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**Frontier between Life and Death: Dionysos<sup>1</sup>**

**ABSTRACT**

*The marginal presence of Dionysus in the Homeric Poems offered a large faction of investigators, the basis for believing in the foreign origin of the god, a native of Thrace, belatedly admitted to the Olympic pantheon. This conviction, underlined by Herodotus' testimony, was revalidated by the ambiguity of the mythical versions, has however never been unanimously subscribed nor in ancient times, nor recently. As son of Semele and Zeus, linked with the wildest and most uncontrolled facets of nature, Dionysos was for centuries the god of vegetation, wine, and natural, disordered and liberating pleasures. But not all the mythical narratives and ritual interpretations associated with him boil down to festivals of unreasonable joy; many are related to death and atonement. The remarkable recurrence of the theme of violent death, which multiply in the framework of some of the versions of the myth seems to indicate poetic treatment, corresponding to a ritual phase of human sacrifice, that is not historically documented in the Greek religion. Closer than any of the Olympians, Dionysos shares with the unfortunate mortals his perishable nature. As the vine that represents it, he is capable of being reborn from its own painful severed finitude. His contradictory nature embodies duality and dissolves into a disturbing coexistence the boundaries. After being worshiped in the Ancient World as a god, through a cult of exceptional projection, Dionysos became an irreducible symbol of a human state of mind: that of antithesis, latent opposition, of rebellion against all mechanisms of oppression and all tyrannies, and against prejudice of all kinds in all times. With his contradictory, enigmatic, and fascinating nature, he further evokes, in the innermost recesses of our unconscious, our unavoidable desire to defy the frontiers of death, and inscribe ourselves into eternity.*

**Keywords:** *Dionysus, Greek mythology, Greek tragedy, Homeric poetry, mysteries*

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## Dionysos, Dual Nature

According to the repository of narratives left by classical Greek and Latin authors, ancient mythology marked a clear boundary between the nature of divine beings, eternal Olympian inhabitants, endowed with immortality and bliss, and that of human beings, industrious and unfortunate inhabitants of the earth, inscribed in the fatality of their mortality. The most absolute distinction between the first ones (superior, predecessors, and, in most cosmogonies, creators), and the second ones (inferior, successors, and creatures), was the distinctive trait that death lent to the immutable bliss of those and to the unmeasurable misfortune of these. If the gods omnipotence allowed them in boredom moments to transgress the luminous frontiers of their ethereal abodes, and to wander through the earthly mire of the world, invading human dreams, homes and lives, it was certain that the seed of divinity became stained by the tragic misery of the harsh soil where it fell.

Homer and Hesiod, to whom antiquity attributed the joint honour of creating the theogony of the Greeks<sup>2</sup>, detailed, in true formulaic conformity, the invasions of the divine into the human world. In this context, the figure of Zeus is particularly striking. He is the supreme lord, who exercises dominion over the unpredictable primordial elements; he has a superior capacity for understanding the world, destinies, and men, and can therefore sanction them with the unequivocal authority of his moral judgment. He also appears regularly referenced with various epithetical notations denoting him as *Father*, and *Father of men and gods*: and if the poetic formulation connotes in abstract the primitive personification of the supreme and primordial power – which generates all, and on whom all beings depend – the mythological narrative associated to his figure the peculiar inflection of a ravished amorous temperament, which came to justify his multiple adventures, and his numerous offspring, not only with goddesses and minor divinities, but also with a variety of mortal women. To his children born of divine mothers, he left the genetic purity of a blessed immortal nature. To those born of mortal women, however, he left in inheritance a mestizo nature of demigods: being superlative like their father in the excellence of some of their qualities, but mortal like their mothers, despite their longing for eternity, each one of them will end up, according to the mythical tradition (sometimes quite controversial), by finding, in the framework of a troubled earthly life, the circumstance where over their path opens the silence of a tomb<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>Herod. (2.53.2) recalls that the systematic definition of the names, characteristics, spheres of action and honors of the gods of the Greeks is owed to both.

<sup>3</sup>All the mortal sons of divinities enjoy the same luck. The worldview of the Homeric Poems is structured precisely on the consistently austere, realistic, and tragic conviction that the hero bases his excellence on his ability to face, with unconditional courage, the hostile forces of the world, and the tragic inevitability of death, which touches and takes everyone. Even the well-loved human children of the gods, naturally endowed with an exceptional status, see their existence come to an end, as the Iliad attests in the death of Sarpedon at the hands of Patroclus (Book XVI) and that of Achilles, defeated by Paris. The tragic depth of the poem lies precisely in the somber lucidity with which the heroes face their own human finitude, always defined by the double inevitability of the natural

What about Dionysos? Critics note that the god presents himself as an enigma to be deciphered not only from the onomastic reference, but also from his mythical biography. Διόνυσος<sup>4</sup> seems indeed to present itself in Greek morphology as a compound, comprising, alongside an obvious first element, the genitive Διο(ς)- of Zeus' proper name, a rather obscure second term<sup>5</sup>. The same enigmatic impression overshadows the contradictory versions of his mythical story: appearing in the framework of the amorous exploits of Zeus with human women, he is, however, an atypical case: he is not a mortal demigod, but an Olympian god in his own right, who, being immortal, has a life trajectory that entails not one, but successive deaths, and rebirths. How does the strict logic of mythical genealogies explain this anomalous and incomprehensible exception? It does not: it only suggests, through the proliferation of narrative versions, the hybrid nature of Dionysos.

### The Oldest Literary Tradition

Curiously, amid the constant turbulence in which the Olympian deities are struggling in the Homeric Poems, Dionysos is mentioned only marginally in four very discrete instances.

In the *Iliad* (VI, 130-40), in the context of the combat between Diomedes and Glaucus, the Greek hero shrewdly expresses his surprise at finding on the battlefield an opponent so audacious and never before seen: is he human or one of the immortals from heaven? The truth, he continues, is that he does not intend to harass any of the immortals, subjecting himself afterwards to the inevitable divine punishment, as documented by the disastrous example of Lycurgus, who had mercilessly pursued with a whip the wet nurses of *the delirious Dionysos*, and forced the young god to precipitate himself into the sea, earned the general hatred of all the divinities: Zeus punished him with blindness, and the wrath of the other gods shortened his life span. In XIV 325, disturbed by an insatiable desire (maliciously provoked by Hera), Zeus suggests to Hera that they devote themselves to the intimate pleasures of love.

