

Nietzsche and Dionysus: Tragedy and the Affirmation of Life



The Nature of Dionysus (All Passages by Walter Otto from Dionysus: Myth and Cult)

We have the habit of looking at the great spiritual processes with uncreative minds.

That which confronts mankind in epiphanies is not a reality which is completely unrecognizable and imperceptible, affecting only the soul which turns its back on the world, but the world itself as a divine form, as a plenitude of divine configurations. These are the primal appearances which stand at the beginning of all of the more profound human activities and endeavors. They transform the horde into the community, the community into the nation, and go on to leave their mark on the creations of all of the basic forms of human existence. Thus none of the institutions and practices which affect the basic existence of a people is to be completely separated from cult. Rather, all of them, in their periods of most vital growth, no matter how practical and useful they may be, are at the same time cult practices, that is to say, expressions or imitations of the glories of being which appeared at the beginning and established the culture through their appearance.

ALL of antiquity extolled Dionysus as the god who gave man wine. However, he was known also as the raving god whose presence makes man mad and incites him to savagery and even to lust for blood. He was the confidant and companion of the spirits of the dead. Mysterious dedications called him the Lord of Souls. (To his worship belonged the drama which has enriched the world with a miracle of the spirit. The flowers of spring bore witness to him, too. The ivy, the pine, the fig tree were dear to him. Yet far above all of these blessings in the natural world of vegetation stood the gift of the vine, which has been blessed a thousandfold. Dionysus was the god of the most blessed ecstasy and the most enraptured love, But he was also the persecuted god, the suffering and dying god, and all whom he loved, all who attended him, had to share his tragic fate.

The god of ecstasy and terror, of wildness and of the most blessed deliverance—the mad god whose appearance, sends mankind into madness—gives notice already, in his conception and birth, of his mysterious and paradoxical nature.

He was the child of Zeus and a mortal woman. But even before she bore him, she was consumed in the holocaust of the lightning of her heavenly bridegroom.

To return to Dionysus, himself: the myth of his birth, which scholars have earnestly tried to reduce to nothing but historical contingencies, is the most sublime expression of his Being. Just as the amazing image of Athena's ascent from the head of her father can be conceived only in the spirit of the genuine revelation of her Being, so beneath the lightning flashes of Dionysus grew the certainty that the enigmatic god, the spirit of a dual nature and of paradox, had a human mother and, therefore, was already by his birth a native of two realms.

In both instances his appearance is startling, disquieting, violent. And, like every thing violent, it arouses opposition and agitation. Right at his birth gods arise as his enemies. Terrible disturbances are engendered in his vicinity. The destruction of his mother is followed by suffering, bitter distress, and violent death for all who interest themselves in the little boy, beginning with his mother's sister, Ino, who plunges into the sea, out of her mind, with her own child in her arms. And in this way, even the revelation of the god who has become a man creates wild emotion, anger, and opposition among mankind.

The myths of his appearance among men, like the myth of the birth of the god, have something unusual and strangely thrilling about them. He entered the world differently from the way in which we are told the other gods did, and he encounters man, too, in a very special way. In both instances his appearance is startling, disquieting, violent. And, like every thing violent, it arouses opposition and agitation. Right at his birth gods arise as his enemies. Terrible disturbances are engendered in his vicinity.

Dionysus was presented in the mask because he was known as the god of confrontation. It is the god of the most immediate presence who looks at us so penetratingly from the vase painting. Because it is his nature to appear suddenly

and with overwhelming might before mankind, the mask serves as his symbol and his incarnation in cult.

Dionysus is always surrounded by women. The nurse becomes the loved one on whose beauty his glances are fixed in drunken rapture.

But no matter when and where he may come from, whether he sails over the sea in a wondrous ship, or rises up from the depths of the sea, or as a new-born child suddenly opens his divine eyes—his passion takes possession of the women who awaited him, so that they throw their heads back, toss their hair and rave, just as he himself is the one who raves.

This makes itself felt most in the panther, which was, after all, the most loyal attendant of the god. Of all the cats devoted to Dionysus, it was not only the most graceful and fascinating but also the most savage and bloodthirsty. The lightning-fast agility and perfect elegance of its movements, whose purpose is murder, exhibit the same union of beauty and fatal danger found in the mad women who accompany Dionysus. Their savagery, too, fascinates those who watch them, and yet it is the eruption of the dreadful impulse to pounce on the prey, tear it into pieces, and devour its flesh raw. We are told that the leopard and the lynx are the most murderous of all the larger beasts of prey. Many more victims must bleed to death under their teeth than would be needed for their sustenance. And when one hears that a female leopard which is suckling her young is the bloodthirstiest of all the carnivores, one cannot help thinking of the maenads who were also nursing mothers

The same miracle which calls forth nourishing streams from the hard and the rigid also bursts chains asunder, causes walls to fall in ruins, and lifts the age-old barriers which keep the future and the remote concealed from the human mind. Dionysus is, after all, given the highly significant name of the "liberator"

