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TRAGEDY AND RELIGION: THE *BACCHAE*

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I

The *Bacchae* is not intrinsically a religious drama. This flies in the face of certain criticical assumptions which have recently gained currency. It has been suggested that Euripides' chief object in writing the drama was to give a clinical portrayal of what Dionysiac religion, hence Dionysus, does to men. According to this view, the *Bacchae* is a more or less realistic document, perhaps an anthropological account of an outburst of manic behavior, of a psychosis analogous to certain phenomena reported from the Middle Ages and not unknown in our own troubled times. The play has even been compared with a modern imaginative treatment of mass psychosis, Van Tilburg Clark's *Oxbow Incident*. I feel that this is mistaken, and for a very simple and obvious reason. Whatever one may say about the ancient tragedians, about the extravagant character of many of the plots, about the implausibility of much that is said and done, the fact remains that the writers are interested in what is typical, in the generic, or, as Aristotle has it, in the universal. To attribute to Euripides a study in abnormality is to indulge in an anachronism. Euripides is not the kind of dramatist, like Sartre, whose poetic urge is stimulated by small grievances rather than catholic insight. Nor is Euripides a scientific observer of sickness; he does not record, he creates. His material is ritual and mythical, and some of it is clinical; but the product is something entirely different.

Pindar once uses the tale of Perseus cutting off the head of the Medusa as an image symbolizing the act of poetic creation: living ugliness is violently refashioned into sculptured beauty. The ferocity of the *Bacchae* is to be seen in the same light. By an act of literary exorcism the cruelty and the ugliness of a living experience are transmuted into the beauty

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of a large vision, a vision which is not without its own horror, but a horror entirely unlike that felt at the approach of the god. It is the kind of horror which Plato touches on in the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*, the sudden weakness and awe which get hold of the philosophic soul at the moment when she comes face to face with a like-minded soul and jointly ventures to explore the ultimate. Dionysus is only a means to an end; Euripides exploits the Dionysiac revels to produce a dramatic action which helps the spectators to consider the mystery and the precariousness of their own existence.

Aeschylus, notably in his *Agamemnon* but also in some of his other extant plays, appeals to the audience with an interplay of sounds and sights. With Aeschylus, language is not an instrument but an entity, a vibrant self-sufficient thing, working in close harmony with the brilliant objects filling the stage of the *Oresteia*. The word textures pronounced by the chorus, like the sentence patterns of the actors' speeches, stir the audience as violently as the sight of a crimson tapestry or the vision of evil Furies on the roof. Behind this sumptuous drapery of color and sound, personality takes second place. The characters are largely the carriers of images and speech. Sophocles introduces the personal life, the *bios*, into drama. Now a man is no longer largely the pronouncer of words, the proposer of ideas and emotions, but an independent structure involving a past and a future, a point of intersection for ominous antecedents and awful prospects. This emergence of the organic character, of the heroic life as the nucleus of drama, was a fateful step in the history of literature. Aeschylus also, in some of his later plays, adopted the new structuring for his own purposes.

Euripides goes further. He rejects the autonomy of speech as he rejects the autonomy of the personal life; instead he attempts to combine the two in an organic mixture of his own. In the *Ion* he gives us a parody of the pure *bios* form; mythology is squeezed into a biographical mold, with unexpectedly humiliating consequences for the great hero. In the *Bacchae*, on the other hand, it is in the end not the persons who count, nor the words or sound patterns though the play may well be the most lyrical of all Euripidean works, but the ideas. The *Bacchae*, in spite of its contrived brutality and its lyricism, is a forerunner of the Platonic dialogues. The smiling god is another Socrates, bullying his listeners into a painful reconsideration of their thinking and their values. That is not to say that we have here an intellectual argument, an academic inquiry into logical relations. Rather, the *Bacchae* constitutes a poet's attempt to give shape to a question, to a complex of uncertainties and puzzles which do not lend themselves to discursive treatment. There is no clear separation of thesis and antithesis, of initial delusion and liberating doubt,

nor is there anything like a final statement or a solution. Nevertheless the poem is cast in the philosophical mode. Sophocles, in the *Oedipus Rex* or the *Ajax*, takes a heroic life and fashions its tragic nexus to the world around it or to itself. Euripides, in the *Bacchae*, takes an abstract issue and constructs a system of personal relations and responses to activate the issue. He builds his lives into the issue, instead of letting the life speak for itself as Sophocles does.

The issue derives from a question which is simple and raw: What is man? As Dionysus remarks to Pentheus (506),

> Your life, your deeds, your Being are unknown
> to you.

For Plato, the human soul is a compound of the divine and the perishable, a meeting place of the eternal beyond and the passionate here. In the *Phaedrus* he puts the question more concretely. Socrates suggests that it is idle to criticize or allegorize mythology if one has not yet, as he himself has not, come to a satisfactory conclusion about his own nature and being (230 A):

> I try to analyze myself, wondering whether I am some kind of beast more heterogeneous and protean and furious than Typhon, or whether I am a gentler and simpler sort of creature, blessed with a heavenly unfurious nature.

The word that I have translated as 'creature' is the same that appears in Aristotle's famous definition of man as a 'political creature,' or rather, as 'a creature that lives in a polis.' 'Political animal,' the usual translation, is unfortunate, for in his definition Aristotle clearly throws the weight of his authority behind the second alternative of Plato's question. Man is not a ravaging beast, but a gentler being. But perhaps Aristotle is not as fully sensitive as Plato to the difficulty posed by the alternative. Is man closer to the gods or to the beasts?

Another question which is linked to the uncertainty about the status of the human soul is: What is knowledge? Or, to put it differently: How much in this world is subject to man's insight and control? Greek philosophical realism, beginning with the Eleatics and reaching its greatest height with Plato, taught that reality is unchanging, static, difficult of access, and that in general men come to experience it only through the veil of ever-changing patterns of sensory impulses. There is an inexorable friction between total Being and partial Appearance. Man is constrained to deal with the appearances, but at his best he comes to sense – or, according to Plato, to know – the reality behind the phenomena. The breakthrough to the reality is a painful process; it can be achieved only

at the cost of injuring and mutilating the ordinary cognitive faculties. The perfectionists, including Plato in the *Phaedo*, submit that the breakthrough becomes complete only with the complete surrender of the senses whose activity stands in the way of the vision of reality. That is to say, the perceptual blindness and the phenomenal friction cannot be resolved except by disembodiment and death.

