

## DIONYSUS, PLATO AND THE MYSTERIES

Greek myths speak of the transition from Dionysus the Elder (Zagreus) to Dionysus the Younger; this refers to an important change of consciousness. Steiner indicates that the conception of Dionysus the Elder was completely anchored in the life of feelings; it could not have been expressed in the life of thought.<sup>1</sup> The independent ego appeared first as clairvoyance, only later as individual thinking. And quite rightly, the myth presents Dionysus the Elder as the son of Persephone (daughter of Demeter, and therefore related to the earth) and Zeus. The forces of ancient clairvoyance, surging through the element of the Earth and through the forces of the body are, macrocosmically speaking, the elder Dionysus. The macrocosmic forces that accompanied the ego on the path of further incarnation in the human being produced the rudiments of an intellectual culture, but initially completely permeated with imagery. The receding of the type of consciousness associated with Dionysus the Elder was felt as a tragedy by the Greeks, who now faced the spiritual bereavement of life more and more confined to the senses.

The passage from the old clairvoyant consciousness to the new intellectual culture was indicated in Greek myth with the onset of the mission of Dionysus the Younger. Dionysus now stands through the trials of life, and is much more human; he is the macrocosmic representative of the forces of the soul, present within the Ego.<sup>2</sup> Steiner comments, “If he is the macrocosmic counterpart of our intellectual ego-forces, then he must be the intelligence that belongs to all the Earth and extends into the realms of space.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore he was imagined as a being moving from land to land, and the legends say that he went to Europe, Egypt, and as far as Arabia and India.

Both Dionysus beings manifested their impulses through a living human being. Dionysus Zagreus carried out his work among the ancient Atlanteans. The legend of the younger Dionysus says he is born of a human mother, and that he is much closer to human beings than to the gods. Dionysus was one of the old heroes (demi-gods), one of those who set the stage for the transition from the mythical to the historical age. He belonged to the “dim past of prehistoric Greece,” and the journeys of the legends really did take place. “At his earthly death, his soul flowed into the intellectual culture of humanity.”<sup>4</sup> Plato in his dialogue *Cratylus* derives the etymology of Dionysus’ name from didous oionon (oistai—to think): the bringer of thinking. Rudolf Steiner emphasized this characteristic of Dionysus when he pointed out that the Dionysian principle worked on the construction of the brain.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it was Dionysus who brought the gift of wine, whose mission was to break down the blood ties upon which atavistic clairvoyance depended, thereby loosening the forces of the earthbound brain.

Dionysus was considered the first teacher of intellectual civilization. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Wonders of the World, Trials of the Soul, Revelations of the Spirit*, lecture of August 22, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Wonders of the World, Trials of the Soul, Revelations of the Spirit*, lecture of August 21, 1911.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, lecture of August 22, 1911.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, lecture of August 22, 1911.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Steiner indicates that for the Greeks Dionysus' ego had not yet taken full residence in a human being, but was only on the point of doing so. And further, the Greeks imagined that "Dionysus and all belonging to him had such human bodies as were bound to arise if no ego were in them, if the human body were only influenced by the physical, etheric and astral body."<sup>6</sup> These were in fact the forms of the followers of Dionysus, of Dionysus' master, Silenus, and of the satyrs, the forms that one would obtain by separating the ego from the other human sheaths. The satyrs, fauns and Pan represented the forms of Atlantean bodies carried into Greek times. Dionysus worked with those human beings whose bodies had the least of an ego in order to become the first teacher of the ego.

