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xi
A STUDY OF DIONYSUS

THE SPIRITUAL FORM OF FIRE AND DEW

Writers on mythology speak habitually of the religion of the Greeks. In this speaking, they are really using a misleading expression, and should speak rather of religions; each race and class of Greeks—the Dorians, the people of the coast, the fishers—having had a religion of its own, conceived of the objects that came nearest to it and were most in its thoughts, and the resulting usages and ideas never having come to have a precisely harmonised system, after the analogy of some other religions. The religion of Dionysus is the religion of people who pass their lives among the vines. As the religion of Demeter carries us back to the cornfields and farmsteads of Greece, and places us, in fancy, among a primitive race, in the furrow and beside the granary; so the religion of Dionysus carries us back to its vineyards,
and is a monument of the ways and thoughts of people whose days go by beside the winepress, and under the green and purple shadows, and whose material happiness depends on the crop of grapes. For them the thought of Dionysus and his circle, a little Olympus outside the greater, covered the whole of life, and was a complete religion, a sacred representation or interpretation of the whole human experience, modified by the special limitations, the special privileges of insight or suggestion, incident to their peculiar mode of existence.

Now, if the reader wishes to understand what the scope of the religion of Dionysus was to the Greeks who lived in it, all it represented to them by way of one clearly conceived yet complex symbol, let him reflect what the loss would be if all the effect and expression drawn from the imagery of the vine and the cup fell out of the whole body of existing poetry; how many fascinating trains of reflexion, what colour and substance would therewith have been deducted from it, filled as it is, apart from the more awful associations of the Christian ritual, apart from Galahad's cup, with all the various symbolism of the fruit of the vine. That supposed loss is but an imperfect measure of all that the name of Dionysus recalled to the Greek mind, under a single imaginable form, an outward body of
flesh presented to the senses, and comprehending, as its animating soul, a whole world of thoughts, surmises, greater and less experiences.

The student of the comparative science of religions finds in the religion of Dionysus one of many modes of that primitive tree-worship which, growing out of some universal instinctive belief that trees and flowers are indeed habitations of living spirits, is found almost everywhere in the earlier stages of civilisation, enshrined in legend or custom, often graceful enough, as if the delicate beauty of the object of worship had effectually taken hold on the fancy of the worshipper. Shelley’s *Sensitive Plant* shows in what mists of poetical reverie such feeling may still float about a mind full of modern lights, the feeling we too have of a life in the green world, always ready to assert its claim over our sympathetic fancies. Who has not at moments felt the scruple, which is with us always regarding animal life, following the signs of animation further still, till one almost hesitates to pluck out the little soul of flower or leaf?

And in so graceful a faith the Greeks had their share; what was crude and inane in it becoming, in the atmosphere of their energetic, imaginative intelligence, refined and humanised. The oak-grove of Dodona, the seat of their most venerable oracle, did
but perpetuate the fancy that the sounds of the wind in the trees may be, for certain prepared and chosen ears, intelligible voices; they could believe in the transmigration of souls into mulberry and laurel, mint and hyacinth; and the dainty *Metamorphoses* of Ovid are but a fossilised form of one morsel here and there, from a whole world of transformation, with which their nimble fancy was perpetually playing. "Together with them," says the Homeric hymn to Aphrodite, of the Hamadryads, the nymphs which animate the forest trees, "with them, at the moment of their birth, grew up out of the soil, oak-tree or pine, fair, flourishing among the mountains. And when at last the appointed hour of their death has come, first of all, those fair trees are dried up; the bark perishes from around them, and the branches fall away; and therewith the soul of them deserts the light of the sun."

These then are the nurses of the vine, bracing it with interchange of sun and shade. They bathe, they dance, they sing songs of enchantment, so that those who seem oddly in love with nature, and strange among their fellows, are still said to be *nympholepti*; above all, they are weavers or spinsters, spinning or weaving with airiest fingers, and subtlest, many-coloured threads, the foliage of the trees, the petals of flowers, the skins of the fruit, the long thin stalks on which
the poplar leaves are set so lightly that Homer compares to them, in their constant motion, the maids who sit spinning in the house of Alcinous. The nymphs of Naxos, where the grape-skin is darkest, weave for him a purple robe. Only, the ivy is never transformed, is visible as natural ivy to the last, pressing the dark outline of its leaves close upon the firm, white, quite human flesh of the god's forehead.