Now if this, or something like it, is the philosophical issue which Euripides is trying to dramatize, he is at once faced with a grave artistic difficulty. How is he, as a dramatist, to convey the universal scope of Reality and the beguiling contradictoriness of Appearance, without rendering the formulation banal or bloodless or both? The statement 'Dionysus is all' would be worse than meaningless. It should be emphasized again that Euripides is not trying to say poetically what could also, and better, be said discursively. What does a poet-metaphysician do to clothe the range of abstract issues in the living and self-authenticating flesh of poetry? Is it possible for a dramatist to convey ideas without having his characters preach them ex cathedra, which is by and large the situation we find in the *Prometheus Bound*? Can a philosophical idea which is refracted by a process of poetic mutation continue to score as a factor in a metaphysical argument?

To begin with, the Greek writer has an advantage over his modern colleagues. The ancient conventions of tragedy stipulate that the dramatic nucleus be essayed from a spectrum of approaches. From prologue to chorus to characters to epilogue, each constitutive part of the drama contributes its specific orientation. In the end the various perspectives coalesce into one and invite a unified though never simple audience response. This is the desired effect; sometimes the merging of the lines of coordination is not complete, and the spectators are left without a certain key to gauge their participation. Goethe's *Faust* is, perhaps, once again a fair example of such a case on the modern stage. The author is saying something profound about man and reality, but for various reasons the play leaves us with the impression of partial statements instead of a total imagining, because of the vast scope of the action, because Goethe has inserted certain curious elements of diffusion and fragmentation, and because he tries to play off one culture against another in an attempt to universalize the compass of the theme. Any Greek play is likely to be more successful on this score. The traditional spectrum of perspectives is offset by an extreme succinctness of speech and thought, by a narrow conformity to Greek ways, by an economy of character, and, last but not least, by the condensatory effect of hereditary myth. Myth is itself a condensation of many experiences of different degrees of concreteness. Greek drama simply carries forward the business begun by myth.

Dionysus, who is Euripides' embodiment of universal vitality, is described variously by chorus, herdsmen, commoners, and princes. The descriptions do not tally, for the god cannot be defined. He can perhaps be totaled but the sum is never definitive; further inspection adds new features to the old. If a definition is at all possible it is a definition by negation or cancellation. For one thing, Dionysus appears to be neither woman nor man; or better, he presents himself as woman-in-man, or man-in-woman, the unlimited personality (235):

> With perfumes wafted from his flaxen locks
> and Aphrodite's wine-flushed graces in
> his eyes . . .

No wonder Pentheus calls him (353) 'the woman-shaped stranger,' and scoffs at the unmanly whiteness of his complexion (457). In the person of the god strength mingles with softness, majestic terror with coquettish glances. To follow him or to comprehend him we must ourselves give up our precariously controlled, socially desirable sexual limitations. The being of the god transcends the protective fixtures of decency and sexual pride.

Again, Dionysus is both a citizen, born of Semele, and a Greek from another state, for he was raised in Crete, like the Zeus of the mysteries – surely this is the implication of lines 120 ff. – *and* a barbarian from Phrygia or Lydia or Syria or India, at any rate from beyond the pale of Greek society. It is not as if the conflicting pieces of information had to be gathered laboriously from various widely separated passages in the play. All of them are to be found in the entrance song of the chorus. After the introductory epiphany of the god himself, the women of the chorus begin to assemble their picture of Dionysus, and it is indicative of what Euripides means him to be that even these first few pointers should cancel out one another. It happens to be true historically that Dionysus is both Greek and non-Greek; recently discovered Mycenean texts have shown that the god's name was known to the Greeks of the Mycenean period. It now appears that the foreign extraction of Dionysus may have been a pious fiction of Apollonian partisans. Dionysus the popular god, the god of mysteries, the emblem of surging life in its crudest form, of regeneration and animal passion and sex, was endangering the vested interests of Apollo, grown refined and squeamish in the hands of the gentry and the intellectual elite. One of the defense measures, and there were many, was to declare Dionysus a foreigner, a divinity whose ways, so the propaganda went, offended the true instincts of the Greek. There was some apparent justification for this. The genuinely foreign deities who were being imported into Greece often were kindred in spirit

to Dionysus. At any rate the propaganda took hold. At the end of the fifth century all Greeks tended to believe that Dionysus came from abroad; and yet they considered him one of their own, a powerful member of the Olympian pantheon. Euripides exploits the discrepancy to the advantage of his purpose; he uses it to emphasize the unbounded, the unfragmented nature of the ultimate substance. But the arrival from foreign lands signifies a special truth; it highlights the violently intrusive character of the Dionysiac life, of the unlimited thrusting itself into the limited and exploding its stale equilibrium, which is a favorite theme of Pythagorean and Greek popular thought.

But all this would be bloodless metaphysics, dry-as-dust allegory, were it not for Euripides' grasp of the essential irony enunciated in the passage of the *Phaedrus* and skirted in Aristotle's aphorism. Man is both beast and god, both savage and civilized, and ultimate knowledge may come to him on either plane, depending on the manner in which the totality communicates itself. It is as an animal, as a beast close to the soil and free of the restrictions of culture and city life, that man must know Dionysus. But that means that in embracing Dionysus man surrenders that other half of himself, the spark of the gentle and celestial nature which, the philosophers hope, constitutes the salvageable part of man's equipment. The incongruity of the two planes, the political and the animal, becomes the engrossing puzzle and the energizing thesis of the play. The double nature of man is what the play is really about; the ambivalence of Dionysus is pressed into service largely in order to illumine the ambivalence of human cognition reaching out for its object, for the elusive pageant of truth.