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processes of aging and death. Only this lucidity can touch the unyielding heart of Achilles, as he recognises in the senile frailty of Priam, deprived of all his children, a reflection of the same ineluctable fate of his poor mortal father.

<sup>4</sup>Also documented in Greek with the dialectal variants Διόνυσος, Δεύνυσος, Διόννυσος, Ζόννυσος, Δίνυσος, or Διένυσος.

<sup>5</sup>Etymologists have stressed the coincidence that several of the mythical names transmitted by late versions of the god's legend bear a phonetic resemblance to a \*-νυσος-theme: thus, in addition to references to the nymph Νύσα, her wet nurse, and to Νύσος, her husband, to whom the deity once entrusted the city of Thebes, and to several generic allusions to Νύσαι or Νυσίαι, the nymphs of the Nisa, the mention of the hill Νύσα, where the god was supposed to have spent his orphaned childhood, emerges as particularly relevant. Chantraine (1968: s.v. Διόνυσος) subscribes to the hypothesis that all these proper names bear a primitive Thracian root \*sunu-, which would translate the idea of "son of". One faction of the critics recognises, however, that, although ingenious, this, like several other attempts to attribute an etymology to the name of the god, has no secure scientific basis; it is very likely that the connection indicated corresponds only to a popular etymology, supported by a phonetic analogy, which ignores the possible non-Greek origin of the name.

He then sets before her, in contrast to her present vehemence, the long list of passions that have dominated him in the past. Integrated in this ardent catalogue of seven conquests is a brief allusion to Semele, who begot Dionysus, a joy for mortals.

In the *Odyssey*, the god reference occurs in two very brief allusions: the first, in the catalogue of the tortured in the Underworld (XI, 321-325), uttered by Odysseus to the Phaeacians, associated with the figure of Ariadne (who, taken from Crete by Theseus, was killed by Artemis through the testimony of Dionysus); the second, in Agamemnon's description of Achilles funeral (XXIV, 74), where it is mentioned the very precious golden amphora that Thetis presents for the funeral rites of her son Achilles, the work of Hephaestus, which would have been offered to her by Dionysus as a sign of gratitude<sup>6</sup>.

The four Homeric allusions, presented to the audience without the need for explanatory dissertations, presuppose a clear knowledge of the myth of the god. In fact, the same basic thematic indications (about his exceptional genealogy, about his link to wine-growing and to intoxicating ecstasy, and about the violent resistance to his cult) will be taken up without notable deviations in all the later literary developments of the narrative, in clear interconnection with the alternating themes of irrational excess of feeling, love, and death.

Hesiod also reserved a marginal role in his poetic production for Dionysos. When, intent on organising the Greek legendary narratives, he set out to treat in the *Theogony* the origins of the world and of the gods (beginning from Chaos, with the first beings, until arriving, by a continuous succession, at the Olympian gods), he included at the end of the poem a brief allusion to the mortal princess Semele, daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia, to whom Zeus, the supreme god, dispensed immortality, after having begotten with her the illustrious Dionysos (*Theog.* 940-42); the latter, in his turn, marrying the blonde daughter of Minos, Ariadne, justified the generosity with which the Cronide made her immortal and exempt from old age (*Theog.* 947-49). In *Erga*, designed to defend the moral foundation of virtue and work in the sphere of action of men, earthly agents of the superior divine justice, reference is made very briefly to Dionysos as god of the vine (*Erg.* 613-14), in the exposition of useful teachings on agriculture<sup>7</sup>.

Also the poetic collection traditionally known as *Homeric Hymns* consecrates to Dionysos three compositions. The first *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos*, which

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<sup>6</sup>According to the poetic testimony of Stesichorus (PMG, fr.57, ap. schol. ABD II. 23.92), this step, following the allusion of the episode of Iliad VI, 130-4, would suggest the recognition of the god for the affectionate protection given in the past by Thetis, when, tormented by Lycurgus, he took refuge in her arms. Also in Iliad XXIII 92 the shadow of Patroclus, addressing Achilles in dreams, alludes to the same dionysian present, in a verse that Aristarchus athetized, and the Ptolemaic Papyrus 12 omitted. To clarify the issue, see Kirk (1990: 174, ad II.VI, 132-37); Heubeck (1986: 343, ad Od. XXIV, 72-75); and Richardson (1992: 176-77, ad II. XXIII, 92).

<sup>7</sup>The poetic image of the god appears here linked to two epithets which Homer never attributes to him in his poems, πολυγηθής (Th. 941, Erga 614) and χρυσοκόμης (Th. 947). However, the characterisation of the golden-haired god, who inspires many joys, suggests to the memory the Homeric Dionysos, joy for mortals.

begins the collection, appears clearly fragmentary<sup>8</sup>, suggesting a length perhaps rather longer than the present twenty-one verses. It is possible that the composition set out the controversial circumstances of the god's successive births: inspired by the obscure allusion of vv. 11-12 ("Ὡς δὲ τὰ μὲν τρία, *since these things were three...*), critics tend to accept as probable the idea that the lost narrative section of the poem was associated with the origin of the Trieterida festivals, which were celebrated every three years, founded on the mythical version of the three successive births of the god<sup>9</sup>. The *Homeric Hymn VII* narrates in fifty-nine verses a prodigious manifestation of the god<sup>10</sup>, deceitfully involved in a piratical manoeuvre by some Tyrrhenian sailors. Although it does not document any aspect, either mythological or linguistic, that suggests a late period of composition, this poem (endowed with a complete hymnic structure, with an exordium, an authentic narrative sequence, and a formula of farewell), is probably later than *H.H.I*, and found its inspiration in it<sup>11</sup>. The *Homeric Hymn XXVI* describes in thirteen verses the movements of Nysa's nymphs through the woods, following little Dionysos, according to the commitment made before Zeus, who tried to hide the illegitimate son from the terrible jealousy of Hera.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>The last lines of the Hymn (10-21) were transmitted fragmentarily only in the Codex Mosquensis, due to a probable loss of the preceding sheet(s) of the manuscript; since the composition precedes the series of Major Hymns, regularly formed by the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, Homeric Hymn to Hermes, and Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite—and here also preceded by the Homeric Hymn to Demeter—it was deduced that this Homeric Hymn to Dionysus contained a broad narrative section. Verses 1-9 are taken from a quotation by Diodorus Siculus (III 66.3, cf. I 15.7, IV 2.4), who recognizes them as belonging to a Homeric Hymn; verses 8-9, in turn, are quoted again in a scholia to Apollonius of Rhodes (II 1209-15), where they seem to be attributed to the mythographer Herodorus (c. 5th century BC). Christian Friedrich Matthiae, the German philologist who discovered the manuscript in Moscow, associated the two separate fragments, interpreting them as constituent elements of the same composition, an opinion that was later adopted by the other editors of the Hymns. It is possible that an allusion by Athenaeus (653 B) to the vine — which blossoms and bears fruit on the same day — was also part of the same Hymn, perhaps associated with a spring festival that celebrated the miraculous creation of wine.

