the desert, thus it hurries into its desert.

But in the loneliest desert the second metamorphosis occurs. Here the spirit becomes lion, it wants to hunt down its freedom and be master in its own desert.

Here it seeks its last master, and wants to fight him and its last god. For victory it wants to battle the great dragon.

Who is the great dragon whom the spirit no longer wants to call master and god? "Thou shalt" is the name of the great dragon.

But the spirit of the lion says "I will. "

"Thou shalt" stands in its way, gleaming golden, a scaly animal, and upon every scale "thou shalt!" gleams like gold.

The values of millennia gleam on these scales, and thus speaks the most powerful of all dragons: "the value of all things - it gleams in me.

All value has already been created, and the value of all created things - that am I. Indeed, there shall be no more 'I will! '" Thus speaks the dragon.

My brothers, why is the lion required by the spirit? Why does the beast of burden, renouncing and reverent, not suffice?

To create new values - not even the lion is capable of that: but to create freedom for itself for new creation - that is within the power of the lion.

To create freedom for oneself and also a sacred No to duty: for that, my brothers, the lion is required.

To take the right to new values - that is the most terrible taking for a carrying and reverent spirit. Indeed, it is preying, and the work of a predatory animal.

Once it loved "thou shalt" as its most sacred, now it must find delusion and despotism even in what is most sacred to it, in order to wrest freedom from its love by preying. The lion is required for this preying.

But tell me, my brothers, of what is the child capable that even the lion is not? Why must the preying lion still become a child?

The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying.

Yes, for the game of creation my brothers a sacred yes-saying is required.

The spirit wants its will, the one lost to the world now wins its own world.

Three metamorphoses of the spirit I named for you: how the spirit became a camel, and the camel a lion, and finally the lion a child. -

Thus spoke Zarathustra... (15-16).



In a Garden of Lions

Memory is illusive, and yet such weight is placed upon it. After this present moment, what else is there, after all? I am 5 years old. My parents and I, and an orange kitten, Maori, are driving across the country in a blue Ford Mercury. The car is piled high with suitcases and boxes. I am buckled in the backseat, the cracked window lets the wind blows wisps of hair across my eyes and I see the orange and gold landscape of the southwest whizzing by. We play games with the license plates of passing cars, my dad keeps the beat of the Talking Heads with the brakes, I laugh a big free child's laugh, my mother feeds us cut pieces of fruit, we are family. We are on our way to a small boarding school in upstate New York where my parents will teach. We make our way up the last mountain, driving at night, snow falling, hitting the foggy windows and streaking by alongside us, making a blanket of shining white. I have never before seen such glorious shimmering. We have arrived at the Garden of Lions.



The property that will become this school is bought for next to nothing—it is an old summer camp, not insulated for year-round use. Arriving that night in the snow, I remember the intense white cold stillness piercing into me. And at the first hint of spring we are all sunbathing on the rooftops in the ‘warm’ 40 degree air.

The property is flanked on one side by a wide rocky creek and on the other by Hunter Mountain. We can see the ski slopes cutting into its side and the metal tower lookout on its peak. There are two rows of cabins on either side of the main building, a three-story “hotel,” and a long wide lawn spreads out in front.



For the first year my parents and I live together in our own cabin.

Memories are a series of still pictures with various emotions attached:

the flaking red paint of the big barn, empty except an altar and a

piano. A teacher says I have no talent for music, which is okay with

me because doing scales on the black and white keys is a close

second to torture. My cat Maori getting sick, “leukemia” is what the

vet says, that there is nothing we can do, and when we bring her

home she disappears. A day later after hours of calling and

searching, I find her in the woods outside the cabin, inside a hole in

the ground, weak but unwilling to come out to me. I try to reach in to

get her and she looks at me for the first time with fear and resistance.

My mother says she wants to be left in peace; that she is dying; but I

do not understand. One hand taken in my mother’s as she leads me

away, the other one reaching out to that sweetest friend that I had

loved for a child’s eternity. Incomprehensible that I can do nothing to

help her, that I can do nothing to keep her with me, that she would

prefer to stay in the darkness. The image of her face peering painfully

out at me from the dark hole is the last I see of her.



Memories seem to be punctuated by acute pain, and pure joy. a thunderstorm one unusually dry summer, we are sitting in the dead heat of our 2nd story classroom, looking wistfully out at the cool creek, dark clouds suddenly appearing and that pungent wetness of a coming storm begins to waft into the windows. Our teacher declares an unprecedented halt to class as the warm raindrops begin to fall and we all tumble down the stairs onto the lawn. Dancing and yelling up at the sky like wild creatures, big rain drops hitting our upturned faces, into our open mouths, and outstretched arms. Just as ecstatic about being let out of class as we are about the warm downpour. Our bare feet sloshing in the wet grass, dirt squishing in between our toes and clothes sticking to every part of us, chanting "Rain! Rain! Rain!" Breathing in the humid sweetness of all the trees and flowers and earth, I was sure we had willed it to come, all powerful and indelibly connected to the sky and ground and each other.



