

The Mask of Dionysus: Epiphany and Confrontation at the Limits

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ABSTRACT

Dionysus is the god of the mask *par excellence*. The smiling mask makes known what Dionysus is but its radical otherness evades the truthfulness of his natures and identities. It is with this mask that Dionysus enters into the theater and becomes its patron God. This mask is said to have risen from the depth of the sea. It looks strange and foreign representing an enigma to be deciphered, an unknown power to be identified. In other words, the mask demands an interpretation, a fiction-making enterprise. The purpose of this paper is essentially concerned with the interpretation of the mask of Dionysus by focusing on the experiences of epiphany and confrontation. In the first section “Epiphany,” I will address the main concern—Dionysian epiphany—from various perspectives and along with many modern critical thinkers (Nietzsche, Blanchot, Artaud, Foucault, Deleuze, Heidegger). I will also attempt to distinguish Dionysian epiphany from Joycean epiphany and Heideggerian *aletheia*. In the second section “Confrontation,” I will explore the experience of the face to face confrontation with the mask of Dionysus.

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Dionysus. . . is the genuine mask god.

—Walter F. Otto

In the case of Dionysus, the mask disguises him as much as it proclaims his identity.

—Jean-Pierre Vernant

The mask is a symbol both of the 'pure presence' of Dionysus and of the elusiveness of that presence.

—Charles Segal

Dionysos is not the God behind the mask. He is the mask.

—Ginette Paris

Whether he walks in smiles or leaps in irritation, Dionysos always appears in the guise of the stranger. He is the god who comes from outside, who arrives from Elsewhere.

—Marcel Detienne

For many, Dionysus is the god of the mask *par excellence*. The mask of Dionysus is not only a focal point for myth and cult, for art and drama but “of particular interest as a locus in which many Dionysiac ambiguities come simultaneously into play” (Henrichs 36). In his seminal essay “He Has a God in Him!: Human and Divine in the Modern Perception of Dionysus,” Albert Henrichs briefly reviews the scholarship on the god of the mask.¹ According to Henrichs, Walter Otto's brief chapter on the mask of Dionysus in *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* has exerted a far-reaching influence on the subject of “the god of the mask.” Stressing the large and penetrating eyes of the mask, Otto construes Dionysus as “the god of confrontation.” As Otto writes, “Here there is nothing but encounter, from which there is no withdrawal--an immovable, spell-binding antipode” (90). Otto looks upon the mask as “a sacred object” (90) and “the source of the fascination and confusion” (91). Another influential interpreter

¹ Albert Henrichs has thoroughly documented a list of the principal studies of the Dionysiac mask in his informative article, “He has a God in Him!: Human and Divine in the Modern Perception of Dionysus,” in *Masks of Dionysus*. See particularly the section “The Mask as a Sign of the Other” pp. 36-39 and the notes 60-70.

of the mask of Dionysus is Jean-Pierre Vernant.² Like Otto, he stresses the immediacy and fascination of Dionysus's gaze. Furthermore, as Henrichs has shrewdly observed, Vernant strongly emphasizes the radical otherness of the mask and its enigmatic and elusive power to disorient those who encounter it (37). The smiling mask makes known what Dionysus is but its radical otherness evades the truthfulness of his natures and identities.

The mask of Dionysus is a *simulacrum* not a representation. As Ginette Paris argues, "Dionysus is not the God behind the mask. He *is* the mask" (49). The mask of Dionysus is its own double which imitates nothing, a double that nothing anticipates. There is no original mask of Dionysus as such. The mask is always the mask of a mask. It is with this mask that Dionysus enters into the theater and becomes the patron god of the theater, a place which celebrates the art of miming, of disguise, of illusion, and of role-playing. Like the mime's operation professed by Mallarmé in *Mimique* and interpreted by Derrida in "The Double Session," the mask's performance does allude, "but alludes to nothing, alludes without breaking the mirror, without reaching beyond the looking-glass" (*Diss* 206). The mask of Dionysus defies Platonic or metaphysical conceptions of imitation.

Through the mask, Dionysus introduces "the unpredictable dimension of the 'elsewhere' into the very heart of daily life" (Vernant & Frontisi-Ducroux 201). This "elsewhere" is the "distancing places" (Nietzsche, "ASC" Sec. 3) where Nietzsche the Dionysian piper would like to lure us. This "elsewhere" is also the "outside" where Blanchot would like to lead us; it is a radical outside which has nothing to do with the dialectical struggle of the inside and the outside, and transgresses the limit set by "the idea of a self, of the subject, then of Truth and the One, then finally the idea of the Book and the Work" (*IC* xii).

