Dionysus & the “Left-Hand Path”

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Antinous as Dionysos-Osiris, 2nd century, Vatican Museum

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As outlined in one of Friedrich Nietzsche’s first works, the very suggestive Birth of Tragedy, the concepts of Dionysus and Apollo correspond very little to the meaning these entities had in antiquity, especially their esoteric meaning. Nevertheless, we will use their Nietzschean interpretation as a starting point in this text, in order to define certain fundamental existential orientations.

We will begin by presenting a myth.

Immersed in the luminosity and fabulous innocence of Eden, man was beatific and immortal. In him, the Tree of Life flowered, and he himself was this luminous life. But now a new, unheard of vocation emerges: the will to dominate life, to go beyond Being, to possess both the power to be and not to be, the power of Yes and No. That is the Tree of Good and Evil. In the name of this second Tree, man breaks away from the Tree of Life, leading to the collapse of a whole world, in a flash that reveals the realm of him who, according to a hermetic maxim, is superior to the gods themselves, since along with the immortal nature, to which the gods are bound, he also has within his power a mortal nature, and hence, both finitude and infinity, both affirmation and negation (this condition was referred to with the expression “Lord of the Two Natures”).

But man was not equal to this act; a terror seized him, overcame him and broke him. Like a lamp burning too brightly — it is said in a Cabbalistic text — like a circuit charged with an excessively powerful current, the essences were fractured. This was the meaning of the “fall” and of man’s “guilt.” Unchained by terror, the spiritual powers that would have served, instantly precipitated and froze into the form of autonomous, fatal, objective existences. Passively suffered, externalized, and eluding itself, power took on the aspect of autonomous objective existence, and freedom — the dizzying peak that would have initiated the glory of a superdivine life — became the indomitable contingency of phenomena, among which man stumbles, now a fearful and miserable shadow of himself. One can say that this was the curse hurled by the ”murdered God” at the man who was incapable of taking his place.

With Apollo, still understood in Nietzschean terms, the consequences that derive from this failure are further developed. In his basic function, Apollo is the will separated from itself, no longer experiencing itself as will, but rather as “eye” and as “form” — as vision, representation, knowledge. He is the maker of the objective world, the transcendental foundation of the “category of space.” Space, understood as the mode of exteriority, in which things are no longer experienced as functions of the will, but as visible images, is the primordial objectification of fear, of the disgregation of the will and the discharging of its tension: transcendentally, the vision of a thing is the fear and suffering experienced with regard to that thing. And the “manifold,” the infinite divisibility of space confirms this, since it reflects the loss of tension, the disgregation of the unity of the absolute act.[1]

But just as the eye does not have self-awareness, except as a function of what it sees, a being made external to itself by the “Apollonian” function of space is essentially dependent, bound: it is a being in need of external supports, deriving its reality from something outside of itself. This need for external support generates the “category of the limit”: the tangibility and solidity of material things embody it, they are almost the fear-induced caesura that holds the insufficient being suspended at the limits of the “Dionysian” world. It could be called the “fact” of this fear, of which space is the act. A special case of the limit is the law. While he who exists absolutely, without external supports, does not fear the infinite, does not fear chaos, does not fear what the Greeks called apeiron — because he sees reflected in it his own deepest nature as a being whose very substance is freedom — he who is transcendentally insufficient abhors the infinite, flees from it and looks to the law, to the constancy of causal sequences, to predictability and order, for a surrogate for the absolute certainty and possession which he has fallen from. Positive science and every kind of morality could, in a certain sense, fall under the same category of surrogates.

The third creature of “Apollo” is purpose. For a god, purposes can have no meaning, since he has nothing outside of himself — neither the good, nor the true, nor the rational, the pleasant, or the just — on which to base norms or motivations; instead, whatever he wills is good, true, rational, pleasant, and just, simply because he wills it. In philosophical terms, we could say that the “sufficient reasons” of his affirmations are the affirmations themselves.

In contrast, in order to act, beings that are exterior to themselves are in need of a correlation, a motive or, rather, the semblance of a motive. In fact, in decisive matters, apart from trivially empirical contexts, man does not will a thing because he considers it, for example, right or rational, but considers it right and rational simply because he wills it (even psychoanalysis has, in this respect, provided some valuable insights). But he is afraid to descend into the depths where the will or impulse nakedly affirms itself. And now “Apollonian” prudence saves him from the dizziness of something that could occur without a cause and without a purpose, that is, only for itself, and with the same movement with which it liberated the will in the visible world, through the categories of “causality” and so-called “sufficient reason,” it now makes the deep affirmations of the will appear as functions of purposes, practical utility, ideal, and moral motives that justify them and support them.

Thus, the whole life of the great mass of men takes on the meaning of an escape from the center, of a desire to benumb themselves and elude knowledge of the fire that burns within them, and that they know not how to endure. Cut off from Being, they talk, flutter about, seek each other, love each other, and copulate in a reciprocal demand for recognition. They accumulate illusions and erect a vast pyramid of idols: this is the constitution of society, of morality, of ideals, of metaphysical purposes, of the realm of the gods or a consoling providence, all to make up for the nonexistence of a central reason, of a basic meaning. All “shining spots intended to heal the eye which dire night has seared,” in the words of Nietzsche.