<sup>9</sup>The first, premature, from the womb of the already dead mother Semele the second, from the thigh of his father Zeus, who thus ingeniously rescues him from death; and, finally, reborn for the third time, still in infancy, through the efforts of Zeus, after having been violently butchered by the Titans.

<sup>10</sup>Because the Tyrrhenian sailors decided to divert the route from Naxos to Asia, Dionysos makes sprout vine and ivy, which cover the ship's mast and rigging, while the branches turn into serpents, the deck fills with animals, and the god metamorphoses into a lion; in panic, the pirates throw themselves into the sea and end up transformed into dolphins.

<sup>11</sup>Perhaps ritually reproducing the mythical narrative of the Hymn, the god in the Anthesteria was processionally taken to the communities in a boat-like car; an Attic κύλιξ from the 6th century BC, by Exekias, reproduces the same scene; Graves (20053: 116) points out that the vessel, shaped like a lunar crescent, and the story of the conflict with the pirates seem to have been inspired by the same representation that gave rise to the legend of Noah's Ark. The epiphanies of Dionysus in the form of Leo, Taurus and Serpent could also be explained by these beings, maybe the symbols of the Tripartite Year Calendar: he was born in Winter in the form of a Serpent (hence the coronation by serpents at birth), he became lion in Spring, and was killed and eaten like a bull/goat/deer in Midsummer; these were also the god's metamorphoses when the Titans attacked him.

<sup>12</sup>In addition to the genealogical notations τέκος Σεμέλης εὐώπιδος, Σεμέλης ἐρικυδέος υἱόν, Ζητὸς καὶ Σεμέλης ἐρικυδέος ἀγλαδὸν υἱόν and δῖον γένος, which reference his mythical origins from the fateful love of Zeus and Semele, Dionysos receives in all three compositions the qualifiers ἄναξ,

Among the many references in classical Greek literature, one of the most relevant sources about the myth and cult of Dionysus is Euripides' *The Bacchae*<sup>13</sup>. The play, performed, together with *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and *Alcmaeon*, at the Urban Dionysia, shortly after the death of the tragediographer, earned him a posthumous first prize. Following the previous poetic tradition, Euripides presents, from the prologue, exceptionally enunciated by the protagonist, Dionysos, the background of the tragic episode. Semele, the human daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia, for whom Zeus is bound in love, struck during the final stage of pregnancy by her lover's incomparable divine radiance, dies; the child, subtracted by Zeus from his mother's dead body, is welcomed in his father's thigh until the end of the gestation. After being born again, he is entrusted to the nymphs of Mount Nysa, who protect him from the sick jealousy of Zeus's legitimate wife. But now adult, he returns from far-off Asia<sup>14</sup> to the hellenic land, and first of all to Thebes, his mother's land, to spread his own cult, and to impose the just punishment on those who deny his divinity, starting with his closest family<sup>15</sup>. In the *parodos* (vv. 64-169) scholars recognize a very important source of information about the Dionysian ritual<sup>16</sup>. The

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βακχεῖος, γυναιμανής, εἰραφιότης, ἐρίβρομος, κισσοκόμης, πολυστάφυλος and πολύθυμος. Except for the first, which presents the invoked divinity, according to Homeric tradition, as a sovereign to whom protection is begged, all the remaining epithets denounce the presence of the god of the irrational phenomena, drunkenness and dissolution of consciousness, which the ritual tradition and drama vulgarised in the Greek world on the margins of the Homeric Poems: he appears, in fact, as the Bacchic god of deep cries, crowned with ivy, and with abundant curls, who disturbs women, assuming the appearance of a goat, to whom many hymns are dedicated.

<sup>13</sup>Rocha Pereira (2011: 27) underlines that *The Bacchae* is a masterful document on the Dionysian religion and the psychic experience that it entails, confronting in depth the human ψυχή, when subjected to forces that go beyond reason and are based on the deepest dimension of the divine. The meaning of drama has been interpreted differently over time: in the 19th century it was considered a palinodia of the author's atheism; the 20th century saw in it a severe condemnation of fanaticism; Dodds and Winnington-Ingram recalled, from it, the very current themes of irrationalism, mystery, and the precariousness of human existence in the face of the limitless forces of the world.

<sup>14</sup>Despite the link to his mother's land, the poet seems to subscribe to the suspicions about the foreign origin of the god: he is in fact not only represented as a recent arrival from Asia, but also he assumes the title of foreigner that Pentheus regularly gives him: "That's where I come from: Lydia is my homeland" (v. 464). In addition, he is still seen as introducing unusual rituals, apparently averse to the Greek mentality, associated with uncontrollable unconscious forces, which deserve a severe resistance from part of the population, here superiorly represented by the sovereign Pentheus.

<sup>15</sup>His aunts Ino, Autonoe and Agave, who slandered the memory of his mother, and his cousin Pentheus, who refuses to worship him. Critics distinguish in the narrative two thiasos, the first, of the Bacchae of Asia, companions of Dionysus, always present, and a second, that of the Theban citizens, an invisible choir of absentees, led by the three royal princesses, sisters of Semele, Agave, Ino and Autonoe, whom the avenging god subdues through the violent sting of madness (vv. 34-35). It should also be noted that Pentheus's discursive references to the Bacchae's actions (vv. 215-240), provoked by indirect information, and always marked by an angle of derogatory subjectivity, tend to underline obscene aspects that never appear witnessed in the utterances of other characters more directly involved in them (the choir of the Asiatic Bacchae, vv. 105-167, and the messengers, vv. 664-670, 679-772).

<sup>16</sup>The *parodos* respects the regular structure of the cult hymns, with the description of the nature and attributes of the invoked god (φύσις), the explanation of its history and origin (γένεσις) and the characterization of its deeds and scopes of action (δύναμις). It also includes explicit references to the costume and insignia of the bacchantes and to the various ritual stages of the procession (the ὄρειβασία, the σπαραγμός, and the ὁμοφαγία).

succession of episodes exposes the violent opposition between the two cousins: while Pentheus, the regal authority, refuses to submit to the new spiritual influence of the stranger, and civilly punishes those who do so, Dionysos exerts this influence superiorly, winning not only by force the delirious adherence of the Theban women<sup>17</sup>, in ecstasy, but also the conscious and sensible affinity of the two noblest elders, Tiresias, the prophet, and Cadmus, the old king.