In Chapter V, "Knowledge of the Unknown," of *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot carries on a dialogue with Levinas and mentions terms like "*visage*" and "*autrui*." I find these two terms extremely illuminating when applied to

² In Chapter IX, "Features of the Mask in Ancient Greece," of *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Jean-Pierre Vernant distinguishes two kinds of masks: theatrical masks "worn on stage by actors" and religious masks "designed to represent a deity or to cover the face of one of his devotees for the duration of the ritual" (189). The religious masks can be distinguished again into two different types: "first those donned in ritual masquerades in which the faithful disguised themselves for strictly religious purposes; second, the mask of the god himself that, simply through its countenance with its strange eyes, expressed certain characteristics peculiar to Dionysus, the divine power whose presence seemed ineluctably marked by his absence" (190).

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explain the mask of Dionysus. The mask through which Dionysus manifests itself is the “visage,” a term used by Levinas to name the “epiphany of *autrui*.” The *visage* of Dionysus is the epiphany of the “entirely Other,” of the “absolutely outside,” of something “strangely mysterious” which exceeds the Other of the Same without nostalgia, without return, and which cannot be recognized as a Self, always impossible, inaccessible, irreducible, unthinkable, foreign. As Blanchot argues, the visage is “a presence that I cannot dominate by my gaze, that always exceeds both the representation I might make of it and any form, any image, any view, any idea by which I might affirm it, arrest it, or simply let it be present” (IC 54).

The visage of Dionysus thrusts the experience of the limit, of the unknown, of *autrui*, of ecstasy, and of madness into the moment of face to face. It seizes us, puts us at risk, and bears us away from ourselves. The experience of the visage, of the mask of Dionysus, cannot be represented by the simple movement of manifestation, or the double movement of concealment and unconcealment. As Blanchot suggests, the experience of the visage is the “presence of the outside itself (of exteriority, says Levinas), is not the presence of a form appearing in light or its simple retreat in the absence of light; neither veiled nor unveiled” (IC 55). With the help of Levinas, Blanchot pushes the experiences of epiphany and confrontation to their limits.³

Dionysus's mask is said to have risen from the depth of the sea.⁴ It looks strange and foreign representing an enigma to be deciphered, an unknown power to be identified. In other words, the mask demands an interpretation, a fiction-making enterprise. The purpose of this paper is essentially concerned with the interpretation of the mask of Dionysus by focusing on the experiences of epiphany and confrontation. In the first section “Epiphany,” I will address the main concern--Dionysian epiphany--from various perspectives and along with many modern critical thinkers (Nietzsche, Blanchot, Artaud, Foucault, Deleuze, Heidegger). I will also attempt to distinguish Dionysian epiphany from Joycean epiphany and Heideggerian *aletheia*. In the second section “Confrontation,” I will explore the experience of the face to face confrontation with the mask of Dionysus.

I. Epiphany

³ See Maurice Blanchot, “Knowledge of the Unknown,” in *The Infinite Conversation*, pp.49-58.

⁴ See *Dionysos at Large* by Marcel Detienne, p. 8.

According to Walter Otto, Dionysus is “the god who comes, the god of epiphany, whose appearance is far more urgent, far more compelling than that of any other god. He had disappeared, and now he will suddenly be here again” (79). His interpretation of Dionysus as an epiphanic god, as Albert Henrichs observes, exerts a great influence on the Parisian Dionysus of Jean-Pierre Vernant and of Marcel Detienne (31). Both Vernant and Detienne see Dionysus as a god of “*parousia*,” a god who appears, manifests himself, and makes his presence known.⁵

As a god of epiphanies, the mask is his “visage” to show his sudden coming and his ambiguous raw power. In *The Poetics of Epiphany*, Ashton Nichols traces the etymology of the word “epiphany.” According to Nichols, the word “epiphany” is derived from the Greek *phainein* “to show” and the prepositional prefix *epi*, which means variably “on,” “over,” “at,” and “after.” *Phainein* can also be translated “to bring to light” or to “cause to appear,” and is the root of “fantasy,” “phantom,” and “phenomenon.” The Greek forms *epiphainein* and *epiphaneia* mean respectively “to manifest” and “appearance” or “manifestation” (5).