We have a daily routine, altered for me slightly to account for my age.

I have some classes alone which I mostly tolerate, and others like art and dance with the older girls that I enjoy greatly. We cook and clean and eat and sleep and meditate and chant and exercise together.

The girls live together in small cabins along the creek and the boys live in cabins on the hill.

My main guide and companion is Lydia, a wild dark haired big boned love of a woman. We spend hours together in the kitchen or art studio, our hands and faces covered in food or paint. We laugh and live easily together. Never a harsh word or superior eye—there is nothing imagined that is not as real to her as it is to me. She is love. She is community.



But many of the most precious memories from this time are when I am alone, exploring the creek side, the hills, and meadows surrounding the school. After months of roaming, I find one special spot near the creek, at the base of a crooked pine tree with lush green moss covering its exposed roots, and a perfect dip in the ground in front of it for me to settle into. I go there daily to tend the grasses and mosses, place beautiful rocks particularly here or there. This is my heart's desire--to create a "holy site," a special place that shines when tended and cared for. This place is quiet, still, and yet fully vibrant. The visible memory of this place still lives in me and is the feeling of pure connection. This feeling we describe as "the Mystery" is my understanding of God. This is the innocent foundation of life at the Garden of Lions.



Two and a half years pass in this way, living a fluid and full life together, engaging and learning together amidst all the challenges of practical life—toilets freezing, thunderstorms flooding the creek, the mundane daily routines of sweeping, raking, mowing, waking up too early, going to bed too early, too much homework, too many rules. I am completely unaware of any world other than ours. It is a time of glorious fullness. This place still exists in me, and in so many of my friends.



One cold spring morning, an unusual buzz of activity begins, and everyone's hair and uniforms are brushed and combed with greater attention than usual. I hear the words "television," "interviewing," and "the today show," and see everyone excited with anticipation. Television was a rare occurrence in our lives and because of this, it held me in a certain awe, like a secret doorway into another forbidden world. Most of the time, I did not think about this other world, but there was always the

Later that day, a white NBC News truck arrived at our school. A slick looking man in a tan suit and perfect hair jumped out of the passenger side and greeted us with a wide toothed grin that did not reach his eyes. Everyone whirled around him, opening doors and talking in friendly high-pitched voices. I watched from a distance as he interviewed some of the older kids and adults, asking them about our lives here, genuinely interested and especially curious about our spiritual teacher, Da.



A month passes after the unusual visit from the news truck and I had all but forgotten about it. Then one day we were all told to gather in the TV room. Everyone chattered excitedly about being on TV, wondering what they would look like and how they would sound. We are all sitting together on the floor and as the credits begin, we fall silent. The dramatic introductory credits declare, "NBC's Today Show with Jane Paulie and Boyd Matson..." I recognized the wide-toothed grinning man, now serious in front of us. "Tonight we bring you a special exposé on the Johannine Daist Communion, an active and dangerous cult..."