II

In the *Bacchae* men are identified with animals, not as in Aesop where the beasts aspire to be men and become moral agents, but as in a Gothic tale where intelligence and social grace and responsibility are renounced and the irrational, the instinct of blood and steaming compulsion, take their place. Characteristically this way of looking at life paralyzes value judgment. The gulf between men and animals is erased, but whether this is a good thing or not is by no means clear. When the women of the chorus, for example, call Pentheus a beast they do not mean to flatter him. He is the son of Echion, who was sprung from dragon's teeth, and there is dragon blood in his veins (1155). He is said to be a fierce monster (542) whose acts make one suspect that he was born of a lioness or a Libyan Gorgon. His mother also in her moment of visionary bliss sees him as a lion rather than as a man. For her, however, this is not a matter

of disparagement; if anything, embracing a lion seems to her to offer a glimpse of perfection. Not so the chorus; in the passages cited they show an incongruous pride in human shape and human achievement. But in the fourth choral ode, as they reach their highest pitch of passion and frenzied insight, they issue their call (1017):

> Appear, in the shape of a bull or a many-headed
> serpent, or a lion breathing fire!

In their first ode also they refer to Dionysus as the bull-horned god wreathed in snakes (100 f.). The god Dionysus, the stranger-citizen, the hermaphrodite, at once superman and subman, is a beast, for which the chorus praises him. This is the sacred dogma. Even Pentheus, once he has fallen under the spell of the god, acknowledges him as a bull (920):

> And now, leading me on, I see you as
> a bull, with horns impacted in your head.
> Were you a beast before? I should not wonder.

And Dionysus answers:

> Yes, now you see what is for you to see.

But what of Pentheus' own beast-likeness? Are the women suggesting that human beastliness is a mere parody of divine beastliness, and therefore to be condemned? Or have the ladies of the chorus not yet traveled the full length of the Dionysiac conversion, and retain a vestige of civilized values? Their abuse of Pentheus is couched in terms which expose them as imperfect Maenads. Contrast that other chorus, the band of Bacchantes hidden from our sight, whose mysterious acts of strength are reported to us in the messenger speeches. From them rather than from their more civilized sisters on the stage we expect the pure lesson of the new faith. And in fact they preserve no trace of a false pride in human separateness. They carry the tokens of animal life on their backs and entertain the beasts as equal partners (695):

> And first they shook their hair free to their shoulders
> and tucked up their fawnskins . . .
> . . . their spotted pelts
> they girt with serpents licking at their cheeks.
> And some clasped in their arms a doe or wild
> wolf cubs and gave them milk . . .

Under the aegis of Dionysus, men and animals are as one, with no questions asked. The philosophical message is tolerably clear. But the vestigial bias of the pseudo-Maenads onstage is more than a temporary deviation from the orthodox Bacchic faith. In the interest of the message it would

have been wiser to abuse Pentheus as a man, incapable of going beyond the limitations of his anthropomorphism. The beast imagery in the choral condemnation of Pentheus is cumulative and emphatic. The praise of Dionysus does not blot it from our memory. It is, in fact, intended to serve as a counterpoint. The animal shape rules supreme; but when all parties have been heard it is not at all clear whether one ought to approve or not. The judgment is suspended and values are held in abeyance.

It is a mistake to consider the Dionysiac ecstasy a perversion of social life, an impasse, a negative situation. The *Bacchae* does not tell a story of maladjustment or aberration. It is a portrayal of life exploding beyond its narrow everyday confines, of reality bursting into the artificiality of social conventions and genteel restrictions. Waking and sleeping are deprived of their ordinary cognitive connotations; who is to say that sleeping, the drunken stupor which succeeds the rite, does not expand one's vision beyond its commonplace scope? In the *Ion* the premium is on wakefulness; in the *Bacchae* we are invited to rest in a gray no man's land which is halfway between waking and sleep, where man shelves the tools of reason and social compact and abandons himself to instinct and natural law (862 ff., trans. Philip Vellacott):

> O for the long nights of worship, gay
> With the pale gleam of dancing feet,
> With head tossed high to the dewy air –
> Pleasure mysterious and sweet!
> O for the joy of a fawn at play
> In the fragrant meadow's green delight,
> Who has leapt out free from the woven snare,
> Away from the terror of chase and flight,
> And the huntsman's shout, and the straining pack,
> And skims the sand by the river's brim
> With the speed of wind in each aching limb,
> To the blessed lonely forest where
> The soil's unmarked by a human track,
> And leaves hang thick and the shades are dim.

This is the *strophe* of a choral ode; in the *antistrophe* the chorus invokes the divine order of things – *physis*, nature – which will assert itself eventually in spite of men (884)

> who honor ignorance and refuse
> to enthrone divinity . . .

The verses cited picture the pleasure and awe of identification with non-human nature, with the life of the fawn bounding free of the snare but never quite eluding the hunter, a life of liberty which is yet not free. The

animal senses the sway of natural law even more strongly than the man. *Strophe* and *antistrophe*, the vision of animal escape and the address to natural compulsion, are part of the same complex. But in the text they do not follow one upon the other; they are separated by that rare thing in Greek poetry, a refrain which is repeated once more identically, at the end of the *antistrophe*. Refrains in Greek tragedy always have a solemn ring; they are felt to be echoes of ritual hymns. The fixed severity of the repetition is something foreign within the headlong flow of the dramatic current. The mind accustomed to pressing on after the determined advance of ideas and plot is abruptly stopped in its tracks; time ceases for a while and the cold chill of monotony reveals a glimpse of Being beyond the Becoming of the human scene.

Here is an attempt to translate the refrain as literally as the sense allows (877, 897):

> What is wisdom? Or what is more beautiful,
> a finer gift from the gods among men,
> than to extend a hand victorious
> over the enemy's crown? But beauty
> is every man's personal claim.