In its earliest form, then, the religion of Dionysus presents us with the most graceful phase of this graceful worship, occupying a place between the ruder fancies of half-civilised people concerning life in flower or tree, and the dreamy after-fancies of the poet of the Sensitive Plant. He is the soul of the individual vine, first; the young vine at the house-door of the newly married, for instance, as the vine-grower stoops over it, coaxing and nursing it, like a pet animal or a little child; afterwards, the soul of the whole species, the spirit of fire and dew, alive and leaping in a thousand vines, as the higher intelligence, brooding more deeply over things, pursues, in thought, the generation of sweetness and strength in the veins of the tree, the transformation of water into wine, little by little; noting all the influences upon it of the heaven above and the earth beneath; and shadowing forth, in each pause of the process, an intervening
person—what is to us but the secret chemistry of nature being to them the mediation of living spirits. So they passed on to think of Dionysus (naming him at last from the brightness of the sky and the moisture of the earth) not merely as the soul of the vine, but of all that life in flowing things of which the vine is the symbol, because its most emphatic example. At Delos he bears a son, from whom in turn spring the three mysterious sisters Æno, Spermo, and Elais, who, dwelling in the island, exercise respectively the gifts of turning all things at will into oil, and corn, and wine. In the Bacchae of Euripides, he gives his followers, by miracle, honey and milk, and the water gushes for them from the smitten rock. He comes at last to have a scope equal to that of Demeter, a realm as wide and mysterious as hers; the whole productive power of the earth is in him, and the explanation of its annual change. As some embody their intuitions of that power in corn, so others in wine. He is the dispenser of the earth's hidden wealth, giver of riches through the vine, as Demeter through the grain. And as Demeter sends the airy, dainty-wheeled and dainty-winged spirit of Triptolemus to bear her gifts abroad on all winds, so Dionysus goes on his eastern journey, with its many intricate adventures, on which he carries his gifts to every people.
A little Olympus outside the greater, I said, of Dionysus and his companions; he is the centre of a cycle, the hierarchy of the creatures of water and sunlight in many degrees; and that fantastic system of tree-worship places round him, not the fondly whispering spirits of the more graceful inhabitants or woodland only, the nymphs of the poplar and the pine, but the whole satyr circle, intervening between the headship of the vine and the mere earth, the grosser, less human spirits, incorporate and made visible, of the more coarse and sluggish sorts of vegetable strength, the fig, the reed, the ineradicable weed-things which will attach themselves, climbing about the vine-poles, or seeking the sun between the hot stones. For as Dionysus, the spiritual form of the vine, is of the highest human type, so the fig-tree and the reed have animal souls, mistakeable in the thoughts of a later, imperfectly remembering age, for mere abstractions of animal nature; Snubnose, and Sweetwine, and Silenus, the oldest of them all, so old that he has come to have the gift of prophecy.

Quite different from them in origin and intent, but confused with them in form, are those other companions of Dionysus, Pan and his children. Homespun dream of simple people, and like them in the uneventful tenour of his existence, he has almost no
story; he is but a presence; the *spiritual form* of Arcadia, and the ways of human life there; the reflexion, in sacred image or ideal, of its flocks, and orchards, and wild honey; the dangers of its hunters; its weariness in noonday heat; its children, agile as the goats they tend, who run, in their picturesque rags, across the solitary wanderer's path, to startle him, in the unfamiliar upper places; its one adornment and solace being the dance to the homely shepherd's pipe, cut by Pan first from the sedges of the brook Molpeia.

