



#73 Nietzsche and Dionysus: Tragedy and the Affirmation of Life

In his book *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche wrote:

“Herewith I again stand on the soil out of which my intention, my ability grows – I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus.” (*Twilight of the Idols*)

For the entirety of his writing career Nietzsche was heavily influenced by the ancient Greek god Dionysus – the “god of many forms” and inexpressible depths.

Describing the multifaceted nature of Dionysus, Walter Otto wrote:

“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...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...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.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

The many myths and cults which surrounded Dionysus exerted a great influence on Ancient Greek society, and in them Nietzsche perceived something he sensed as lacking in the modern world – a celebration of what he called a “tragic disposition”. Nietzsche stressed the importance of living with a tragic awareness of life, and asserted that only through the cultivation of such a state could genuine growth, creativity, greatness, and the capacity to truly affirm life, be attained.

“There is only one hope and one guarantee for the future of that which is human; it lies in this, that the tragic disposition shall not perish.” (Nietzsche)

Drawing from Walter Otto’s astounding book, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, as well as from Nietzsche’s philosophical corpus, in this video we will investigate the



nature of Dionysus through the various myths and cults which surrounded this god of the ancient world. In the process, we'll decipher why Nietzsche was consistently enraptured with the figure of Dionysus, and illuminate his ideas on the nature of tragedy and its connection to human greatness and the affirmation of life.

“An intoxicated god”, Walter Otto wrote of Dionysus, “a mad god! Truly an idea which demands our deepest thought.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

In contemplating the meaning and significance of Dionysus, the most appropriate place to start is the myth of his birth. Dionysus was conceived by a mortal woman, Semele, and an immortal god, Zeus. While still in the womb of his mother she was destroyed by a torrent of lightning borne from Zeus. In danger of perishing with his mother, Zeus took the unborn Dionysus from the flames which engulfed his mother, and sewed Dionysus onto his thigh; caring for him until he was developed and healthy enough to set forth in the world.

A child of both the mortal and divine realm, born first from a mortal woman and then an immortal god, Dionysus was referred to in the ancient world as “the twice-born one”; a god of dual nature and paradox, whose essence from the very start differentiated him from other gods as especially enigmatic.

The suffering and death which characterized the myth of the birth of Dionysus prefigured not only his fate, bestowing upon him the epithet the “suffering and dying god”, but the fate of all those who cared for or took an interest in him. Tragedy or madness befell them all. His mother's sister, Ino, for example, who took it upon herself to care for the newborn, and motherless, Dionysus, died in a fit of madness by plunging herself into the sea with her own infant son in her arms.

In all the myths, whenever Dionysus appears, he comes violently and in an alarming manner. His presence awakens a sense of urgency, ecstasy, and terror in the hearts of all within his vicinity. The urgency his presence evokes is due to the inexpressible and agonizing secretive nature of his being, of the fact that he symbolizes “the eternal enigmas of duality and paradox” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*). For what can one do when Dionysus arrives, and one is



confronted with a stark awareness of the perplexing nature of reality, but fall back in euphoria or else lose touch in a transitory insanity.

“The final secrets of existence and non-existence transfix mankind with monstrous eyes...This spirit of duality which distinguishes Dionysus...is the source of the fascination and the confusion which everything that is Dionysiac evokes, for it is the spirit of a wild being. His coming brings madness.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

The madness which his arrival inspires can be fathomed most clearly in the myths of the nymphs and maenads; groups of women who cared for and nurtured the young Dionysus, and who, when he matured into an adult, were possessed by his wild spirit and driven into the mountains, where they nursed the young of wild animals, or else tore them to pieces and devoured their raw flesh.

“The god who sends the mind reeling, the god who appears to mankind in the most urgent immediacy is welcomed and feted by the women in an absolute ecstasy and excess of rapture. They respond to his coming with the behavior of the insane. The myth tells again and again how his fury ripped them loose from their peaceful domesticity, from the humdrum orderly activities of their daily lives for the purpose of making them into dancers in the wilderness and the loneliness of the mountains, where they find him and rage through the night as members of his revel rout.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

The madness of the maenads was not only depicted in bloodthirsty pandemonium, where they devoured the raw flesh of wild animals, and in some myths, the flesh of their own children, but also in paralysis and deathly silence.