It is possible that Euripides' interest in the figure of Dionysos – supposedly associated, according to Aristotle's testimony, with the most ancient origins of Greek tragedy<sup>18</sup> – had to do not only with the expressiveness of his cult in Macedonia (where he spent, at the invitation of King Archelaus, the last years of his life), but also with the tragediographer's special propensity to deal with the irrational component of human behaviour<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup>The massive adherence of women to Bacchic rituals does not imply the exclusion of men, as can be deduced not only from the actions of Cadmus and Tiresias, but also from the later reverence of the servant's testimony (vv. 434-450) and of the messengers (vv. 664-774, 1043-1152). On the contrary, it is to be assumed that a secret component (cf. Bacch. 1109) of the ritual, exclusively associated with the role of women, was articulated with another that would imply the participation of the entire πόλις. Ecstasy, which was translated into a change in the state of consciousness, with a momentary alienation of the personality, implied the sensation of the presence of the god, and, as such, was interpreted as the intervention of the divine. It did not correspond to a simple state of intoxication, nor was it exclusively induced by the ingestion of wine, and could even be totally independent of it. As a mass phenomenon, it was propitiated by the activation, at particular times of the calendar (triennially, in winter), of a set of specific rituals: the thiasus of the Maenads, or Bacchae (snatched servants of the god, barefoot, and covered in light clothes, made of deer skins) began a collective procession to the icy peaks of the mountains, where it dedicated itself, in an atmosphere of contagious joy and communion, to an intensification of delirious spiritual strength, through not only frenetic races and dances (ὄρειβασία), with accompaniment of tambourines and flutes, but also of persecution, hunting, and violent laceration of wild beasts (σπαραγμός), and of violent feasting of their raw flesh (ὠμοφαγία). These rituals, described in detail in the second part of Euripides' parodos of *The Bacchae* (vv. 105-167), are also pictorially documented on multiple Greek vases from the VI and IV century B.C. Athenian culture opposed this primitive form of worship, as confirmed by the historical descriptions of the Dionysian festivals, more civilized cultic variants, instituting, outside the city, a procession of women to Mount Parnassus, and, within the urban space, four major festivities, associated with wine tasting and fertility rituals, the Anthesteria, the Leneia, the Rural Dionysia, and the Urban Dionysia. Despite its collective nature, the Anthesteria festival contained secret rituals, performed by groups of women, which involved sacrifices, oaths, and sexual association between the god and the wife of the "king"; these rituals have been controversially associated with vase paintings depicting women engaged in a ritual around the god's image as they pour wine into goblets; fragmentary texts of the tragedians (TrGrFr II 646a) associate the invention of wine with Dionysian ritual initiation. In the Urban Dionysia, also known as Great Dionysia, the great Greek dramatic representations originated in the framework of multiple civil and religious ceremonies. For more details, see Seaford (2006: 17, and 35).

<sup>18</sup>For a long time it was assumed, in the wake of Aristotle's *Poetics*, that tragedy would be associated with the myth and cult of Dionysus. However – and despite the fact that Antiquity has documented, in the paremiographers, in Plutarch and in the *Suda*, the repeated protest of the public, due to the fact that the tragic works presented have nothing to do with Dionysus (οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Δίονυσον) – this work by Euripides occurs as an exception in the list of surviving tragedies, due to its link to the god. For more details, see Lesky (1995: 253 sqq.) and Easterling-Knox (1985: 258 sqq.).

<sup>19</sup>As proven by several of his works, in particular *Medea* and *Orestes*.



### The Myth in the Late Literary Tradition

The most common story, enriched from the first testimonies of epic and tragic poetry, to later mythographers and Orphic Hymns, tells that her mother was Semele, the human daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes and Harmonia, whom Zeus, disguised as a mortal, had seduced. Jealous Hera approaches her disguised as an old nanny, and maliciously encourages the princess, unsure of her lover's identity, to ask him to reveal himself in his true identity. Committed to an oath of love, and unable to resist the insistent claim of the young woman, six months pregnant, Zeus appears to her like a tonitruating lightning bolt. Because he fulminated her with his divine radiance, he manages, however, to save the foetus: removed from the dead body of the mother and implanted in the father's thigh, he eventually comes to light, three months later, in a singularly framed birth. From the testimony of *Bacchae* (vv. 21-32), it was detailed how, incited by jealousy, the princess' own sisters, Ino, Autonoe and Agave, were the first to state that the sudden death of their sister, struck by lightning, was due to the just punishment of Zeus<sup>20</sup>. The little son of Zeus (who receives the epithet of διθύραμβος, "the twice-born", "the child of two exits"<sup>21</sup>) despite his mortal nature, becomes immortal, because he is born, for the second time, of a divine father, who then legitimately grants him immortality.

The mythical versions then differed.

The simplest one recounted how, after being born again from her father's thigh through Hermes, the child was handed over to her maternal aunt Ino and her husband Athamas, who were charged with raising her among their own children, Learches and Melicertes, as if he were a girl, secretly, and protected from Hera's suspicions. But the intuition of the jealous goddess detected the couple's complicity and tormented them both with the sting of madness<sup>22</sup>. To protect his son, Zeus would have metamorphosed him into a little goat (or lamb), and thus presented him, through Hermes, to the five nymphs of the valley of the Nysa, who raised him with honey and endless tenderness. It was there, on mount Nysa, that Dionysos invented wine, for which he would come to be especially celebrated.

Product of a clear syncretism with other mythical variants, such as the Cretan myth of Zagreus<sup>23</sup>, or the Phrygian one of Sabazios<sup>24</sup>, the version transmitted by

<sup>20</sup>The supreme god had, according to them, been indignant because Semele had tried to slanderously impute to him the responsibility for a amorous frivolity with some stranger

<sup>21</sup>Euripides, *Bacch.* 526; Archilochus, fr. 77; Aeschylus, fr. 355 N.4, 5; the term refers to the type of choral verse dedicated primarily to Dionysus, and later to other gods; later, from Plato onwards, it came to connote the emphatic or stilted style. Chantraine (1968) only brings him closer to a set of terms linked to the scope of dance and singing.