Dionysus, in contrast to the Greek gods, portrayed the adventures of the human soul in the pursuit of earthly knowledge, and in its attainment of spiritual knowledge. Knowledge of these trials was now only open to those who took the paths of the Mysteries, and Dionysus was the inaugurator of such Mysteries in Greek civilization.<sup>7</sup> In the times following his physical incarnation, Dionysus became the most important teacher of those Mysteries. "Dionysus appeared as an etheric form in these holy Mysteries, and in connection with him things could now be perceived which were beheld not merely as reflections, by means of ordinary consciousness, but which sprang forth directly out of the inner being of Dionysus. Because Dionysus is in our own selves, each person saw himself in Dionysus, and learned to know himself..."<sup>8</sup> The mystics were taught by Dionysus in the Mysteries, and saw him as a spiritual form "which was entirely controlled by the most important, the most essential part of man's own nature, represented by the human self as it stands firmly planted on the earth." He appeared to the mystics as "a beautiful and dignified form, which outwardly represented man in a glorious manner..." And Dionysus remained the teacher of the Mysteries for a long time.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning the body in which he incarnated, Dionysus did not represent perfection; he did not possess the finest human form. Nor did his followers, the satyrs and fauns. And the teacher of Dionysus himself, Silenus, is said to have been a very ugly man, but a very wise individual. "And we should make a mistake, if we were to picture the teacher and master of this Dionysus—old Silenus—as otherwise than with an ugly snub nose and pointed ears, and not in the least handsome."<sup>10</sup>

Something is revealed above that shows up as an image in everything [delete that] we will approach later. Greek civilization recognized in its midst influences that expressed themselves through time and space in the human body. It beheld three archetypes: the Hermes type, the Zeus or Apollo type, and the satyr type. The satyr type, as we have seen, was a decadent remnant of Atlantis. The Zeus type was the racial structure which came from the north. The Hermes type came from the southeast.

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<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Wonders of the World, Trials of the Soul, Revelations of the Spirit*, lecture of August 23, 1911.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, lecture of August 24, 1911.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, lecture of August 24, 1911.

The dark-skinned body and curly hair were characteristic of Hamitic populations of North Africa and Semitic populations in Asia Minor. And in Greek mythology Hermes led souls to the netherworld. He led the soul on the path inward, and was therefore linked with the Dionysian principle. Plato continued to carry the body type of Dionysus; his face in many sculptures carries the features of the Hermes type.

The satyr type of Silenus was carried further in Socrates, the recognized lover of wisdom. The satyrs often appeared with a tail, goats' hooves, hairy skin and horns on their heads, reminiscent of atavistic clairvoyance. They could be recognized by their sensual lips, their short and upturned noses. In the satyr type the forces of the head and those of the limbs worked together, but in animal-like and decadent fashion.

In the Zeus type was found a harmonious blend of all racial features, which derived from Atlantis. The Zeus type is that of the Caucasian or European race, whose gaze is turned toward the external world, and whose forehead shows the development of thinking capacities. Aristotle, the thinker par excellence, or Alexander the Great, the man of action, were represented in the typical Zeus typology.

The polarities between the types of Zeus and Hermes were reflected in Apollo and Dionysus. Zeus and Apollo were the gods of the heights of Olympus, which mythology had assigned to the north of the country. Hermes-Dionysus came from the south, from where the Mysteries of the microcosm had been introduced into Greece. Zeus led to the wonders of the world of nature and the macrocosm; Hermes led the souls to the trials of the underworld.

The two different paths of initiation came together under the same roof, and lived as brothers in the sanctuary of Delphi, which for the Greeks was the navel of the earth. Here the oracle of Apollo and the Mystery school of Dionysus stood side by side. The oracle offered exoteric revelations in which everyone could participate. The Mysteries of Delphi were esoteric and open only to selected neophytes. Apollo stood for the day, the light of the sun and human reason. Dionysus opened the doors to the inner world of dreams and visions. Apollo was more strongly present in the nerves and senses, Dionysus in the blood. In Delphi, over time, the old Apollonian clairvoyance gave way to Dionysian initiation. While the Apollonian oracle was quintessentially Hellenic, the Dionysian Mysteries had a more cosmopolitan flavor, bringing together the wisdom of the Orient and the Occident.

Silenus had been the teacher of Dionysus. The two individuals prepared the Greeks to acquire ego-consciousness. In reincarnating, Silenus returned as Socrates, Dionysus as Plato. Now, "...everything that Dionysus and the wise Silenus had been able to do for ancient Greece, was done anew by Socrates and Plato."<sup>11</sup> They returned at the time in which the mystics could no longer perceive clairvoyantly in the Mysteries, when the Mysteries were falling into decadence.