“Madness dwells in the surge of clanging, shrieking, and pealing sounds; it dwells also in silence. The women who follow Dionysus get their name, maenads, from this madness. Possessed by it, they rush off, whirl madly in circles, or stand still, as if turned into stone.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

The madness of the maenads is derived from the madness of Dionysus. “The bloodthirstiness of the maenads is the bloodthirstiness of the god himself.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*) As a child, according to the 2nd



century Greco Roman poet Oppian, Dionysus delighted in tearing kids into pieces and bringing them back to life again. He was called, among many other names, “the raging one”, “the mad one”, and “the eater of raw flesh”.

But to focus too heavily on the bloodthirsty madness of Dionysus and his maenads would be to distort his image. For the madness which inheres in his being and which overtakes all those he comes in contact with, is a double sided madness – capable of the most appalling and dreadful acts, but also of the most fertile, life-enhancing, and creative. The madness which afflicts Dionysus and all those who follow him, is a divine madness.

“The madness which is called Dionysus is no sickness, no debility in life, but a companion of life at its healthiest. It is the tumult which erupts from its innermost recesses when they mature and force their way to the surface. It is the madness inherent in the womb of the mother. This attends all moments of creation, constantly changes ordered existence into chaos, and ushers in primal salvation and primal pain—and in both, the primal wildness of being.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

When life begins to stagnate and decay, when one finds oneself in chains, self-imposed or otherwise, when society becomes increasingly repressive and antithetical to the individual’s ability to flourish, Dionysus arrives to break the chains, refresh and replenish the life that was in danger of dying. In the *Bacchae* of Euripides, after being thrown in prison by the king, the maenads suddenly find their chains mysteriously absent, and witness the prison doors which surround them open of their own accord. In myths Dionysus frequently plays the role of “the liberator”, another of the many titles bestowed on him by the Ancient Greeks.

The liberating spirit of Dionysus is embodied in his role as the god of wine, which has the power to animate, arouse, and inspire. It is said that in public festivals which paid homage to Dionysus, streams of wine flowed spontaneously, and grape vines blossomed and ripened in a single day. But, like all aspects which inhere in the figure of Dionysus, wine too has a dual nature: it can enchant, but excessive use can also lead to inebriated destruction and ruin.



If the “god of many forms” can be said to have a basic nature and essence, it is this: that paradox and duality are embodied in his being. “The fullness of life and the violence of death” (Otto) are one and the same, undifferentiated, within him. Dionysus is the god of tragic contrast. In the words of Otto:

“It is true that the worlds of the other gods are not without paradox. But none of these worlds is as disrupted by it as the world of Dionysus. He, the nurturer and the god of rapture; he, the god who is forever praised as the giver of wine which removes all sorrow and care; he, the deliverer and healer, “the delight of mortals”, “the god of many joys”, the dancer and ecstatic lover, “the bestower of riches”, the “benefactor” – this god who is the most delightful of all the gods is also the most frightful. No single Greek god even approaches Dionysus in the horror of his epithets, which bear witness to a savagery that is absolutely without mercy. In fact, one must evoke the memory of the monstrous horror of eternal darkness to find anything at all comparable. He is called the “render of men”, “the eater of raw flesh”, “who delights in the sword and bloodshed”. Correspondingly we hear not only of human sacrifice in his cult but also of the ghastly ritual in which a man is torn to pieces.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

To understand the significance of Dionysus in the modern day, both Walter Otto and Nietzsche thought we must seek out the worldview which lay behind the myths and cults surrounding the god.

“The visage of every true god is the visage of a world. There can be a god who is mad only if there is a mad world which reveals itself through him. Where is this world? Can we still find it? Can we appreciate its nature?” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

The vision of the cosmos Nietzsche perceived as revealing itself through Dionysus was a tragic worldview he believed capable of restoring the dignity and capacity for heroism which the modern world has largely lost.

At the core of this Dionysian tragic worldview is a principle contained in one of the fragments of Heraclitus: “Everything always has its opposite within itself.” In the myths of Dionysus, madness, destruction, and death hover over all those he



comes in contact with, but likewise does the possibility for healing, liberation, bliss, and the removal of all sorrow and care. Dionysus is “the great ambivalent one” who is both “the divine archetype of all triumphant heroes” and simultaneously the “suffering and dying god”. The god of tragic contrast is symbolic of the tragic contrast within all things. He expresses the truth that opposition and harmony, creation and destruction, ecstasy and terror, life and death, are inseparable from each other.