<sup>22</sup>The goddess managed to get Athamas to kill her son Learches, after mistaking him for a deer in a hunt, and Ino, also hallucinating, killed little Melicertes, and with him dead threw herself in despair into the sea.

<sup>23</sup>The variant of the Orphic religion (Orphic Fragments, Kern, 34), also transmitted by Nonus of Panopolis (in addition to Diodorus Siculus, Harpocration, Tzetzes, Eustatius, Firmicus Maternus, and by fragment 472 N of Euripides' *Cretans*), associates the figure myth of Dionysus to that of Zagreus. Here it was narrated that, before Hades took Persephone to the Underworld, Zeus had secretly impregnated her; To safeguard her from Hera's suspicions, Zeus delivers the child, Zagreus, to the children of Rhea at birth-either the Cretan Curetes or the Corybans, who, noisily jumping

Apollodorus added to the simple narrative sequence an episode, noting that, immediately after the birth of Zeus's thigh, the Titans, obeying the vengeful impositions of Hera, snatched the child, endowed with horns and crowned with serpents, from the hands of Hermes, who had attended the singular birth. Despite his successive metamorphoses, the Titans cut him to pieces and boiled him in a cauldron. Rescued and reconstituted by the arts of his paternal grandmother, the goddess Rhea, Dionysos came back to life. Only after this second rebirth Zeus would have entrusted him to Persephone, who took him to the court of King Athamas of Orchomenus and his wife Ino, the child's aunt, with the recommendation that they raise him in disguise in the female chambers, safe from the ominous suspicions of Hera; the discovery of the vengeful Hera would later lead to the irreversible madness of the couple, and the death of Learches, whom the father mistook for a deer, and of Melicertes, annihilated by his hallucinated mother<sup>25</sup>.

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around their cradle, as they had previously done around Zeus's own. In Dicte, to protect him from Kronos' attack. Prompted by Hera's resentment, however, the Titans discover and try to seduce with various toys (a pinecone, a spinning wheel, golden apples, a game of astragalus and a tuft of wool) the child, who successively assumes the appearance of Zeus, of Kronos, of a lion, a horse, a serpent, a tiger and a bull; finally, the Titans manage to pounce on her, and tear her apart, eating her flesh raw. Athena manages to interrupt the brutal feast, rescuing Zagreus' heart for immortality, housed in a plaster statue, to which she breathes life, and burying the bones in Delos; Zeus blasts the Titans with his thunderbolt. The Fables of Hyginus added the detail that the blood of Zagreus, shed in the attack of the Titans, and collected by Athena, was given by Zeus to Semele, as a fertilizing potion, before she conceived Dionysus; from the drops lost on the ground the first pomegranate tree would sprout, whose ripened fruit opens like a bloody wound; this fruit will appear as a symbol of death and promise of resurrection in mythical versions associated with Persephone, the queen of the Underworld, and her mother, the bereaved Demeter; it was precisely the themes of death and resurrection that presented themselves as the foundation of the whole mystical dynamism of the Eleusinian Mysteries. The legends of death and resurrection of Zagreus and Dionysus present clear points of contact, despite some differences: in Zagreus, the meat is eaten raw by the Titans, who devour it cooked; the role of adjunct intermediary assumed by Athena in the legend of Zagreus is played in that of Dionysus by her grandmother Rhea. Graves (2005<sup>3</sup>: 125) notes that the cruelty of the myth evokes the Cretan initiatory ritual sacrifice, celebrated annually, of a teenager, who, as a substitute for Minos, the Bull-king, reigned for a day, performing the dance of the five seasons each of the five animals of Zagreus metamorphosis) and was finally eaten raw; the tradition of this ritual sacrifice was transmitted through the Orphic priests, who used the five gifts as symbolic references, and in the sacrifice they substituted a calf for the boy who was originally eaten raw.

<sup>24</sup>Documented in a scholium to Arist., *Vesp.*, 9, in addition to Diodorus Siculus (IV, 4, 1), Cicero (*Nat. Deor.* III, 23, 58), Aelian (*NA*, XII, 39), Strabo (X, 58), Macrobius, Clement of Alexandria, and others. Graves (2005<sup>3</sup>: 47 and 115) recalls that J.E. Harrison was the first to point out (*Proleg.* VIII) that Dionysus, the god of wine, may have superimposed himself on the Dionysus god of beer, named Sabazios, and it is possible that the tragedy derived not from *τράγος*, goat, as intended, but from *τράγος*, spelled (the grain with which beer was made in Athens); on ancient vases, the companions of Dionysus are represented as horse-men and not goat-men; the Lydian and Cretan goat was associated with wine, and the Helladic horse with beer and nectar; hence Lycurgus is quartered by horses, like the primitive Dionysus; these legends indicate, according to the author, the spread of the culture of the vine to many places, including the East.

<sup>25</sup>The narrative of his youth, and the title *Dendrites*, seem to link Dionysus to a primitive deity of the vegetation of the Aegean world, associated with the Spring Festival, which marked his emancipation. His ability to nullify opposites is poetically translated by the epithet *δίμορφος*, and by the narrative details that show him in successive manifestations of anthropomorphism (assuming sometimes the beardless / feminine facet, sometimes the bearded / masculine one) and

As an adult, and in spite of the effeminate nature under which he was disguised, Hera recognised him as the secret son of Zeus, and drove him mad, making him go on an itinerant tour of the world<sup>26</sup>, accompanied by a retinue of hybrid beings<sup>27</sup> – the tutor Silenus, the Satyrs, and some Centaurs – and the Maenads, or Bacchae, who, simply human, but possessed by the mystical madness supernaturally inspired by Dionysos, wandered in ecstasy through the fields and mountains. Armed with the thyrsos (the sacred staff), swords, serpents, and noisy horns, and given over irrationally to the orgiastic spirit of the god's ritual celebration, the elements of this unusual thiasus sowed terror. While the god on the one hand peacefully propagated the vine in Egypt<sup>28</sup>, on the other hand, on his way to India, he engaged in brutal confrontations<sup>29</sup>. On his way back to Europe, he passed through Phrygia, where his grandmother Rhea, purifying him of the crimes committed during the previous phase of madness, initiated him into the Mysteries. Having invaded Thrace, he was confronted at the mouth of the River Stromon with the fierce resistance of Lycurgus, king of the Edonians, who imprisoned all his retinue, while the god, throwing himself into the sea, took refuge in Thetis cave, as Homer mentions in the *Iliad* (VI, 130-140). Apollodorus also details (III, 5.1) how Reia helped the prisoners to escape, and drove Lycurgus mad, who,

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theriomorphism. In this context, his upbringing takes place in disguise, as a girl (like Achilles), which Graves (2005<sup>3</sup>: 114 sqq.), associates with a Cretan custom of keeping young people in obscurity, in female quarters, until they reach puberty. The description as a child endowed with horns (without knowing whether of a goat, deer, bull or ram) varies according to the places of worship: Apollodorus says it disguised as a lamb to escape Hera's jealousy, which seems to point to the Cretan cult of Dionysus-Zagreus, the wild goat with huge horns; as a deer, Dionysus identifies with Learches, son of Athamas murdered by his father; in Thrace, he appears represented by a white bull, and in Arcadia (land of sheep, where the Sun enters the sign of Aries in the Spring Festivals), Hermes transforms him into a ram.