Wisdom equals tyranny, beauty equals vengeance. The hunted and the hunter have their own jealous notions of wisdom and beauty, but their pretensions are drowned in the vast offering of the gods, the dispensation of natural law, and the survival of the strongest. This is what the refrain seems to say; the message agrees well with the propositions of *strophe* and *antistrophe*. But note the didactic quality of the speech, the question and answer, and particularly the academic formulation of the last line, which in the Greek consists of only four words: 'Whatever beautiful, always personal.' It is a line which might have come straight from the pages of Aristotle; better yet, it reminds us of a similarly scholastic passage in a poem by Sappho in which she contemplates various standards of beauty and preference and concludes: 'I [think that the most beautiful thing is] that with which a person is in love.' The poetess speaks of a 'thing,' using the neuter gender, and of 'a person,' any person desiring the thing. Like a good teacher she starts her discussion with a universal premise. Then, as the poem draws to its conclusion, she discards the generality and focuses on the living girl and on the I, the specific poles of her love whose reality constitutes the authority for the writing of the poem. But the philosophic mode of the earlier formulation remains important; it reminds us that the specific poles of her present love are at the same time representatives of a universal rhythm. In Euripides' ode, also, it is this universal rhythm which comes into view through the

hieratic stillness of the refrain and particularly through its last line. The words are almost the same as those of Sappho; the difference is that between a vision intent upon the small joys and sufferings of love, and a vision which comprehends man in the sum total of his powers and feebleness. The refrain may well be the closest approach to poetry shedding its disguise and showing itself as metaphysics pure and simple.

But the glimpse is short-lived, and the clarity immediately obscured. Again it is the chorus itself which is the chief agent of confounding the analysis. It does so by combining in the Dionysiac prospects of its songs the two sides, the real and the ideal, which are inevitably connected in the experience. Both ritual and hope, slaughter and bliss, dance and dream, the cruelty of the present and the calm of the release, are joined together as one. The paradise of milk and honey and the orgy of bloody dismemberment merge in a poetic synthesis which defies rational classification. Of this creative insight into the contradictoriness of things I have already spoken. To complicate the picture even further, Bacchic sentiments are superimposed on traditional choric maxims. In an earlier ode which begins with a condemnation of Pentheus' words and an appeal to the goddess Piety, the women sing (386, 397):

> Of unbridled mouths
> and of lawless extravagance
> the end is disaster . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Life is brief; if a man,
> not heeding this, pursues vast things
> his gain slips from his hands.
> These are the ways, I believe,
> of madmen, or of
> injudicious fools.

We recognize the familiar adage of 'nothing in excess,' the motto of bourgeois timidity and sane moderation, at opposite poles from the Dionysiac moral of vengeance and expansiveness and the bestialization of man. The injunctions of moderation and knowing one's limits run counter to the hopes of those who worship Dionysus. The two people who live up to the injunctions, Tiresias and Cadmus, come very close to being comic characters, as we shall see directly. Why, then, does Euripides put the pious precept into the mouth of a chorus whose primary artistic function is to communicate precisely what it is condemning, the spirit of unbridled mouths and lawless extravagance? It may be noted that such injunctions in Greek tragedy are often illusory. Setting off as they do a heroic imbalance or a cosmic disturbance, they underscore the

poignancy of the action. But in this particular instance the use of the Delphic motto is even more startling than usual. The direction of the metaphysical impact is rudely deflected and the opacity of the poem enhanced by this conventional reminder of irrelevant quietist values.

While the Theban women are away celebrating, the foreign votaries are in Thebes. This is a mechanical displacement necessitated by what Greek tragedy permits; for the Dionysiac revels must be reported rather than seen, and so the true Maenads are offstage. But that puts the chorus in an anomalous position. They are worshipers of Dionysus, but they must not behave like worshipers. Few Euripidean choruses are less intimately engaged in the action and in fact less necessary to the action. It is the chorus offstage that counts. Hence the curious mixture of half-hearted participation and distant moralizing, as if the poet were not entirely comfortable with the choral requirements. This may account for the perplexing admixture of Apollonian preaching which I have just mentioned. It may account also for the remarkable poetic color of many of the choral utterances. The poet, making a virtue of the necessity, calls attention to the detachment of the chorus from the heart of the plot – though not from the heart of the philosophical issue – by giving it some of the finest lyrics ever sounded in the Attic theater. This is not the place for a close appreciation of the poetry; that can be done only in the original. The analysis of ancient poetry is a difficult thing; there are few men who combine the necessary scholarly equipment with an understanding of what poetry is about. Further, some of the clues to such an understanding which in modern poetry are furnished by the experience of living speech are missing for the Greek. Nevertheless few readers can expose themselves to the choral odes of the *Bacchae* without realizing that this is poetry of the highest order. Imagery has little to do with it; in this as in most Euripidean plays the choral poetry is even less dependent on metaphor and simile than the dialogue. There is some pondering of myth to be sure. But perhaps the most important thing about the odes is the wonderful mixture of simplicity and excitement. The women do not beat around the bush; their interest in life is single-minded, and they declare themselves with all the fervor of a unitary vision. This does not, of course, say anything about the poetry as poetry, but it may explain why the lyrics of the *Bacchae* touch us so powerfully.

There is one image, however, or rather a class of images, which ought to be mentioned: the container filled to the bursting point. In their first ode the chorus uses the trope three times. They sing of Dionysus stuffed into the thigh of Zeus, golden clasps blocking the exit until such time as the young man may be born (94 ff.). They call on Thebes, nurse of Semele, to (107)

> teem, teem with verdant
> bryony, bright-berried;

the city is to be filled to the rooftops with vegetation, as a sign of the presence of the god. For illustration we should compare the famous vase painting of Exekias in which Dionysus reveals himself in his ship to the accompaniment of a burst of vegetation. Finally the women caution each other to be careful in their handling of the thyrsus, the staff of the god (113):

> Handle the staffs respectfully;
> there is *hybris* in them.

In all three instances it is the fullness of the container which is stressed, not the spilling over. But as the play advances, containment proves inadequate. At the precise moment when the stranger is apprehended by Pentheus' men, the Maenads who had been imprisoned earlier are set free (447):

> All by themselves the bonds dropped off their feet;
> keys unlocked doors, without a man's hand to turn them.

Their liberation is as real as the binding of the stranger is false.