However, since the other — whether object, cause, reason, etc. — does not exist in itself, being only a symbolic manifestation of the deficiency of the will with respect to itself, the act through which the will demands recognition from the other, really only confirms this deficiency.[2] Thus, man wanders, chasing his own shadow, eternally hungry and eternally disappointed, incessantly creating and devouring forms that ”are and are not” (Plotinus). The “solidity” of things, the Apollonian limit, is ambiguous; it eludes every grasp, again and again deferring to a later moment the reality that it appeared to guarantee, and through which it enticed desire and need. Thus, besides the category of space, there is the category of time, the law of becoming of forms that arise and dissolve — indefinitely — since if for just one instant of hiatus, man did not act, did not speak, did not desire, he would feel everything disintegrate. His feeling of security among things, forms and idols is as phantasmal as that of a sleepwalker on the brink of an abyss.[3]

Nevertheless, this world might not be the ultimate instance. The I, not being rooted in anything else, being solely responsible for and containing within itself the causes of its predicament, has, in principle, the possibility of resolving it. A tradition is attested concerning the great work, the creation of a “second Tree of Life.” This is the expression used by Cesare della Riviera, in his book The Magical World of the Heroes (Il mondo magico degli Heroi, 2nd ed. Milan, 1605), where this task is associated with “magic,” and generally with the hermetic and magical tradition. Here, the so-called “Left-Hand Path” is of interest. It involves the courage to tear away the veils and masks with which “Apollo” conceals primal reality, transcending forms in order to enter into contact with an elemental world in which good and evil, divine and human, rational and irrational, right and wrong no longer have any meaning. At the same time, it entails knowing how to raise to its peak everything through which the primal terror is exacerbated, and which our natural and instinctive being does not want; knowing how to break through the limit and dig deeper and deeper, inflaming the feeling of a dizzying abyss, and to endure, to persevere in the destructive overcoming that would break other men. Hence the possibility of establishing a connection with the historical cult of Dionysus, not in its “mystical” and “Orphic,” but rather its Thracian form, which had savage, orgiastic, and destructive aspects. And if Dionysus reveals himself in moments of the crisis and collapse of the law, “transgression” can also be included in this existential field. In transgression, the Apollonian veil is torn asunder, and man, confronted with primordial power, plays the game of his perdition or his rising above life and death. Interestingly, the German word for “crime” includes the sense of “to break” (ver-brechen). An act can be said to be guilty as long as it is an act that one fears, that one feels that one cannot take absolute responsibility for, so that one breaks down before it: one unconsciously recognizes that it exceeds one’s strength. But active, positive transgression possesses something transcendent. Novalis wrote: “When man wanted to become God, he sinned, as if that were the condition.” In the Mithraic mysteries the ability to kill or impassively witness killing (even if simulated) was an initiatory test. To this domain belong certain aspects of sacrificial rites, in which the victim was identified with the divinity, yet the sacrificer, transcending accursedness and calamity, had to kill it in order to liberate the absolute and allow it to pass into him, as well as into the community that magically converged in him: transcendence through the tragedy of sacrifice and guilt.

The act may also be directed against oneself, as in certain varieties of “initiatiatory death“: to do violence to life in oneself, in evoking something elemental. Thus, the path that in some forms of tantric yoga is opened to kundalini is called the one in which “blazes the fire of death.” The tragic act of the sacrificer is here internalized and becomes the practice through which organic life at its root is deprived of all support, suspended and dragged beyond itself on the “Royal Path“ of the so-called sushumna, “devourer of time.“

It is well known that historically, the cult of Dionysus was sometimes associated with forms of frenzied, destructive and orgiastic fury, as in the classic type of the bacchante (Dionysus = Bacchus), the maenad, and the corybant. But here it is difficult to separate what actually belongs to the field of experiences mentioned above, on the one hand, from, on the other, mere phenomena of possession, especially when we are not dealing with institutionalized forms connected with a tradition. However, we must always remember that we are concerned with the “Left-Hand Path,” which runs along the edge of the abyss, and, as stated in some texts, resembles walking on a the edge of a sword. The presupposition, both of these practices and in the sovereign vision of life, is the knowledge of the mystery of the transformation of poison into medicine, which constitutes the highest form of alchemy.

Notes

1. In this context we could recall Henri Bergson’s theory, which explains space precisely as “the undoing of a gesture,” in a process that is the reverse of that through which multiple elements in an élan are gathered and fused together in a qualitative simplicity.

2. To this one could associate the deepest sense of the patristic doctrine, according to which the body, the material vehicle, was created at the moment of the “fall” in order to prevent the further fall of souls (see, eg., Origen, De princip., I, 7, 5). Apollo is such a prudent god. Also think of a paralysis due to a fright: it is like a retreat, a backwards leap of the ego, through which what was dominated and understood organically as a living and pulsating body becomes an inert, rigid, alien thing. The objective world is our paralyzed “great body” — frozen or fixed by the condition of the limit, through fear.

3. Cf. C. Michelstaedter, Persuasion and Rhetoric, Part II and passim.