What has happened at the moment of Dionysian epiphany? What have we experienced? We experience the “manifestation” of Dionysus. But what is it that manifests? A fantasy? A phantom? A vision? An image? A mask? The fact that remains with the movement of epiphany is that what “is” has always already in effect disappeared; something was there that is there no longer. The epiphany of Dionysus is nothing but an intimate immediacy, in an aura of the alterity of desire, of passion, and of excess. The immediacy and alterity of the presencing defy the mediation of dialectics. As Blanchot suggests,

immediate presence is presence of what could not be present, presence of the non-accessible, presence excluding or exceeding any present. This amounts to saying: the immediate, infinitely exceeding any present possibility by its very presence, is the infinite presence of what remains radically absent, a presence in its presence always infinitely other, presence of the other in its alterity: non-presence. (*IC* 38)

⁵ See Jean-Pierre Vernant's *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, pp. 390-394, and Marcel Detienne's *Dionysos at Large*, pp. 1-19. See also Albert Henrichs's essay, “Human and Divine in Dionysus” in *Masks of Dionysus* for an invaluable discussion and information, pp. 13-43.

The epiphany of Dionysus dissuades us from thinking of his coming, presencing, or manifestation, but overflows every spectrum of thought. Neither beginning nor end, neither origin nor destination, the mask god manifests and keeps manifesting in-between. The gratuitousness of the Dionysian epiphany exemplifies the Nietzschean Dionysian “chance-necessity” which defeats every naming but affirms every coming and becoming. One’s relation with the epiphany of Dionysus is not one of recognition, the power of knowing and relentless grasping, but of contagion which is derived from the “epidemic drive” (Detienne 5) of Dionysus. As *The Bacchae* of Euripides opens, Dionysus is returning from Asia to Thebes, his natal spot. He has been spreading his worship throughout the non-Greek world. Thebes has rejected his divinity, but already he has animated its women with “barbarian” joy and emotional frenzy. They are reveling in the mountains nearby in uncontrolled religious ecstasy, celebrating the Dionysian rites. In this and many other tales, Dionysus is epidemic in the strongest sense of the word. The epiphany of Dionysus, as Detienne suggests, “takes on epidemic proportions” (3). All the more, an epidemic of this kind requires “no theory of contagion” (3). “In Dionysus,” Detienne elaborates, “there was an ‘epidemic’ drive, which set him apart from other gods with regular, programmed epiphanies, always amenable to the official order of feasts and each with his or her fixed time” (5).

For Erwin Rhode, the spread of the frenzied Bacchic rite is a “religious epidemic,” similar to the dancing epidemic after the Black Death in Europe (5-6). However, Rhode’s view of the Dionysian epidemic is essentially negative. He considers the Dionysian ecstasy “basically pathological, a state of hallucination and *alienatio mentis*” (259). In contrast to Rhode’s view, Otto, who follows Nietzsche in observing sickness and frenzy as violent, alternative ways of perceiving the universe, views the epidemic outbreak of the Dionysian in a positive note: “The madness which is called Dionysus is no sickness, no debility in life, but a champion of life at its healthiest. It is the tumult which erupts from its innermost recesses when they mature and force their way to the surface” (143).

Artaud’s view of the epidemic is similar to that of Otto. In the essay “The Theater and the Plague,” Artaud gives us an interesting and horrifying account of the plague’s symptoms and effects on civilization. For him, the plague is an acting out of cruelty, the cosmic energy which stirs the body fluids “like lava kneaded by subterranean forces, search for an outlet” (19). Under the attack of

the plague, the victims and survivors, in a condition of mixed panic and delirium, behave crazily in an orgy of “gratuitous absurd” (24) as though released from all social conventions and sanctions. Thus for Artaud, theater like the plague is the “redeeming epidemic” which is “a superior disease because it is a total crisis after which nothing remains except death or an extreme purification. Similarly the theater is a disease because it is the supreme equilibrium which cannot be achieved without destruction” (31). In fact, Artaud's theater of cruelty is a theater of the plague, which tries in various way to evoke the epidemic drive found in the Great Mysteries of Dionysus, Orpheus, and Eleusis.