The most striking *mise en scène* of the inadequacy of the container is the so-called palace miracle. Like that of the other passages, its function is symbolic rather than dramaturgical; after it has happened it is never mentioned again. It is not necessary to the progress of the plot, only to the effect and the meaning of the poem. We need not worry much whether the stage director engineered the collapse of a column or a pediment, or whether the spectators were challenged to use their own imaginations, though I am inclined to assume the latter. At any rate, the vision of the palace shaking and tumbling is the most explicit and the most extended of a series of images pointing to the explosion of a force idly and wrongfully compressed. Eventually this concept converges on what I have called the friction between total Being and fragmentary Appearance, the friction which is worked out also through a series of antinomies: the brute wildness of the thyrsus versus the spindles abandoned in the hall, the fawnskins versus the royal armor, the civic proclamation versus the bleating shout, the beating of tambourines versus the steady clicking of the loom. Dionysus disrupts the settled life, he cracks the shell of civic contentment and isolation. Probably the most important word in the play, as a recent critic has well pointed out, is '*hybris*.' It occurs throughout, and always in a key position. But it is not the *hybris* of which the tragic poets usually speak, the *hybris* which figures also in the legal documents, the thoughtless insolence which comes from too much social

or political power. In the *Bacchae*, *hybris* is quite literally the 'going beyond,' the explosion of the unlimited across the barricades which a blind civilization has erected in the vain hope of keeping shut out what it does not wish to understand. That is not to say that the word is not used also in its more conventional sense, especially with reference to the campaign of Pentheus. As a result, the efforts of Pentheus take on the aspect of a parody of Dionysiac impulsiveness.

Similarly the hunt is a principal symbol because it catches the futility of organized, circumscribed life. From the vantage point of the larger reality, all worldly activity appears both hunt and escape. Hunting and being hunted are the physical and psychological manifestations of Appearance, the monotonous jolts of the process of generation and decay. Agave cries when approached by the herdsman (731):

> Run to it, my hounds!
> Behold the men who hunt us! Follow me,
> brandish your thyrsus and pursue them!

The Maenads are resting; they are communing with the god and sloughing off the sense of separateness when they are violently pulled back into the world of Appearance and resume their game of hunting and being hunted. In this case it is Appearance which causes the disruption; Being and Appearance are so related that one as well as the other may be the cause of disturbance and dislocation. There is a perpetual pull between them which never allows either to win a lasting victory. Without the constant friction there would be no tragedy; without the violent disruption of one by the other there would be no dismemberment. *Sparagmos*, the sacred dismemberment of the Dionysiac rites, is both a means to an end and an autonomous fact. As a means to an end it supplies the frenzied exercise which terminates in the drugged sleep. The explosion of energy, the tearing and mutilation of a once living body, leaves the worshiper exhausted and readies the soul, through a numb tranquility, for the mystic union with the god. But the dismemberment operates also as a self-validating event. Through it, symbolically, the world of Appearance with its contradictions and insufficiencies is made to show itself as it really is. The destruction of Pentheus, then, is not simply a sardonic twist of an unspeakable bloody rite, but a fitting summation of the lesson of the play. The limited vessel is made to burst asunder, refuting the pretentions of those who oppose Dionysus, of the partisans of unreality.

III

Who is Pentheus, and why is it he who dies rather than one of the other Thebans? When the stranger raises the question whether the king knows who he really is, he answers (507):

> Pentheus, the son of Agave and of Echion.

Thus Pentheus identifies himself as a member of the ruling house, as an officer of the State. He bears a name which establishes his position within the hereditary political structure of his city. Even at the moment of death he throws off the leveling disguise of the ministrant and cries (1118):

> Mother, it is I, your son
> Pentheus, the child you bore in Echion's house.

In the judgment of Dionysus this pride in the house, the emphasis on the limited life, is ignorance. But is it commensurate with the punishment which Pentheus receives? Is there not something about him as a person which is more likely to justify the violence of his undoing? To ask the obvious question: Does Pentheus not exhibit an arrogance which cries out for retribution?

Here we must step gingerly. It is to be remembered that the action of the *Bacchae* is not primarily borne or promoted by the characters. Euripides does not in this play operate with idiosyncracies but with lives. Suffering is constructed as the measurable content of a life, not as the unique unquantifiable experience of a specific irrational soul. And the lives, also, are largely catalysts for the release of social complications.

These complications have nothing to do with the arbitrary contours of individual dispositions, but answer directly to the needs of the author's metaphysical purpose. The personal relations brought into play are devised chiefly as one of the means for the author to invoke his philosophical riddle. In the *Alcestis* character is all; in the *Bacchae* it counts for very little. It is sometimes said that the tragedy of Pentheus is not that he tried to do what was wrong but that he was the wrong man to do it – that he was, in fact, not a political strongman but precisely the unbalanced, excitable type of person who most easily falls a victim to the allurements of the Dionysiac indulgence. In other words, the character of Pentheus is too Dionysiac to allow him to oppose Dionysus successfully. But this argument will not stand up. Pentheus is no more and no less excitable or unstable than most of the heroes of Greek tragedy. An Odysseus, or a Socrates, is no more fit to stand at the center of a high tragedy than a Pecksniff or a Tanner. Odysseus is not a whole man, as Helen is not a whole woman; they are exponents of a partial aspect of the human range: intelligence in the case of Odysseus, love in the case of Helen. But Pentheus is a whole man, precisely as Oedipus is, or

as Antigone is a whole woman. And because he is whole he is vulnerable, more vulnerable than the men and women who are weighted in one direction or another.