Such a tragic insight into the nature of things can stimulate what Nietzsche called a “Dionysian affirmation of life” – a complete affirmation of the totality of being where the negative and destructive elements are not slandered, explained away, or rejected, but seen as a necessary component of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and therefore as ultimately desirable.

“The saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life... that is what I call Dionysian.” (Twilight of the Idols)

But a “tragic disposition” and Dionysian affirmation of life is not easy to cultivate, requiring a strength of which most are incapable. To attain the capacity to gaze simultaneously into and affirm equally both the “horrors of night” and the “heights of bliss”, to join together “peak and abyss” (Nietzsche), or in the words of Thomas Carlyle, to see the universe as a “mystic temple and hall of doom” and still say Yes to it, requires the rare state of being Nietzsche called “the great health”.

All those who lack this health would be destroyed by a tragic vision of the cosmos. A mere glimpse into the abysses of life would cause them to slander existence like those whom Zarathustra called “the preachers of death” – individuals who in the midst of pain, suffering, or tragic insight, assert “Life is refuted!” (Z), and advocate renunciation and world-weariness.

“They negate life;”, Nietzsche wrote of all those who preach world-weariness, “they slander it, hence they are my antipodes.” (Nietzsche contra Wagner)

Nietzsche found in Dionysus a symbol for his opposition against all those who preach renunciation.



“How differently Dionysus spoke to me! How alien all this resignation was to me!” (Nietzsche)

Within the myths and cults of Dionysus Nietzsche intuited the presence of a “great health” which he believed saturated Ancient Greek culture, enabling the Greek individual to cultivate the strength required to not only endure, but worship as divine, the tragic contrast embedded in the nature of reality:

“The fullness of life and the violence of death are equally terrible in Dionysus. The Greek endured this reality in its total dimensions and worshipped it as divine.” (Walter Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*)

The tragic sensibility which pervaded early Ancient Greek culture can be perceived in their worship of procreation, and their recognition that pain and suffering are necessarily intrinsic to all forms of birth and creation.

“What suffering this race must have endured”, Nietzsche wrote of the Ancient Greeks, “in order to create such beauty.”

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche explained the feeling of sacredness the Ancient Greeks felt towards the pain which precedes birth and creation:

“For the Greeks a sexual symbol was therefore the most sacred symbol...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.” (*Twilight of the Idols*)

For Nietzsche Dionysus symbolizes the justification of pain and suffering both on a personal level, be it the agony of the woman giving birth or the pain and suffering which precedes the creation of oneself or a work of art, as well as on a cosmic level. A Dionysian worldview reveals a universe in which the “boundless



fecundity of the world will” builds up and tears down life forms, worlds, and galaxies in an innocence and agony that conveys the idea that pain and suffering are part of the primordial essence of things, and that to remove them would be to remove life itself in all its beauty and grandeur.

As a result of this tragic worldview “the tragic man affirms even the hardest lot on earth”, realizing that as long as he possesses the “great health”, pain, suffering, and tragedy are to be not only welcomed but worshiped as “the great stimulants of his life”, and that he will only “grow stronger through the accidents that threaten to destroy him.” (The Will to Power)

To attain a Dionysian affirmation of life and not only accept the “horrible, evil, problematic” aspects of existence as necessary, but affirm them as a highly desirable part of the whole, is an ideal that is likely not achievable as a permanent state of being. The proclivity of human beings, in the midst of intense suffering, to become resentful “preachers of death” and long for some form of escape, is far too strong to overcome once and for all. But if a Dionysian affirmation of the world is possible, even as a fleeting and temporary experience, the struggle and effort required to achieve this mode of being is well worth the effort.

For the heights that one scales when one is able to look into the dreadful abysses of life, to experiment with the most painful thoughts and the most extreme form of nihilism, and still be able to emerge from such depths and affirm life – saying Yes to it in its totality – is arguably the highest state a human being can attain:

In a passage from The Will to Power titled “My new path to a “Yes””, Nietzsche conveyed this idea:

“Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary quest for even the most detested and notorious sides of existence...Such an experimental philosophy as I live anticipates experimentally even the possibilities of the most fundamental nihilism; but this does not mean that it must halt at a negation, a No, a will to negation. It wants rather to cross over to the opposite of this – to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction, exception, or selection...The highest state a philosopher can attain: to stand in a Dionysian



relationship to existence – my formula for this is amor fati [love of fate].” (The Will to Power)