The gift of wine that Dionysus offers mankind is contagious. It is a *pharmakon* which cures and infects. For Pentheus, Dionysus is contagious like a *pharmakeus*: at once a magician who topples the palace and changes forms, a sorcerer who bewitches women and teaches promiscuity, and a prisoner he himself puts in jail. On the other hand, Dionysus is also a *pharmakos*, a scapegoat whom he wishes to capture as the representative of the evil. By arresting Dionysus, he can establish the distinction between a pure, rational inside and a corrupt, irrational outside. Even with all of Penthesus's efforts, Dionysus and his rites, by confounding the outside and the inside, still disseminate like a plague.⁶

His epiphany is entirely heterogeneous: maenads, animals, vines, wine particles, microorganisms--all in packs. Contagion through the maenads as pack does not function by filiation and heredity. The maenads and their lord Dionysus are packs which transform the polis through contagion. As Deleuze & Guattari write, “we oppose epidemic to filiation, contagion to heredity, peopling by contagion to sexual reproduction, sexual production. Bands, human or animal, proliferate by contagion, epidemics, battlefields, and catastrophes” (*TP* 242).

The epiphany of the mask god is not only a contagious phenomenon, but also a play of uncanny forces--forces that come from without, forces that traverse and cut across the Dionysian mask at the moment of the epiphany. This epiphanic moment is also “the moment of arising” what Foucault designates as “*emergence*” (*Entstehung*) in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (*FR* 83). As Foucault writes,

⁶ See the part “Plato's Pharmacy” in *Dissemination* for Derrida's exquisite argument about the relationship between *pharmakon*, *pharmakeus* and *pharmakos*, pp. 61-172.

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Emergence is thus the entry of forces; it is their eruption, the leap from the wings to center stage, each in its youthful strength. . . . emergence designates a place of confrontation, but not as a closed field offering the spectacle of a struggle among equals. Rather, as Nietzsche demonstrates in his analysis of good and evil, it is a “non-place,” a pure distance, which indicates that the adversaries do not belong to a common space. Consequently, no one is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice. (*FR* 84-85)

The emergence of the mask god, which is the most terrible and yet the most gentle, happens in the “non-place” of the confrontation. Not to temper violence, nor to gratify it, the epiphany emerges through the cruel and gratuitous instigation of forces. The epiphany as emergence is constituted by the relation of force with force, by a plurality of irreducible forces. Every epiphany is different because the relation of forces undergoes metamorphosis. This power of transformation defines the epiphany as emergence, not according to causality, but by the dice throw, by wandering, by dancing “on the feet of chance” (Nietzsche, *Z*, III “Before Sunrise”).

To the question “What is the Dionysian epiphany?” “Which one is it? You ought to ask!” Thus spoke Dionysus. “Which one?” The vine, the wine, the maenads, the snake, the lion, the bull, the Dionysian, the dancing, the leaping, the flute-playing, the laughter, the animal, the thyrsus, the dismemberment, the fragmentary limbs, the feast, the mask? The one that manifests is always a mask, a mask of Dionysus. To start the question with “What is. . . ?” is for Deleuze the way that metaphysics formulated the question of essence (*NP* 75). Through the mask, a dynamic flux of Dionysian raw power carries us away even further outside, outside of the question of essence and truth.

The moment of the mask god's epiphany is the moment of intensity, of intensities. At this moment, there is nothing for us to experience. Our relation to the mask is not that of experiencing subject. Rather, it is a radical non-empirical experience, an experience of presence as outside, as *ek-stasis*. This ecstatic state of experience is not subjective in origin, nor is it individual. It is fundamentally linked to the unspecified others. It is, in fact, a “theatrical” experience envisioned by Artaud, in which participants experience “a passionate overflowing, a frightful transfer of forces from body to body. This transfer

cannot be reproduced twice.”⁷ This theatrical experience will definitely lose its potency if it is translated into representations, into the binary performance of the signifiers and the signifieds. On the stage, the smiling mask of Dionysus conveys nothing but contagious Dionysian laughter which is meant to evoke in us either an affirmative Nietzschean tragic experience or an indescribable ecstasy.