<sup>26</sup>Graves (2005<sup>3</sup>: 114) notes that the legend of Dionysus has to do with the spread of the cult of the vine across Europe, Asia and North Africa. Wine culture, not invented by the Greeks, must have been imported from Crete; it is possible that it extended through Libya, through Palestine, and from there to Crete, to India through Persia; the orgies around wine in Asia Minor and Palestine, in the Tabernacles, would possibly have affinities with the orgies of the Bacchanals.

<sup>27</sup>Burkert (1993: 318) notes that the constant company of the divine thiasus reproduces, in the mythical narrative, the collective representation of the phenomenon of mystical enthusiasm, not experienced by a single individual, but spreading in an almost contagious way through the group, in order to blur the boundaries of personality and individual consciousness in a mechanism of collective metamorphosis. The mythical tradition, touched upon in Virgil (*Buc.* VI) and Herodian (VIII, 138), and detailed in later authors such as Apollodorus and Clement of Alexandria, recognized Silenus as a wise and experienced winemaker, a deformed son of Pan or Hermes and of a nymph, who was responsible for instructing little Dionysus in the secrets of her art. The Satyrs were, in turn, like Silenus, geniuses of nature, endowed with a hybrid nature, between the human and the bestial; Centaurs, also sometimes incorporated into the god's drunken procession, were monstrous creatures, regularly brutal, that combined the bust of men and the body of horses.

<sup>28</sup>Enjoying the hospitality of king Proteus in Pharos and, supported by the Libyan Amazons of the Nile Delta, conquering one of his first military successes, forcing the Titans to give back the throne to the deposed king Ammon.

<sup>29</sup>Near the Euphrates, he flayed alive a fellow traveller, king Damascus, who had dared to axe a vine from his vineyard; he had to build a bridge of ivy and vines over the violent waters of a river, which Zeus helped him to cross on the back of a tiger; and only after much resistance did he conquer the territory, bequeathing to the people the cultivation of vines and many laws, and founding magnificent cities.

mistaking him for a vine, chopped up his own son Dryas with an axe; contaminated by such a horrendous crime, the Thracian soil became barren, until, obeying the instructions of Dionysos, the Edonians quartered the king, hitching him on Mount Pangeus to four powerful horses.

Multiple sources detail several other sinister episodes of violent resistance to the ravishing influence of the god. Thus, when Dionysos invaded Thrace, Orpheus did not hasten to honour him, proclaiming instead to the Thracians, who listened to him with respect, Apollo's superiority over other gods, and censuring human sacrifices. Inspired by the vengeful god, the Maenads waited for their husbands to enter the temple of Dion, where he officiated, and armed with the spears (which the latter had laid at the door), they slew all the men, including Orpheus<sup>30</sup>. It was also said that since Aeneas was the first mortal to whom Dionysos gave a vine, Icarius was the first to make wine of its fruit; because the shepherds to whom he gave it to taste did not mix water with it, hallucinated by the effect of the drink, which they supposed to be a spell, they killed Icarius, and hid his corpse.<sup>31</sup> Like Euripides in *Bacchae*, Theocritus and Ovid<sup>32</sup> also detail the tragic return of Dionysos to Boeotia: having at Thebes associated several women with his orgiastic cult on Mount Citeron, he suffered the persecutions of King Pentheus, son of Agave, one of Semele's sisters; either by induced madness, or by divine metamorphosis, the king imprisoned instead of the god (his cousin), a bull, while the Maenads, escaping, fled to the mountains, and in frenzy attacked all the calves they could find; inflamed by the delirium of wine and divine ecstasy, mistaking Pentheus for an animal, they severed him, and his mother herself beheaded him. Similarly, in Orchomenus (Plut., *Quaest.* 38), the three daughters of Minyas (Alcithoe, Leucippe and Arsippe) refused to take part in the orgies, even though Dionysos, disguised as a woman, came to invite them himself. Violently resentful, the god metamorphosed himself before them into a lion, a bull and a panther, and drove them so mad that Leucippe offered up her own son Hippasus as a sacrifice, whom the three sisters killed and ate raw, scampering frantically over the mountains until a divinity (either Hermes or Dionysos himself, according to different versions of the myth) metamorphosed them into birds. After winning the acceptance of all of Boeotia, the god's journey, spreading joy and terror, proceeded to the Aegean islands: following the episode narrated in the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos VI*, and repeated in Apollodorus and Ovid, several sources allude later to the god's amorous adventures at Naxos, where Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus, bore him the children Oenopion, Thoas, Staphylus, Latramys, Euanthes and Tauropolis<sup>33</sup>. From Naxos, Dionysos proceeded to Argos and punished the heroic

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<sup>30</sup>Whose body they lacerated, and whose decapitated head they cast into the Hebros; the head, floating, went singing to the island of Lesbos.

<sup>31</sup>His daughter, Erigone, came later to find him and in despair committed suicide; by the just intervention of Athena, all the young girls in the vicinity followed his example, until the oracle of Delphi demanded reparation, through the punishment of the criminal shepherds, and propitiatory rituals for the victims at the grape harvest festivals.

<sup>32</sup>Theocr. (Id. XXVI), and Ovid (Met. III, 714 sqq.).

<sup>33</sup>About other amorous adventures of Dionysus, it was told (Paus., IX, 31,2; sch. to Apoll. of Rhodes I, 932) that after having given the son Hermaphroditus to Hermes (who interceded in his favor in the dispute raised by Hephaestus betrayed), Aphrodite also yielded to the wooings of

resistance of Perseus by driving mad all the women of the country, who killed and devoured their own living children; Perseus, reconsidering, erected a temple to the god. At last, having established the cult throughout the world, Dionysos ascended to heaven, taking a place at the right hand of Zeus in the council of the Twelve Olympians<sup>34</sup>.