The Mysteries revealed the being of the Logos and foretold the approaching of Christ. The Pythian games at Delphi were devoted almost entirely to contests in music and poetry (the arts of the Word), in singing and playing the flute and the lyre. Through these arts Apollo revealed his mission as the bringer of harmony in the soul. The Logos was still more intimately understood at Ephesus, where it came nearer to the comprehension of the human mind. While music originated in Delphi, Ephesus became

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<sup>11</sup> Steiner, *Wonders of the World*, lecture of August 24, 1911.

the spiritual birthplace of philosophy and natural science. Understanding of the human soul and revelation of the wonders of the world went hand in hand. Ephesus was most intimately associated with Athens, its mother city, and therefore philosophy was soon transplanted to the rising capital of Hellas.

Another Mystery center added to the growing importance of Athens. Eleusis the most important Mystery center of the final epoch of Hellas—was located only twelve miles from Athens. The spiritual background of Eleusis' Mysteries were the realms of Zeus and Demeter—the Mysteries of the heavens and of the earth whose representatives appeared as their children, Persephone and Dionysus. The myth of Dionysus took a further step in its evolution. It concerned the birth, passions, death and resurrection of the human spirit. Eleusis concerned itself chiefly with the Mysteries of the Fall of Man. And the problem of death, always uppermost in Hellenic thought, acquired urgent relevance in the nocturnal rites of Eleusis.

Eleusis too had two sets of Mysteries. The lesser Mysteries, celebrated in February, recreated the drama of Persephone, aimed at reaching catharsis (purification) in preparation for the next stage. The Greater Mysteries, those of Dionysus, took place only every five years in September, over nine days. The outcry of Persephone in the lesser Mysteries awakened Dionysus. It was the cry for the birth of the Iacchus-child, or the reborn Dionysus. The drama prophetically depicted “the deity that was to descend into the material world and was buried therein, in order to rise again within man.”<sup>12</sup> Iacchus-Dionysus became the bearer of the ego-consciousness, the inaugurator of the epoch of individualism. The anticipation of the Mysteries of the Christ-child planted its seeds in the Greek spirit, which was to play such an important role later in the spread of Christianity.

Athens became the city of Dionysus and incarnated the fullness of the impetus towards individualism. Dionysus had his temple in Athens, and at the foot of the Acropolis stood his theatre. Thus Athens became the stage for his dramas and the center of intellectual activity in Greece. One could say that the last of the Mysteries of Dionysus flowed together and reappeared as drama and philosophy. Due to the importance of these twin impulses Athens became the cultural center of Hellas. Many of the legacies of Greek culture, such as sculpture, painting, history, politics, rhetoric and grammar also originated in Athens or in its immediate hinterland.<sup>13</sup>

The word *theatron* is derived from *theaomai*, which contains the word god—*theos*—and means to admire or worship in devotion. The drama was conceived primarily as an interplay between chorus and monologue, which reflected the dialogue between the human soul and the world's spirit. The human soul became aware of what had been known in the Mysteries, the marriage of Dionysus with Persephone. The theater replaced the temple, and within it all the arts were present, architecture included.

As did its forerunner—Eleusis' drama of Persephone—the early Greek drama brought about catharsis, the purification of the soul. In the movement towards the macrocosm (the Apollonian pole) the overcoming of fear led to devotion and awe; the awareness of egotism in the soul (the Dionysian pole) made room for compassion and

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<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Steiner, *Aristoteles und das Mysteriendrama*, in *Lucifer Gnosis*, Berlin 1904, quoted in Frederick Hiebel, *The Gospel of Hellas*, Chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup> Hiebel, *The Gospel of Hellas*, Chapter 3.

love. Thus the Apollonian and Dionysian principles that had accompanied the Greek polis historical phase were once more reunited. And the theater experience set the stage for the rebirth of the ego after the death experience. Greek philosophy became the ripe fruit of all the previous developments we have followed closely.