The Dionysian epiphany is essentially different from the epiphany in Greek mythology which refers to the unexpected manifestation of the divine and the epiphany in Greek drama which describes the sudden appearance of a god on stage. It is nothing like the Christian epiphany which commemorates the manifestation of the Christ to the Gentiles in the form of the Magi, or the literary epiphany, especially the Joycean epiphany in which a commonplace event takes on a revelatory quality in the mind of the observer. After Joyce, epiphany has enjoyed wide currency as both a literary technique and a critical term. As many critics have pointed out, the term epiphany was first discovered in the manuscript of *Stephen Hero* (written in 1904-5) in which the central character, Stephen Daedalus, claims that one function of writing is “to record. . . epiphanies with extreme care,” since “they. . . are the most delicate and evanescent of moments” (*SH* 211). Stephen explains the idea of epiphany as the third quality of beauty after he introduces the first two, integrity and symmetry:

This is the moment which I call epiphany. First we recognise that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany. (*SH* 213)

Joyce uses “epiphany” both to describe his records of moments that blend triviality with significance and to designate the revelatory climax of aesthetic apprehension.

⁷ Quoted in Derrida's essay “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and Difference*, p. 250.

From the perspective of the Dionysian epiphany, the Joycean epiphany is too Platonic, too organic, and too subjective. It relies too much on the structural position of the object, the sudden insight of the subject, consciously or unconsciously, and the subject's power over the phenomenal world. It also puts too much emphasis on the single movement of appearing, revealing, unconcealing, and manifestation. In what follows, I will devote a few pages to discuss the notion of *aletheia* in Heidegger, which bears a close affinity with the motif of epiphany and is crucial for us to further explore the nature of the Dionysian epiphany.

As compared with Joycean epiphany, Heideggerian *aletheia*, mainly used as a critical or philosophical term, takes on a movement which is far more intriguing. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger flourishes a complex gesture in showing how the truth as *aletheia* works. *Aletheia* is associated with light and the phenomenon of illuminating, but what is even more important is the truth's coming into being through lighting, shining, appearing. The empty space in which the truth appears is a stage with many names (the clearing, the lighting, the Open). This stage is no ordinary stage, with no ordinary curtain, no ordinary cast of Being and beings, and no ordinary repertoire of the double concealment. As Heidegger writes,

The open place in the midst of beings, the clearing, is never a rigid stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings runs its course. Rather, the clearing happens only as this double concealment. The unconcealedness of beings--this is never a merely existent state, but a happening. Unconcealedness (truth) is neither an attribute of factual things in the sense of beings, nor one of proposition. (54)

"The Origin of the Work of Art" (1933-34) attests to Heidegger's continuous effort to elaborate the "question of being," which is his life-long preoccupation first formulated in his unfinished magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1927). The question of being was from the outset a question concerning truth, understood not as the correspondence of propositions to states of affairs but as disclosure, unconcealment, and what Heidegger called the "lighting of Being" (*die Lichtung des Seins*). In "The Origin of the Work of Art" the question of being is presented as the question of the truth as *aletheia*.

In the Greek sense of the word, *aletheia* is the curtain-raising unconcealment. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger gives the notion *aletheia* a new

twist. The question of the truth is not *aletheia as unconcealment* pure and simple because *aletheia* is also a complex pun that preserves the darkness of the truth. According to Heidegger, the double concealment of the truth “can be refusal or merely a dissembling. We are never fully certain whether it is the one or the other” (54). As Gerald L. Bruns interprets, “that is, it can be self-seclusion or withdrawal on the one hand, and masking, disguise, or figure on the other, where something appears only by concealing itself as something other or as what it is not” (32-33). Thus *aletheia* becomes the opening up of the stage which not just holds and withdraws itself but dissimulates and disguises itself. It is characterized by its otherness, its strangeness from the usual, its reserve or resistance to all modes of truth as representation or proposition.

The performance of *aletheia* is the becoming-uncanny of the being, the becoming denial and untruth of the truth. As Heidegger writes,

We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary....At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary, uncanny. The nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial. Yet this denial is not a defect or default, as though truth were unalloyed unconcealedness that has rid itself of everything concealed. If truth could accomplish this, it would no longer be itself. *The denial, in the form of a double concealment, belongs to the nature of truth as unconcealedness.* Truth, in its nature, is untruth. (54)

The nature of the Heideggerian truth as *aletheia* borders on unreconciled paradox and is presented as a restless movement of negotiation and metamorphosis in the spatio-temporal realm.

The uncanny theater of the truth doubles itself and oscillates between two poles. It operates in a strategy similar to the Derridean “both and” and “neither nor”. Truth is that specter-character playing double roles and always beside itself in the open space, equipped with an extraordinary *aletheia-curtain*. As in *The Birth of Tragedy* in which the “perpetual strife” between the Apollinian and the Dionysian “generates an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art--Attic tragedy” (Nietzsche 33), here, “truth happens as the primal strife between lighting and concealing” (55).