Breathing of remote nature, the sense of which is so profound in the Homeric hymn to Pan, the pines, the foldings of the hills, the leaping streams, the strange echoings and dying of sound on the heights, "the bird, which among the petals of many-flowered spring, pouring out a dirge, sends forth her honey-voiced song," "the crocus and the hyacinth disorderly mixed in the deep grass" — things which the religion of Dionysus loves — Pan joins the company of the satyrs. Amongst them, they give their names to insolence and mockery, and the finer sorts of malice, to unmeaning and ridiculous fear. But the best spirits have found in them also a certain human pathos, as in displaced beings, coming even nearer to most men, in their very roughness, than the noble and delicate
person of the vine; dubious creatures, half-way between the animal and human kinds, speculating wistfully on their being, because not wholly understanding themselves and their place in nature; as the animals seem always to have this expression to some noticeable degree in the presence of man. In the later school of Attic sculpture they are treated with more and more of refinement, till in some happy moment Praxiteles conceived a model, often repeated, which concentrates this sentiment of true humour concerning them; a model of dainty natural ease in posture, but with the legs slightly crossed, as only lowly-bred gods are used to carry them, and with some puzzled trouble of youth, you might wish for a moment to smoothe away, puckering the forehead a little, between the pointed ears, on which the goodly hair of his animal strength grows low. Little by little, the signs of brute nature are subordinated, or disappear; and at last, Robetta, a humble Italian engraver of the fifteenth century, entering into the Greek fancy because it belongs to all ages, has expressed it in its most exquisite form, in a design of Ceres and her children, of whom their mother is no longer afraid, as in the Homeric hymn to Pan. The puck-noses have grown delicate, so that, with Plato's infatuated lover, you may call them winsome, if you please; and no one
would wish those hairy little shanks away, with which one of the small Pans walks at her side, grasping her skirt stoutly; while the other, the sick or weary one, rides in the arms of Ceres herself, who in graceful Italian dress, and decked airily with fruit and corn, steps across a country of cut sheaves, pressing it closely to her, with a child’s peevish trouble in its face, and its small goat-legs and tiny hoofs folded over together, precisely after the manner of a little child.

There is one element in the conception of Dionysus, which his connexion with the satyrs, Marsyas being one of them, and with Pan, from whom the flute passed to all the shepherds of Theocritus, alike illustrates, his interest, namely, in one of the great species of music. One form of that wilder vegetation, of which the Satyr race is the soul made visible, is the reed, which the creature plucks and trims into musical pipes. And as Apollo inspires and rules over all the music of strings, so Dionysus inspires and rules over all the music of the reed, the water-plant, in which the ideas of water and of vegetable life are brought close together, natural property, therefore, of the spirit of life in the green sap. I said that the religion of Dionysus was, for those who lived in it, a complete religion, a complete sacred representation and interpretation of the whole of life; and as, in his relation
to the vine, he fills for them the place of Demeter, is
the life of the earth through the grape as she through
the grain, so, in this other phase of his being, in his
relation to the reed, he fills for them the place of
Apollo; he is the inherent cause of music and poetry;
he inspires; he explains the phenomena of enthusi-
asm, as distinguished by Plato in the *Phædrus*, the
secrets of possession by a higher and more energetic
spirit than one's own, the gift of self-revelation, of
passing out of oneself through words, tones, gestures.
A winged Dionysus, venerated at Amyclæ, was per-
haps meant to represent him thus, as the god of en-
thusiasm, of the rising up on those spiritual wings, of
which also we hear something in the *Phædrus* of Plato.

The artists of the Renaissance occupied themselves
much with the person and the story of Dionysus; and
Michelangelo, in a work still remaining in Florence,
in which he essayed with success to produce a thing
which should pass with the critics for a piece of
ancient sculpture, has represented him in the fulness,
as it seems, of this enthusiasm, an image of delighted,
entire surrender to transporting dreams. And this is
no subtle after-thought of a later age, but true to
certain finer movements of old Greek sentiment,
though it may seem to have waited for the hand of
Michelangelo before it attained complete realisation.
The head of Ion leans, as they recline at the banquet, on the shoulder of Charmides; he mutters in his sleep of things seen therein, but awakes as the flute-players enter, whom Charmides has hired for his birthday supper. The soul of Callias, who sits on the other side of Charmides, flashes out; he counterfeits, with life-like gesture, the personal tricks of friend or foe; or the things he could never utter before, he finds words for now; the secrets of life are on his lips. It is in this loosening of the lips and heart, strictly, that Dionysus is the Deliverer, Eleutherios; and of such enthusiasm, or ecstasy, is, in a certain sense, an older patron than Apollo himself. Even at Delphi, the centre of Greek inspiration and of the religion of Apollo, his claim always maintained itself; and signs are not wanting that Apollo was but a later comer there. There, under his later reign, hard by the golden image of Apollo himself, near the sacred tripod on which the Pythia sat to prophesy, was to be seen a strange object—a sort of coffin or cinerary urn with the inscription, "Here lieth the body of Dionysus, the son of Semele." The pediment of the great temple was divided between them—Apollo with the nine Muses on that side, Dionysus, with perhaps three times three Graces, on this. A third of the whole year was held sacred to him; the four winter
months were the months of Dionysus; and in the shrine of Apollo itself he was worshipped with almost equal devotion.