Of course he is not a moderate. His order to smash the workshop of Tiresias (346 ff.) is not well considered. He happens to be right; Tiresias appears to have turned disloyal to Apollo, and so will no longer need his oracle seat. Under the democratic spell of Dionysus, everybody will do his own prophesying. But even if Pentheus were unjustified in his harshness toward Tiresias, his lack of moderation, or, to put it more fairly, his capacity for anger, does not necessarily discredit him. Stability, self-control, discretion smack too much of asceticism and puritan artifice to provide a solid basis for tragic action. Pentheus is a whole man, with none of his vitality curtailed or held in check. But he is also a king, a perfect representative of the humanistic Greek ideal of the ordered life, a political being rather than a lawless beast. Being Aristotle's 'creature living in a polis,' he is destined to ask the wrong sort of question, a political question, when faced with the reality of religion. His query (473),

> What profit do the celebrants draw from it?

shows the political or educational frame of his thinking. The twentieth century, unlike the eighteenth, is once more inclined to the view that the question of usefulness when applied to religion misses the point, that religion cannot be adjusted to a system of utilitarian relations. But where did Euripides and his contemporaries stand on this issue? In all probability Pentheus' question did not strike the audience as irrelevant; it may, in fact, have impressed them as noble and responsible. At the end of the fifth century, as we can see in the *History* of Thucydides, the preservation of social and political institutions and traditions had become the overriding topic of discussion to which all other values tended to be subordinated. The *Bacchae* demonstrates that this sort of nobility, the exaltation of the political and educational thesis, is as nothing before the primary currents of life. But a nobility which goes under is not the less noble for its defeat. Pentheus dies, and the nature of his death, particularly of the preparations which lead to his death, is deplorable. But the fact remains that his stand, and only his, can be measured in positive moral terms. Clearly the force which kills him eludes ethical analysis.

Because Pentheus is a king he offers a larger area to be affected by the deity. His responses differ from those of other men less in their specific quality than in their intensity. As a king he suffers for the group; his name, as Dionysus reminds him (508), means 'man of sorrow.' But there is nothing Christlike about him. He proposes to live as a rational

man, to leave everything nonrational, everything that might remind us of man's original condition, behind him. Love and faith, the Christian antidotes of the dispassionate intellect, have not yet been formulated. In Plato, characteristically, it is love and reason together, or love-in-reason, which refines man and weakens the animal in him. Nonreason, in the fifth century BC., is neither love nor hatred but religious ecstasy. This Pentheus means to fight, for he knows it is wrong. Pentheus is not a romantic hero, he does not search for a hidden truth. The same thing is true of the others; both the characters and the chorus are, each of them, convinced that they know best and that their way of life is best. For Pentheus the best is Form, the tested and stable limits of responsibility, law, and control. Against the chorus, which espouses the cause of excitement, of formlessness and instability, Pentheus is the champion of permanence and stability. Neither his anger nor his defeat are valid arguments against the merits of this championship. Like Ajax, Pentheus is identified with armor (781, 809); like Ajax, the armed Pentheus, confined in the panoply of embattled civil life, turns against the forces which are wrecking his fragile cause. As a functionary he represents order and limit; as a man he is whole and robust and fully alive.

This cannot be said about Cadmus and Tiresias. For one thing, they are old men, their life force is diminished and stunted. This means that they cannot suffer as Pentheus can. It also means that they have come to terms with the world; there are no issues left for them to battle out, no difficulties over which to fret. Cadmus is a fine specimen of the *arriviste*, proud of the achievements of his grandson, but even prouder of the inclusion of a genuine god in the family. The god must at all costs be kept in the family, even if it becomes necessary to mince the truth a little. Here is Cadmus' humble plea to Pentheus (333):

> And if, as you say, the god does not exist,
> keep this to yourself, and share in the fine fiction
> that he does; so we may say that Semele bore
> a god, for the greater glory of our clan.

The distinction between truth and falsity, between order and disorder, is of no importance to him. At his time of life, a good reputation is a finer prize than a noble life, no matter whether the reputation is deserved or not. Tiresias likewise is not concerned with essentials. This Tiresias is not the Sophoclean man of truth, the terrible mouthpiece of mystery and damnation, but, of all things, a clever sophist, a pseudo-philosopher who strips away the mystery and the strangeness of the superhuman world and is content to worship a denatured, an ungodded god. A squeamish deist, he does not hold with the miracles and the barbarisms of popular

faith. In his lecture to Pentheus he pares down the stature of Dionysus to render him manageable and unoffending (272 ff.). Point one: he is the god of wine (280)

> which liberates suffering mortals from
> their pain.

That is to say, he *is* wine (284), precisely as Demeter *is* grain. By allegorizing the old stories and identifying the gods with palpable substances, we can dispense with whatever is not concrete and intelligible in the traditions about Dionysus. Point two: he is a perfectly natural god. The distasteful tale about Zeus sewing him up in his thigh produces a quite satisfactory meaning once it is understood that the grating feature is due to a pun. Like Max Müller in a subsequent era of facile enlightenment, Tiresias believes that the mystery of myth is caused by a linguistic aberration; with the discovery of the cause, the mystery disappears.

Finally, in the third part of the lecture, Tiresias does pay some attention to the irrational virtues of the god, to his mantic powers and his ability to inspire panic in strong men. But this part of the assessment is underplayed; it is briefer than the other two, and one feels that Tiresias adds it only in order to have a weapon with which to frighten Pentheus. The reference to soldiers strangely routed and to Dionysiac torches at home in the sanctuary of Delphi is not a confession but a threat, calculated to appeal to Pentheus in the only language he understands: the language of military and political authority. Tiresias' heart is not in the threat; what interests him is the theological and philological sterilization of the god. Neither he nor Cadmus really understands or even wants to understand what the god has to offer. But they know that his triumph is inevitable, and so they try to accept him within their lights. They are fellow travelers, with a good nose for changes of fashion and faith. To take them seriously would be absurd; a Tartuffe has no claim on our sympathy.

They do not understand; hence nothing happens to them.[1] Pentheus, on the other hand, is fully engaged, and he is a big enough man to perceive the truth beyond his own self-interest. He is capable of appreciating the real meaning of Dionysus; though he does not approve, he understands. But understanding, in a man of his power of commitment, is tantamount to weakening, and in the end, to destruction. This is what Euripides dramatizes with the sudden break-up of Pentheus' royal substance. Abruptly the officer of the State turns into a Peeping Tom. One shout of the god (810) and the manly general becomes a slavish, prurient, reptilian thing, intent on watching from a safe distance what he hopes will be a spectacle to titillate his voyeur's itch. The civilized man of reason

is gone, and in his place we find an animal, living only for the satisfaction of his instinctual drives.