But to the Greeks this entity appeared as a god in the form of a god. And the mad god who appeared with a host of raving female attendants summoned mortal women to share his madness with him. He brought the primeval world along with him. This is the reason why his onslaught stripped mortals of all of their conventions, of everything that made them "civilized," and hurled them into life

which is intoxicated by death at those moments when it glows with its greatest vitality, when it loves, procreates, gives birth, and celebrates the rites of spring. There the most remote is near, the past is present, all ages are mirrored in the moment of the now. All that is lies locked in a close embrace. Man and animal breathe in the same maternal warmth. Cries of joy fill the air everywhere at the miracle of the springs which flow forth from an earth unlocked—until madness becomes a lowering storm and lets the frenzy of horror and destruction burst forth from the frenzy of ecstasy.

But there is a sacred plant in which this madness itself rises out of the earth in the form of an elixir which intoxicates. This is the vine.

Thus, of all that earth produces, the vine mirrors best the god's two faces and reveals most clearly his miraculous nature—both his endearing and his terrible wildness. It was doubtless always recognized as such, ever since one knew of him and of wine. We, on the other hand, are accustomed to use the gifts of nature to suit ourselves without being amazed by its secrets, and whenever there is talk of wine, we think of geniality, high spirits, and, perhaps, also of the dangers to health and morals. But the Greek of antiquity was, caught up by the total seriousness of *the truth that here* pleasure and pain, enlightenment and destruction, the lovable and the horrible lived in close intimacy. It is this unity of the paradoxical which appeared in Dionysiac ecstasy with staggering force

The wild spirit of the dreadful, which mocks all laws and institutions, reveals itself in the initial phenomena which accompany the approaching and imminent god. These are the phenomena of pandemonium and its related counterpart: deathly silence.

“Oh deathly quiet pandemonium”, (Nietzsche, Dionysosdithyramben)

Thus Dionysus presents himself to us in two forms: as the god who vanishes and reappears, and as the god who dies and is born again. The second conception has evolved into the well-known doctrine of numerous rebirths of the god.

He who begets something which is alive must dive down into the primeval depths in which the forces of life dwell. And when he rises to the surface, there is a gleam

of madness in his eyes because in those depths death lives cheek by jowl with life. The primal mystery is itself mad—the matrix of the duality and the unity of disunity. We do not have to appeal to the philosophers for this, although much could be quoted from Schelling here. All peoples and ages testify to it through their life experiences and their cult practices.

The rapture and terror of life are so profound because they are intoxicated with death. As often as life engenders itself anew, the wall which separates it from death is momentarily destroyed.

Again and again it has been confirmed that the life element is at the same time the element of death. This is why Dionysus, himself, goes to his death just as, as the awakener of life, he himself is born.

Thus all earthly powers are united in the god: the generating, nourishing, intoxicating rapture; the life-giving inexhaustibility; and the tearing pain, the deathly pallor, the speechless night of having been. He is the mad ecstasy which hovers over every conception and birth and whose wildness is always ready to move on to destruction and death. He is life which, when it overflows, grows mad and in its profoundest passion is intimately associated with death. This unfathomable world of Dionysus is called mad with good reason.

Nietzsche: Dionysus, Tragedy, and the Affirmation of Life (All Passages by Nietzsche)

“Either through the influence of the narcotic drink, of which the hymns of all aboriginal humans and peoples speak, or with the invigorating springtime’s awakening that fills all nature with passion, these Dionysian impulses find their source, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete loss of self-recognition. Even in the German Middle Ages singing and dancing crowds, ever increasing in number, moved from place to place under this same Dionysian impulse.... There are people who, from the lack of experience or thick-headedness, turn away from such manifestations as from “folk-diseases,” mocking or with pity derived from their own sense of a superior health. But of course these poor people have no idea how corpse-like and ghostly their so-called

“health” looks when the glowing life of the Dionysian swarm buzzes past them.
(Nietzsche)

“The soul that has the longest ladder and reaches down deepest—the most comprehensive soul, which can run and stray and roam farthest within itself; the most necessary soul that plunges joyously into chance; the soul that, having being, dives into becoming; the soul that has, but wants to want and will; the soul that flees itself and catches up with itself in the widest circles; the wisest soul that folly exhorts most sweetly; the soul that loves itself most, in which all things have their sweep and countersweep and ebb and flood—” But that is the concept of Dionysus himself.—Another consideration leads to the very same result. The psychological problem in the type of Zarathustra is how he that says No and does No to an unheard-of degree, to everything to which one has so far said Yes, can nevertheless be the opposite of a No-saying spirit; how the spirit who bears the heaviest fate, a fatality of a task, can nevertheless be the lightest and most transcendent—Zarathustra is a dancer—how he that has the hardest, most terrible insight into reality, that has thought the “most abysmal idea,” nevertheless does not consider it an objection to existence, not even to its eternal recurrence—but rather one reason more for being himself the eternal Yes to all things, “the tremendous, unbounded saying Yes and Amen.”—“Into all abysses I still carry the blessings of my saying Yes.”—But this is the concept of Dionysus once again.”

