

## Nietzsche and Dionysus

“Hat man mich verstanden? *Dionysos gegen den Gekreuzigten ...*”

“Have I been understood? *Dionysus against the Crucified ...*”

These two sentences, the final lines of his philosophical autobiography *Ecce Homo* (1888/9), were some of the last words that Friedrich Nietzsche committed to paper, and they contain both the thing that he is best known for today as well as something unexpected. Popular representations of Nietzsche tend to focus on the antagonism that he evokes between his philosophy and Christianity, represented in his hostility to Jesus Christ, “the Crucified”. For most of his readers he is the philosopher of nihilism, and, depending on their interests, his famous pronouncement that “God is dead” is either the eternal motto of teenage alienation or a dangerous anticipation of Hitler and Nazism. But for the purposes of this short essay I want to focus on the other part of Nietzsche’s statement. For Nietzsche mentions another god here; and I would argue that his identification with the Greek deity Dionysus opens up a very different window onto his philosophy.

An important context to understanding Nietzsche’s Dionysus is the fact that, in the early part of his career, Nietzsche was a professional classicist. He obtained a professorship in classical philology at the University of Basle at the astonishingly young age of 24, and worked at the university for around a decade before resigning due to his failing health and beginning a life of nomadic philosophising. As scholars like myself and James Porter have argued, his early philological career deeply informed the development of his later thought, influencing both the style of his cultural analysis (for example, his close attention to words and their usage in *Genealogy of Morals*), as well as the content of his thinking, particularly in the recurrence of characters from the ancient world like Dionysus and Socrates. Nietzsche’s use of ancient symbols is not least significant for the influence it would later exert on the tradition of continental philosophy. Thinkers including Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Sarah Kofman and Hélène Cixous would have been unlikely to turn so readily to the myths and texts of ancient Greece if it hadn’t been for Nietzsche’s example (though, of course, Freud’s Oedipus offered another inspiration for using Greek myths as the springboard for philosophical thinking in the twentieth century).

If we turn to *The Birth of Tragedy*, we can better grasp the appeal of Nietzsche's Dionysus. Nietzsche begins the work thinking about this Greek god in opposition with another one, Apollo. Apollo stands for measure, limit and reason, and his primary resonance is with the plastic art forms, whether the solid lines of architecture and sculpture or the patterned words of poetry. Dionysus, by contrast, stands for chaos, formlessness and potential, and his characteristic aesthetic media are the invisible tones of music. This is partly due to Nietzsche's desire to present the famous composer Richard Wagner, a close friend of his at the time, as the modern instantiation of the Dionysiac spirit; but it is also due to his wish to put forward a fresh understanding of ancient Greece that is not reducible to its surviving texts and objects and which conveys something of the raw spirit of their existence. Nietzsche's masterstroke in *The Birth of Tragedy* was to make Dionysus into a symbol for the liveliness and excitement that exists in the legacy of ancient Greece, lurking behind all of the beautiful achievements than one can see in a museum. Nietzsche was clear, however, that this was not simply a positive thing, and that the possibility of untrammelled liberation from rational behaviour was something the Greeks themselves could come to despise. He even suggests at one point that the Greeks so often produced artworks and cultural achievements in the spirit of Apollo because the feelings evoked by their Dionysiac side were violent, tumultuous and horrifying.

Written at the start of his philological career, Nietzsche hoped *The Birth of Tragedy* would make his name as a scholar. Sadly, this was not how it turned out, as the book received bad reviews from his rivals and crushing silence from his colleagues. This negative response was so effective in damping Nietzsche's ambitions that, when he began to gain international fame in the late 1880s, his early readers were often surprised to find he had ever been a classicist at all. But his Dionysus has lived on in other ways. Thomas Mann took the title of his 1924 novel *The Magic Mountain* from a phrase in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the idea of Dionysiac dissolution is almost ever-present in his 1912 novella *Death in Venice*; artists like Pablo Picasso and Mark Rothko incorporated the Dionysiac vision of antiquity into many of their ground-breaking paintings; and in the late sixties the Nigerian Nobel Prize-winning playwright Wole Soyinka wrote a theory of Yoruba tragedy that was inspired by Nietzsche's ideas, and later wrote it into one of his own plays, *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973).

So consider, as you sit watching this production of Euripides' *Bacchae*, whether you can glimpse any Nietzschean resonances in the action on stage. When Euripides has Dionysus drive the women of Thebes out onto the mountains after they refuse to worship him, are we seeing

punishment or liberation? When the aged Cadmus and Teiresias hesitantly start to dance for the god, are we watching a breakdown in royal authority or the acceptance of forces greater than human understanding? Is the conflict between Pentheus and Dionysus a meditation on the competing claims of earthly and divine power, or a primal antagonism between the forces of destruction and the forces of life? Is a text like the *Bacchae* simply a document of an ancient culture, there to be translated and understood, or a spur to approaching the deep questions that guide human experience? It is part of Nietzsche's influence on our vision of the Greeks that these questions are open to us; but we have to learn to answer them for ourselves.