John D. Caputo, in the chapter, “*Aletheia* and the Myth of Being,” of

Demythologizing Heidegger, distinguishes two senses of the word *aletheia* at work in Heidegger's text. In the first sense, *aletheia* means the unconcealment of the being "prior to its reduction to an object of an assertion or to an object for a thinking subject" (22). In this sense, *aletheia* is a historical Greek experience. In the second, *aletheia* takes on a "radical, structural, antehistorical sense" (22). It is rendered as a hyphenated form, *a-letheia*, to stress the rift emerging in the field of presence. The disruptive hyphen "breaks up the nominal and natural unity of the word and prevents it from taking up residence within any natural, historical language. Like Derrida's *différance*, *a-letheia* is neither name nor concept and possesses no nominal unity" (25). The two senses of *aletheia* engage in a perpetual strife like the conflict within a being between lighting and concealing as well as the opposition of world and earth in "The Origin of the Work of Art."

According to Allan Megill, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger "argues for the distinctive truth value of art" (157). He radicalizes the "aesthetic" view of art which can be traced back to Kant. The aesthetic view denies the "truth-claim" of art. As Megill elaborates, "Opposed to the 'aesthetic' view is the 'ontological' view, which holds that art is not mere play but is rather a revelation of truth and hence of Being. Obviously, Heidegger's view of art is 'ontological' rather than 'aesthetic'" (159).

Critiquing his own "onto-theological" approach in *Being and Time* and radicalizing the subjective intentionality of Husserlian phenomenology, Heidegger, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," shifts away from his earlier anthropological and phenomenological preoccupations because they still rely too much on modern philosophy's Cartesian turn to the subject and its search for foundational conditions of thought. Playing down the role led by "the self-sovereign subject's performance of genius" (76), his theater underscores the primal performance of the truth which is "ontopoetic" or "ontoartistic" in its nature.

According to Heidegger, the origin of the work of art originates with "the spring that leaps to the truth of what is, in the work" (77). An ambiguous paradox, the origin of the work of art is a primal leap that grounds, a creative work that preserves, an exuberant gift that reserves, a genuine beginning that "already contains the end latent within itself" (76). At the end of "The Origin of the Work of Art," art, poetry, and truth belong together celebrating "the setting-into-work of truth" (74) in an uncanny "founding leap" (*ursprung*) which

is not unlike the ecstatic “round dance” of the fourfold in “The Thing.” Heidegger’s “founding leap” of the work of art sets up not only the performance of the truth as *aletheia*, but the performance of metaphor, of language, and of art as event and happening.

Heidegger’s rendering of *aletheia* is inspirational and influential. We can observe that critics sometimes employ similar metaphors to give expression to the Dionysian epiphany. However, the Dionysian epiphany risks itself in a far more radical manner than that of *aletheia*. Completely devoid of any “ontological” value, it valorizes the “tragic” spirit of play. Heidegger’s radicalization of art, of phenomenology remains unforgetful of the ground, of the reserve, of the end, and of the truth. Nietzsche broaches the revaluation of all values and proposes to actively forget the “ground,” to excessively spend/unthink (*dé-penser*) the “origin.”

In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot ponders over the word *aletheia*, its possible etymologies and meaning, and problematizes Heidegger’s reading of the word. For Blanchot, the privileged function of “the negative *a*” should be questioned. This word was read by Plato as *ale-theia*, which according to Blanchot “could be translated as divine wandering and which is of no less importance than Heidegger’s etymological interpretation. Truth (what is commonly called truth) would mean, according to Plato’s etymology, errant course, the straying of the gods” (94). To read *aletheia* according to Plato’s etymology sheds light on our interpretation of the epiphanic god, who keeps manifesting himself through his itinerant epiphanies. In this reading, truth cannot be dissociated from the wandering of the gods, especially the nomadic god Dionysus.

The “coming” of the epiphanic god which traverses human beings, sweeps them away, and affects the animal and the vegetation no less than the human is best understood not by Heideggerian *aletheia* but by Deleuzian *becomings*. The Dionysian epiphany comes and becomes, always in a threshold, in a liminal breaking point, always beyond consciousness, beyond empirical perception, beyond phenomenology. Nothing subjectifies and mediates in the god’s coming and becoming. There is only the indefinite play of interpretations, the indefinite shift of masks, and the indefinite flux of multiple and differential becomings. The Dionysian epiphany is directed against recognition and identity by means of becomings. It opposes epiphany as the illumination, as the means to truth and knowledge. It is against memory by exercising active

forgetfulness through intoxication. In a word, it is an epiphany at the limits of manifestation.