Is the rapid change psychologically plausible? Once more, the question is not pertinent. There is no character in the first place, only a comprehensive life-image to symbolize one side of a conflict which transcends the terms of a uniquely experienced situation. Whether it is possible for such a man as Pentheus is shown to be in the first half of the play, to turn into the creature he becomes after his conversion by Dionysus, is a question on which psychoanalysts may have an opinion but which does not arise in considering Euripides' purpose. The truth is that the change is not a transition from one phase of life to another, much less a lapse into sickness or perversion, but quite simply death. When a tragic hero in the great tradition is made to reverse his former confident choice, especially if this happens at the instigation of the archenemy, the role of the hero has come to an end. We remember Agamemnon stepping on the crimson carpet, after Clytemnestra has broken down his reluctance. The blood-colored tapestry is a visual anticipation of the murder. Instead of the corporeal death which will be set offstage, the audience watch the death of the soul. With Agamemnon slowly moving through the sea of red the contours are blurred and the king of all the Greeks is annihilated before our eyes. Aeschylus uses a splash; Euripides, less concretely but no less effectively, uses a change of personality.

That the hero has died in his scene with Dionysus becomes even clearer when the god, with a Thucydidean terseness, announces the physical death (857):

> Now I shall go and dress him in the robes
> he'll wear to Hades once his mother's hands
> have slaughtered him . . .

His death, then, is an agreed fact both while the chorus sings their ode to Natural Necessity and also during the terrible scene which follows in which Pentheus arranges his woman's clothes about him. The King joins the Maenads, but he goes further than they, for he adopts the bisexuality of the god. All this is meaningful as a picture of the complete and devastating victory of reality over unreality, of the natural over the institutional life. But it is not without its psychological aspect, and here, curiously, we may see an ironic parallel to one of Plato's most troublesome concerns. In his discussions of dramatic poetry, Plato takes it for granted that the spectacle affects the soul of the spectator, even to the extent of transforming it in its own likeness. This is what drama demands; the audience must allow what they see to shape their souls, without struggling against the impact. Plato recognizes the legitimacy of the

demand, and decides that therefore drama is too dangerous to have around in a healthy body politic, except the kind of drama whose effect is beneficial. Pentheus also is about to see a spectacle, a Dionysiac drama of the type which as a responsible man of the city he had condemned. Euripides knows that Plato's act of censorship is in a hopeless cause. A life which does not reach out to embrace the sight of a greater reality which tragedy affords is incomplete. Watching a play may mean a partial sacrifice of the soul, a surrender to the unlimited and the irrational, but we cannot do without it. Pentheus holds out against it for some time, but in the end he throws down his arms, with such finality that his soul comes to be transformed and enriched even before he goes off to spy on the mysteries.

Pentheus is drunk, without the physical satisfaction of strong drink (918):

> Ho, what is this? I think I see two suns,
> two cities of Thebes each with its seven gates!

This is one way of formulating his conquest at the hand of Dionysus. Drunk he sees more keenly, or at any rate more completely:

> And now, leading me on, I see you as
> a bull . . .

And Dionysus replies:

> Yes, now you see what is for you to see.

For the first time Pentheus' eyes are sufficiently opened to see the god in his animal shape. His vision is broadened; but his role as Pentheus is finished. The disintegration of the king is made particularly painful by the emphasis on the feminine clothing. Which Dionysus assisting as his valet (928) the one-time upholder of the *vita activa* becomes fussy and vain about the details of his toilette. Does the cloak hang properly? Is he to carry the thyrsus in his right or in his left hand? The energies which had once been directed toward the mustering of armies and the implementation of public decisions are now bestowed on the arrangement of his Bacchic vestments. Along with this attention to the correct fashion – behold, another Tiresias – to the external signs of his newfound anonymity, there goes an internal change which is equally preposterous. The blocked doer turns into an uninhibited dreamer (945):

> I wonder if my shoulders would support
> Cithaeron and its glens, complete with Maenads?

His speech, formerly royal and violent and ringing, has become pretty and lyrical; he pictures the women (957)

> like birds in the thickets,
> contained in the fond coils of love's embrace.

Compare this with his earlier comment (222) that the women

> slink off by devious ways into
> the wild and cater to the lusts of males.

His imagination has been fired, his surly prejudices are gone. The vision which neither Cadmus nor Tiresias was able to entertain has come to Pentheus and is inspiring him. The Bacchianized Pentheus is a visionary and poet. But it is a poetry which lacks the saving grace of choice. He contemplates the prospect of his mother carrying him home from the mountains, and the prospect pleases him. The political man has become woman *and* child. Having rid himself of the social restrictions and classifications, he savors infancy, a sentient creature for whom the mother's cradled arms offer escape and bliss. He is woman and child and beast, an amorphous organism susceptible to all influences and realizing itself in a life of instinct and unthinking sense. The victory of Dionysus is complete; the king is dead, and the man has been found out, in the god's image.

determines the dramatic structure of the whole work. The conclusions drawn from this are of a merely biographical nature and do not need to be discussed here as we are dealing with the unity of the *Bacchae* as a work of art.