The religion of Dionysus takes us back, then, into that old Greek life of the vineyards, as we see it on many painted vases, with much there as we should find it now, as we see it in Bennozzo Gozzoli's mediaeval fresco of the Invention of Wine in the Campo Santo at Pisa—the family of Noah, presented among all the circumstances of a Tuscan vineyard, around the press from which the first wine is flowing, a painted idyll, with its vintage colours still opulent in decay, and not without its solemn touch of biblical symbolism. For differences, we detect in that primitive life, and under that Greek sky, a nimbler play of fancy, lightly and unsuspiciously investing all things with personal aspect and incident, and a certain mystical apprehension, now almost departed, of unseen powers beyond the material veil of things, corresponding to the exceptional vigour and variety of the Greek organisation. This peasant life lies, in unhistoric time, behind the definite forms with which poetry and a refined priesthood afterwards clothed the religion of Dionysus; and the mere scenery and circumstances of the vineyard have determined many things in its development. The noise of the vineyard still sounds
in some of his epithets, perhaps in his best-known name — *Iacchus, Bacchus*. The masks suspended on base or cornice, so familiar an ornament in later Greek architecture, are the little faces hanging from the vines, and moving in the wind, to scare the birds. That garland of ivy, the æsthetic value of which is so great in the later imagery of Dionysus and his descendants, the leaves of which floating from his hair, become so noble in the hands of Titian and Tintoret, was actually worn on the head for coolness; his earliest and most sacred images were wrought in the wood of the vine. The people of the vineyard had their feast, the *little or country Dionysia*, which still lived on, side by side with the greater ceremonies of a later time, celebrated in December, the time of the storing of the new wine. It was then that the potters' fair came, *calpis* and *amphora*, together with lamps against the winter, laid out in order for the choice of buyers; for Keramus, the Greek Vase, is a son of Dionysus, of wine and of Athene, who teaches men all serviceable and decorative art. Then the goat was killed, and its blood poured out at the root of the vines; and Dionysus literally drank the blood of goats; and, being Greeks, with quick and mobile sympathies, δευτεραιμονες, "superstitious," or rather "susceptible of religious impressions," some among
them, remembering those departed since last year,
add yet a little more, and a little wine and water for
the dead also; brooding how the sense of these
things might pass below the roots, to spirits hungry
and thirsty, perhaps, in their shadowy homes. But
the gaiety, that gaiety which Aristophanes in the
*Acharnians* has depicted with so many vivid touches,
as a thing of which civil war had deprived the villages
of Attica, preponderates over the grave. The trav-
elling country show comes round with its puppets;
even the slaves have their holiday; the mirth be-
comes excessive; they hide their faces under gro-
tesque masks of bark, or stain them with wine-lees, or
potters' crimson even, like the old rude idols painted
red; and carry in midnight procession such rough
symbols of the productive force of nature as the
women and children had best not look upon; which
will be frowned upon, and refine themselves, or dis-
appear, in the feasts of cultivated Athens.

Of the whole story of Dionysus, it was the episode
of his marriage with Ariadne about which ancient art
concerned itself oftenest, and with most effect. Here,
although the antiquarian may still detect circumstances

1 There were some who suspected Dionysus of a secret demo-
cratic interest; though indeed he was *liberator* only of men's hearts,
and *eleutherios* only because he never forgot Eleutherae, the little
place which, in Attica, first received him.