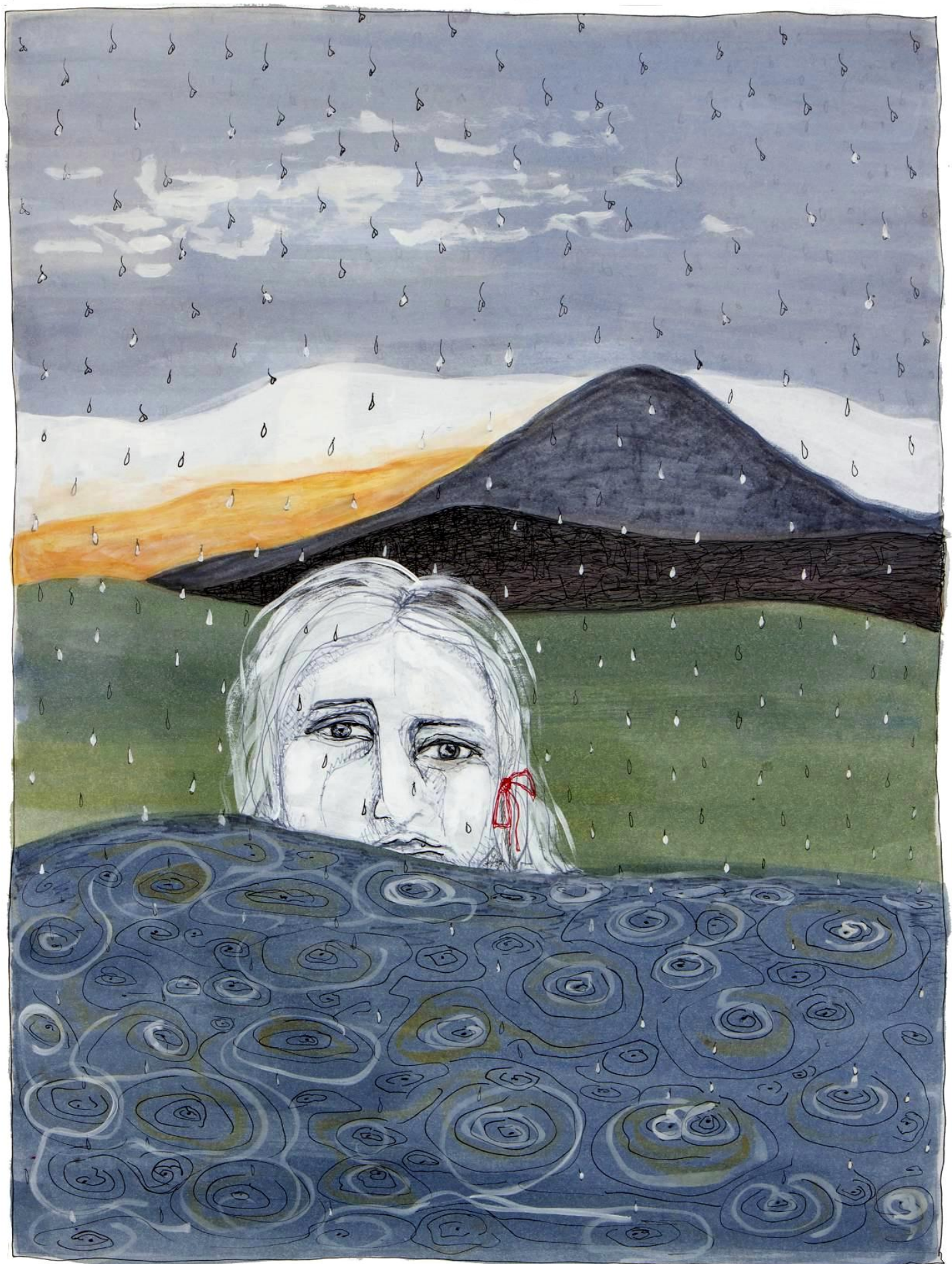


We sit frozen. Silently watching national television throw out a few carefully chosen words:

“religious cult”, “brainwashing”, “abuse”, “misty-eyed testimonials”, “destroyed”, “aberrant behavior”, “harem”, “indoctrination”, “bizarre sexual behavior”, “fanatics”, “dangerous”, “madman.”



It is 2:15 am; I lay dead awake, eyes open to the dark. I feel the ceiling sinking above me and I suddenly realize that in order to resolve anything, in order to grow in any way I must face all possibilities. The realization is terrifying and oppressive: what if I find out that everything ever said about my childhood is true? What if I find out that the worst imaginations are reality—that I have blocked out everything terrible? Who would I be, then? I would have to throw out everything in order to consciously bring any of it back. I had to consciously “try on” every possibility. I had to think of the worst-case scenario and accept that it may be true. Perhaps the conventional point of view was right after all. Perhaps I had been raised in an “abusive religious cult,” “brainwashed,” a victim. Perhaps everyone I knew and loved was complicit in this. No belief was sacred, no memory infallible.



We had been naïve. The unusual nature of our lives was skewed, manipulated into the most dramatic story, one that fed and fed off fear. Much changed in our community after this. Suddenly there was fear, self-protection. Classes were cancelled as everyone went to visit families who had seen the show and were worried. We became more aware of our neighbors and people in town as “public.” The relationship between our “community” versus “the world” became oppositional. We felt afraid of who we were and what we looked like to others and because of this we began to be intentionally silent and withdrawn from those who were not members of our community. I begin to have nightmares, fighting off threatening wide-toothed monsters, feeling the need to protect and defend. It is inevitable growth. It is a death. It is only recently that all sides of this dilemma have begun to occupy equal space. A paradox, resting.



Years later, I begin to look with full intention at this presumption of “community” and “world” in conflict. To see how it has unconsciously been guiding much of my life. I want to be free of this conflict. I want both experience of the world and of community to exist in me, but I do not know how they can. I have heard this kind of process called an “existential crisis.” What I come to realize is that I have been given all the skills to understand and transcend this crisis, that it is necessary, predictable even. This is what it is, to live in a garden of lions.



This process of reflection, of transformation is a constant process, and it is ongoing. The illustrations and text already just a few months ago begun, have a life of their own, I have new insights both to the memories preceding them and the memories they have created. It is a work in progress.

Friedrich Nietzsche summarizes this best in his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*:

Every human being is fully an artist...and the lovely semblance of dream is the precondition of all the arts of image-making... all forms speak to us; nothing is indifferent or unnecessary. Yet even while this dream-reality is most alive, we nevertheless retain a pervasive sense that it is *semblance* (15).



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