## Conclusions

The very marginal presence of Dionysos in the Homeric Poems has provided a large faction of researchers, headed by Erwin Rohde (1925), with grounds for believing in the foreign origin of the god, a native of distant Thrace, and belatedly admitted to the Olympian pantheon. This conviction, which is underlined by Herodotus testimony and revalidated by the ambiguity of mythical versions (which tend to insist on the vagueness of his birthplace<sup>35</sup> and the cultural resistance to which he was subjected throughout his life), nevertheless comes up against two major difficulties. If, on the one hand, it has never been unanimously subscribed to since antiquity, it has also recently been called into question by unavoidable archaeological discoveries. In fact, in addition to very old testimonies of two Linear B tablets of Pylos (Py Xa 06 and Py Xa 1419, from the bronze age, around the 13th century BC)<sup>36</sup>, also the first votive inscription in the temple of Ayia Irini

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Dionysus, and gave birth, in addition to this adulterous adventure, to Priapus; through the malicious intervention of Hera, who – the goddess of legitimate marriages, and a wife regularly betrayed by her husband's fiery temper – abhorred illicit manifestations of promiscuity, the child was born misshapen, endowed with enormous genitals, and became a gardener; in his representations he brings a pruning shear. Graves notes that the figure of Hermaphroditus, represented as a young man of extravagant physique, with female breasts and long hair, as well as the androgynous (or bearded female) counterpart, and figures of effeminate gods, such as Dionysus, would correspond to transitional periods. from the old matriarchal to the patriarchal social and religious system.

<sup>34</sup>Once Hestia had ceded to the rebellious young god the place at the divine table. Some late versions of his myth detailed how he won for his mother a post among the immortals: indeed, after descending into Tartarus, and bribing with a gift of myrtle Persephone, he freed from the fetters of death Semele, who went up with him to the temple of Artemis at Troezen, and was afterwards presented to the fellow Olympians as Tione, so as not to stir up resentment; Zeus welcomed her with hospitality, and Hera resigned herself.

<sup>35</sup>If it is true that the first birth in Thebes, the land of origin of his human mother, Semele, can be assumed, it is never clear in what distant territory, in exceptional circumstances, the second birth took place, of Zeus' thigh, assisted by Hermes, nor where would the secret cave be located where, according to the oldest reference in the myth, that of the episode of Lycurgus (alluded to in II.VI, 130 sqq., and in H.H.I and XXVI), the nymphs of Nisa spared him, through from the turbulent rituals of the Curetes or Corybans, to the baleful jealousy of Hera. The fact that in The Bacchae he assumed himself as a newcomer from Thrace would prove that the region of Boeotia soon became an important center for the diffusion of the cult of the god.

<sup>36</sup>It is supposed, but without much substantiation, that the first written records containing its nominal reference, the clay tablets of Pylos and Crete, associate him with wine; this link between the god and wine will later appear attested in the oldest Greek poetry and in the Athenian vase painting of the VI and V century, often decorated with images of the god and his entourage of silens and satyrs, in the harvest or in the transport of grapes and wine; the oldest, from the Attic δῖνος of Sophilos (c. 570 BC), and the slightly more recent Clythias (the so-called "French Vase" of Florence) are well known, representing with small variations the marriage of Thetis and Peleus:

in Keos, as a sanctuary of Dionysos, seems to prove that the god was already recognised in the Mycenaean world.

Seaford (2006) points out a platform of understanding for the divergent interpretations: more than endowed with a scarce relevance, the first literary testimonies seem to present Dionysos as a fragile young god<sup>37</sup>, living an ideological marginality. Far from the aristocratic glitter of the polis and heroic society, to which the Olympian gods lend religious support, he appears relegated to a very discrete shadow, not only because of his rebellious youth, but also due to the essentially agrarian framework which he tutors, as divinity of vegetation. The communal festivals and the cult-mystery where he manifests himself, and his extraordinary capacity to break the barriers of the individual, plunging the conscious identity of man into the collective unconscious, also underline Dionysos essential marginality.

As the son of Semele (the earth mother) and Zeus (the fertilizing ray of the heavens), associated with the wildest and most uncontrolled facets of nature, Dionysos was for centuries the god of vegetation, wine and natural, disordered and liberating pleasures. Capable, with the enigmatic power of his ecstatic epiphany, of capturing man's conscience, he encourages him to free himself from his own contingencies, and to overcome the restraints imposed by the moralising forces of the social order. The mythical development that makes him reborn for the second time from his father's thigh may be interpreted not only as the logical expedient to legitimise his unusual immortality, but as a narrative framework tending to convey, by the rejection of matriarchal antecedents, a new patriarchal phase of religion.

The inflexible hatred of Hera for Dionysus and his attributes and ritual ambit, mirrored in many of the hostilities with which the human characters welcome him in the mythical narrative, seems to reflect a first conservative mechanism of opposition to the Dionysian cult, which would have spread, mainly by women, in a truly contagious outbreak, irradiating through all the civilized cities of the Greek world, probably from the reinvigoration of pre-Hellenic autochthonous elements. Towards the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 6th centuries, once the initial resistance to the ritual use of wine and to the behavioural extravagances of the Maenads had been overcome, the authorities decided to approve the cult, instituting official festivities in honour of Dionysos. Similarly, the later mythical developments note that Dionysos is welcomed on Olympus, where he not only replaces Hestia at the convivial table, but also manages to legitimise the presence of his mother Semele in the face of the resignation of the jealous Hera. It is therefore probable that, similarly to that development of the myth, his relevance in

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Dionysus, in the first place of the nuptial procession, barefoot and on foot, more informal than all the other invited deities, offers the groom a bunch of grapes as the first fruit of nature, which he receives, already culturally transformed into wine, in a chalice. Apulian vase paintings depict wine flowing directly from the grapes, similar to the testimony of Sophocles (fr. 253), who refers to magical vines capable of producing ripe grapes in a single day. The Anthesteria festival, celebrated in his honor in many Ionian communities (but above all known for its projection in Athens), was the festival of the premiere of wines produced in the previous autumn.

<sup>37</sup>In the episode of Lycurgus, Dionysus is a child who runs away in terror in search of the protection of a maternal lap.