14. Statement of Dionysos' self-characterisation 860 f.: *theos, deinotatos, anthropoisi d'ēpiōtatos* (compare Dodds, Comm., 1953).
15. Wasserman, 272 ff.: Winnington-Ingram, 161.
16. Dodds, Comm. xl.
17. K. Deichgräber, *Hermes*, 70 (1935), 331.
18. Pohlenz², 458; Deichgräber, 330.
19. Dodds, Comm xl, a highly readable amusing characterisation.
20. 'Man of action', Winnington-Ingram, 20.
21. Wasserman, 275.
22. On the development of the concept from epic via tragedy to Hellenistic philosophy, compare J. C. Kamerbeek, *Mnemos*. iv. i, (1948), 271 ff.
23. Wilamowitz, *Griech. Trag.* iv. 143.
24. Winnington-Ingram, 54.
25. Ibid. 160.
26. Ibid. 55, 58.
27. W. Zürcher, *Die Darstellung des Menschen im Drama des Euripides*, Basel, 1947. Also the review by G. Miller, *Gnomon* 21 (1949), 167.
28. Thus Deichgräber, 330.
29. Plat. *Ion* 533e6, 534a5, d1, *Phaedr.* 244c, where, as is well known, the pun *manikē-mantikē* is connected to the tracing of the matter from *enthusiasmos*, as in *Ba.* 289–301. It is of fundamental importance that in *Ion* the spiritual works from *enthusiasmos* are compared to the *Bacchae*'s miraculous deeds, as in Aischines of Sphettos, fr. 11c Dittmar (compare Pohlenz, *Aus Platons Werdezeit*, 188) and that in *Ion* 534d1 the mantic also appears. For originally, it was, of course, the madness of Apollonian obsession which caused the mantic, yet Kassandra in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *The Trojan Women* is already called a Maenad or Bacchant. *Hec.* 121, 676 expressly relates to her visionary gifts (material in Pohlenz, n.2, 150). Plutarch, *de Pyth. or.* 6, p. 397a relates the words of Heraklitos that the Sybil is talking *mainomenō stomati . . . dia ton theon.* (*Vers.*[6] 22B 92). The pun that is more than a pun might go back as far as Heraklitos.
30. See in particular the words of blessing at 72 ff., 135 ff., 902 ff. and *hetera megala phanera t'* (other great and clear things) at the textually difficult passage 1006 f. (Murray², 127, Winnington-Ingram, 179; on the text Dodds (193).
31. *Il.* 3. 395. In Euripides see *Phoen.* 399, also (with a rationalistic twist) *Troad.* 988 f.
32. See *Apol.* 22b, c, *Menon* 99b ff., *Ion* 533b ff.; also my paper 'Probleme des platonischen *Ion*', *Hermes*, 83 (1955), 171 ff.
33. This view is confirmed by line 803 where Pentheus rejects an agreement with the Bacchae as *douleuein douleiais emais*.
34. Concerning the speech by Teiresias see G.M.A. Grube, *Trans. Amer. Philol. Ass.* 66 (1935), 41; Winnington-Ingram, 48 ff.
35. Dodds, Comm. xli.
36. Cf. Kamerbeek, *Mnemos.* iv. i (1948), 280 ff.
37. The provoked Bacchae are 'winged' in the rapid speed of their movement (748, 1090); winged also is the poet who creates in the trance of *enthusiasmos* (Plat. *Ion* 533b 4). Yet the genuine madman also 'flies' (*Theogn.* 1053), and in this sense the word is used by Pentheus when, in effect, he has lost control over himself (322; cf. Dodds ad loc.).

38. For the central meaning of the quarrel about *sophia* in the *Bacchae* see Winnington-Ingram 88, 167–70. As to the doubts about the value of knowledge expressed by the old Euripides, see B. Snell, *Philol. Supp.* 20 (1928), 1, 156; Dodds, *Class. Rev.* 43, 100 f.
39. Dodds, Comm. 90 ff.
40. Cf. G. M. A. Grube, *Trans. Amer. Philol. Ass.* 66 (1935), 40, n. 2.
41. The Choral song 862–911 starts from an actual situation, like all such songs in the *Bacchae*. Yet, in the Epodos, the chorus finally finds a traditional form for its affirmation of traditionalism, too. It starts from the fact that the enemy is falling into the trap and the danger is over. The Bacchae are as free as deer in the forest who have escaped the hunters' traps. (For a reversal of the situation see below). They will be able to celebrate the nocturnal Bacchic feast again (862–76). The enemy's cunning has collapsed, the chorus has shown real *sophia*. The god has protected his followers and rewarded them with the highest honor of letting the victorious head fall on to the enemy's hand (877–81, 897–901). The god's revenge falls on those who do not honour him in their rage. One should adhere to religious tradition which is as firmly based as nature (882–96; 895 f.). After this affirmation of tradition the chorus speaks in two general beatitudes 902–5 again about the actual situation, the happy overcoming of danger; it is the 'day's fortune' which alone is praised as secure. In everything else human fortune is fluctuating and uncertain because of an infinite number of possibilities and equally infinite number of hopes. The uncertaity of fortune, the treacherousness of hope because of which only the favorable moment can be treasured, is a motif of archaic poetry. What Euripides says in 905–11 is expressed in similarly conventional thought and words in the early poem by Pindar *Pyth.* 10, 59–62, unconventionally in *Pyth.* 8, 88–97.
42. The omission of 1113 (Nauck; cf. Markelbach, *Rheinisches Museum* 97 (1954), 374 n. 3) seems impossible to me, since the important stage of Pentheus' awakening from Bacchic madness has to be prepared for.
43. Wasserman, 277.
44. Dodds, Comm. 167, Winnington-Ingram, 104.
45. Cf. *Heraclid.* 390–2.
46. Cf. above, p. 361 with nn. 24–6.
47. Cf. p. 448 n. 37.
48. Emphasised particularly by Dodds, *Class. Rev.* 102 f., Comm. xli.
49. But see the legitimate qualifications of Winnington-Ingram, 174.
50. The structural similarities with the *Bacchae* demonstrated in the following confirm the late dating of *Ion* which scholars increasingly accept. See Wilamowitz, Euripides *Ion* 406 ff.; Pohlenz, 165 n. 2; W. H. Friedrich, *Euripides und Diphilos*, 1953, 13 f.: G. Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides*, 1955, 64 n. 1.
51. *El.* 379. Cf. B. Snell, *Philol.* 20, 1928, 1, 153 f.; Dodds, *Class. Rev.* 43 (1929), 100. Cf. also the words of Iocasta to Oedipus. Soph. *O.T.* 979.

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1. The metamorphosis which Dionysus inflicts upon Cadmus in the epilogue is a datum from mythology. Because of the bad state of preservation of the final portion of the play we do not know how Euripides motivated the metamorphosis, and what the punishment – for such it is said to be (1340 ff.) – is for.

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