“Was it not exactly in the most creative periods of their youth that the Greeks possessed the will to tragedy?”

“One sees that I, at that time, misunderstood the essential character of philosophical pessimism as well as of German music – that is their romanticism... Regarding all aesthetic values, I now use this main distinction:... Is it hunger or overflow which has here become creative?... The desire for destruction, change, becoming can be the expression of superabundant power, big with future (my term for it is the word “Dionysian”). But it can also be the hatred of the misfit, the poor in spirit, the destitute; it is hatred that destroys because it rebels against everything that exists, yes, against being itself... This is romantic pessimism in its fullest expression, be it as Schopenhauerian philosophy of the will or as

Wagnerian music: – romantic pessimism... there could be another kind of pessimism which is classical... this vision belongs to me... I call it a pessimism of the future... Dionysian pessimism.”

“Or is there a pessimism of strength, an intellectual predilection for what is hard, evil and problematic in existence, arising from a plethora of health, plenitude of being?... Is there a pessimism of the future... the Dionysian pessimism?”

“The saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life, rejoicing over its inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types – that is what I call Dionysian.”

“[There are those] who suffer from overfullness of life and want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic insight and outlook on life... and then those who suffer from impoverishment of life and demand of art and philosophy calm, stillness, smooth seas or also frenzy... revenge against life itself... the most voluptuous kind of frenzy for those so impoverished.”

“That life is essentially, in spite of all phenomenal change, indestructibly powerful and joyful, this solace was expressed most concretely in the chorus of satyrs, nature beings who dwell behind all civilization and preserve their identity throughout every change of generation and history.”

“The problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning, whether a tragic meaning. In the first case, suffering is supposed to be the road to a holy life; in the latter, life itself is considered holy enough to justify any immensity of suffering. The tragic man affirms even the hardest lot on earth.”

“Contradiction, the last and final reality? “Yes,” says Dionysus, “that I might make man stronger, more evil and deeper than he is.” “Stronger, more evil and deeper?” I asked, shocked. “Yes,” he said once more, “stronger, more evil, deeper, and also more beautiful”... and saying this, he smiled his Halcyon smile, this Tempter-God.” (The Gay Science)

“Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in

forms, tones, words, the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial - out of profundity. And is not this precisely what we are coming back to?" (Nietzsche, Preface to Second Edition of *The Gay Science*, Fall 1886)

"I have quite a different feeling toward the concept "Greek" that was developed by Winckelmann and Goethe; to me it is incompatible with the orgiastic element out of which Dionysian art grows. In fact I believe that Goethe excluded as a matter of principle any orgiastic feelings from his concept of the Greek spirit. Consequently Goethe did not understand the Greeks. For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian state, that the basic fact of the Hellenic instinct finds expression — its "will to life." What was it that the Hellene guaranteed himself by means of these mysteries? Eternal life, the eternal return of life, the future promised and hallowed in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond all death and change; true life as the continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sex. For the Greeks a sexual symbol was therefore the most sacred symbol, the real profundity in the whole of ancient piety. Every single element in the act of procreation, of pregnancy, and of birth aroused the highest and most solemn feelings. In the doctrine of the mysteries, pain is pronounced holy: the pangs of the woman giving birth consecrate all pain; and conversely all becoming and growing — all that guarantees a future — involves pain. That there may be the eternal joy of creating, that the will to life may eternally affirm itself, the agony of the woman giving birth must also be there eternally.

All this is meant by the word Dionysus: I know no higher symbolism than this Greek symbolism of the Dionysian festivals. Here the most profound instinct of life, that directed toward the future of life, the eternity of life, is experienced religiously — and the way to life, procreation, as the holy way. It was Christianity, with its heartfelt resentment against life, that first made something unclean of sexuality: it threw filth on the origin, on the essential fact of our life." (*Twilight of the Idols*)

"Now we see struggle, pain, the destruction of appearances as necessary, because of the abundance of countless forms pressing into life, because of the boundless fecundity of the world will...That primal Dionysian delight, experienced even in the presence of pain, is the origin common to both music and tragic myth."

“Dionysian art wants to convince us of the eternal delight of existence... Now struggle, pain, and destruction... are seen as necessary...In spite of terror and pity we rejoice in living not as individuals but as part of the life force with whose procreative lust we have become one.”

“the world is becoming and perishing, creation and destruction, without any moral content, in eternal innocence.”

“Now, certain of united victory,
We celebrate the feast of feasts:
Friend Zarathustra has come, the guest of guests!
Now the world is full of laughter, the gruesome curtain is rent,
The wedding day has come for light and darkness.”