Greek religion became established in a late phase, between the 9th and 8th centuries BC (which specialists call "the Dionysian awakening"), subsequent to that of its real knowledge by the faithful.

The contradictory nature of this god, who embodies duality and dissolves in a disturbing coexistence the frontiers – of life and death, of joy and pain, of individual and collective, of man and nature, of social and savage – founds the essential contrast, already clearly addressed by the authors of antiquity, between the impulse tutored by Dionysos, of the amoral exacerbation of the senses, and that of the luminous Apollo, of the rational spirit. This notation, modernly developed by Nietzsche<sup>38</sup>, has informed the most recent investigations about the god, and his peculiar nature.

While Homer (*Il.* XIV, 325) refers to Dionysos as "joy to mortals", *χάρμα βροτοῖσιν*, other authors endeavour to describe how nature gushes forth joy at their passing: from the stones, pierced by the thyrsi of the maenads, flow fountains, and from their dancing feet spring flowers; when possessed, they cause milk and honey to gush from the rivers (*Pl. Ion* 534 a); and no stronghold of nature remains indifferent, but rather enthusiastically joins in the bacchanal if they invoke the god (*Euripides, Bacch.* 724-27).

But, contrary to what one might expect, not all the mythic narratives and ritual interpretations associated with Dionysos boil down to festivals of inordinate merriment; many of their elements have to do with death and atonement, as seems to be referred to in the myth of Icharius, the Athenian farmer who, having received from the god the revelation of the production of wine, shared it with his neighbours, and was murdered by them, and of his daughter Ergone, who hanged herself, forcing the institution of an expiatory ritual. The notable recurrence of the fundamental theme of violent death, starting with that of the god himself (Dionysos, Zagreus, or Sabazios), and then developing speculatively, in multiple

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<sup>38</sup>The modern study of Dionysus began with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy, or Hellenism and Pessimism* (1872, 18862). In the 19th century, the work aimed to revalue classical Greek culture, no longer as an example of the simplicity and serene rationality of the spirit, proposed by the conceptions of previous centuries, but as the product of two contrary impulses, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, Nietzsche abstracts from the referential opposition of the two gods, Dionysus and Apollo, a principle: in fact, in the genesis of tragedy, they would be acting in synthesis, as a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic spirit, the Dionysian (the ecstatic disorder) and the Apollonian (the order individualized). Since its publication, Nietzsche's work has been rejected by most Hellenists, who consider it unscientific. Erwin Rohde, who came to expand it with more academic bases, in his *Psyche, The Cult of Souls and the belief in immortality among the Greeks* (1894), defended the idea of an ecstatic experience of the Dionysian, to which he adds the dimension of experience of death and conceptions of immortality. Contrary to Nietzsche, who thought that Dionysus had a Greek origin, Rohde assumed the Thracian origin of the god, which is already contradicted by modern investigations. Rohde in turn influenced R.E. Dodds, who in his commentary on Euripides' *Bacchae* adapted his heritage to Freudian psychology, considering that "resisting Dionysus is repressing the elemental of his own nature". Jane Harrison notes in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) the association of the god with nature (the wine and the bull), in the framework of the scheme of comparative anthropology proposed by J.G. Frazer, emphasizing, more than the link to the myth and literature, the one established with the primitive ritual, which would be the basis of Greek religion.

mythical variants, into the barbaric death of human victims<sup>39</sup>, seems to indicate the poetic treatment of a primitive era, which would correspond to a ritual phase of human sacrifices, not historically documented in Greek religion. With it we can find clear indications of initiation rites<sup>40</sup>, multiplied in the framing of some of the versions of the myth. The generic framing of the myth of Dionysos finds itself in the crucial theme of death, which since Antiquity has radically opened human consciousness to the anguishing certainty of our own finitude, in an unrepeatable solitude. The mythical nature of Dionysos, born the son of a divine father and a human mother, brings him into the classical world tainted with mortality, and allows him to die prematurely. But the surprising enigma of being reborn, from his own rescued heart, or from the bloody sap of his pain, used as a fertilising potion in a new conception exercise, or from the magical breast offered by his father's divine thigh, allows him to assume the status of an immortal-dead.

Much closer than any of the immortal Olympians, Dionysos shares with the unfortunate mortals who the earth nourishes a perishable nature. But, like the vegetation that he protects, and in particular the vine that represents him, because he is capable of being reborn from his own painful and severed finitude, he will end up prefiguring in the spirit of the Greeks the salvific intuition of the resurrection, which gives to the perplexity of all men the hope of a transcendent experience in eternity.

Given its secret character, no clear or detailed information about the nature of the cult of Dionysos has survived. It is believed that the mysteries, having as their earthly pretext the explicitness of techniques for cultivating grain, would culminate in the revelation of practices of transcendent beatitude; the ultimate meaning of human life would appear connoted with the symbolism of the seed, which rots under the earth but re-emerges from death to a new life, like the god himself. We can therefore deduce that the mystical cult would centre on the theme of death-rebirth, and that most initiates (foreigners, outlaws, slaves and especially women), enjoying in some way a marginal social status, would feel peculiarly attracted by the promises of liberation and transcendent happiness that the god guaranteed. It is likely that, in mystical initiation, wine, that enigmatic fluid of nature, and the intoxication it provokes were interpreted as a gift from Dionysos, which, more than nourishing him, granted man the grace to free himself from pain and all limitations.

After having been worshipped in the ancient world as a god, by means of a cult of exceptional projection, Dionysos ends up assuming himself to the consciousness of men of all times as an irreducible symbol of a mental state, that of antithesis, of latent opposition, of rebellion against all mechanisms of oppression and all tyrannies, and against prejudices of all kinds. With its contradictory,

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<sup>39</sup>Of particular relevance are the deaths of boys or men (Learches, Melicertes, Hippasus, Lycurgus and his son Drias, King Damascus, Pentheus, Icarus, Orpheus and the Thracians, and others), but also of various female figures, Semele, Ino, Ariadne, Erigone, somehow linked to the close family and affective circle of Dionysus.

<sup>40</sup>As evidenced in the episodes of capture (through symbolic toys), death, and cooking or ingestion of the divine child in the episode of Zagreus (the first Cretan Dionysus), and of Dionysus, and various ritual dives (such as that of Ino and Melicertes, or of Dionysus fleeing Lycurgus or crossing the Tigris).



enigmatic and fascinating nature, it also evokes, in the innermost recesses of our unconscious, the unavoidable desire we have to challenge the frontiers of death and inscribe ourselves in eternity.

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