II. Confrontation

The seductive fascination of Dionysus lies in his mask. The mask is not an object for our conceptual gaze. Rather, the mask is a strange field of confrontation, filled with multiple inversions and contradictions, duality and paradox. The confrontation with the mask signals an ever-elusive, ever-receding impossibility of any direct grasp of Dionysus. Walter F. Otto gives us a telling description of the mask:

The mask is pure confrontation--an antipode, and nothing else. It has no reverse side--'Spirits have no back,' the people say. It has nothing which might transcend the mighty moment of confrontation. It has, in other words, no complete existence either. It is the symbol and the manifestation of that which is simultaneously there and not there: that which is excruciatingly near, that which is completely absent--both in one reality. Thus the mask tells us that the theophany of Dionysus, which is different from that of the other gods because of its stunning assault on the senses and its urgency, is linked with the eternal enigmas of duality and paradox. This theophany thrusts Dionysus violently and unavoidably into the here and now--and sweeps him away at the same time into the inexpressible distance. It excites with a nearness which is at the same time a remoteness. The final secrets of existence and non-existence transfix mankind with monstrous eyes. (91)

This encounter at a distance, at once near and far, pure and yet immeasurable, is the play of distance which prevents the mask from ever revealing itself. The mask god is foreign to revelation and has nothing to reveal. For Deleuze, Otto posits "a Hegelian Dionysus, dialectical and dialectician" (*Nietzsche & Philosophy* 17). Yet, for me, Otto's interpretation smacks more of Heideggerianism than that of Hegelianism.

Francoise Frontisi-Ducroux's wonderful chapter, "In the Mirror of the Mask," introduces to us several masks of Dionysus, either in profile or facing front. What captivates us most in these masks is the gaze of Dionysus, the enigmatic and fascinating gaze which looks straight into the eyes of whoever looks at him--worshippers, satyrs, Maenads, drinkers, and readers alike. As

Frontisi-Ducroux describes, “the same features that identify him unmistakably--the long robe and crown of ivy--could also be hung from a rigid pole surmounted by a mask. And the mask alone, bearded and crowned, is often shown head on, taking up all or part of the image” (151). Leaping, dancing, flute-playing, thyrsus-brandishing, these are common portrayals of the maenads and satyrs one could observe on the Attic pottery. Swinging the body with the spirit of music, leaping so high as to mock the spirit of gravity, the maenads and satyrs, dancing around the pillar on which the mask of Dionysus is hung, give animated expression of the Dionysian spirit.⁸

In Chapter IX of *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, “Features of the Mask in Ancient Greece,” written jointly by Vernant and Frontisi-Ducroux, emphases are placed on the “immediacy” of the face to face confrontation and the radical “otherness” and “strangeness” constituted by the fascinating gaze of Dionysus (201-206). Also in Chapter XVII of the same book, “The Masked Dionysus of Euripides' *Bacchae*,” Vernant himself makes a similar observation: “It is a mask whose strange stare exerts a fascination, but it is hollow, empty, indicating the absence of a god who is somewhere else but who tears one out of oneself, makes one lose one's bearings in one's everyday, familiar life, and who takes possession of one just as if this empty mask was now pressed to one's own face, covering and transforming it” (396).

The fascinating gaze of Dionysus plays with the tension between presence and absence. It is the gaze of “schizophrenic” nature in the Deleuzian sense, able to see beyond “paranoiac” unity and conformity. In the hollow, empty gaze, blindness is vision and ecstasy is the surplus of vision which is characterized by multiplicity, proliferation, flowing, becoming, a dissolution of boundaries, and is constituted by partial objects, fragments of experience, memory and pathos, linked in chance and unexpected ways. Whoever is fascinated by the gaze of Dionysus loses the power to make sense. He perceives no object, no worldly reality, only what Blanchot calls “the indeterminate milieu of fascination” (*SL* 32). It is a milieu of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, in which separation becomes an encounter; seeing is a kind of touch, a contact at a distance, and an impossibility of not seeing the impossible (Blanchot, *SL* 32).

In *The Bacchae* of the Euripides, the initiated stranger who is Dionysus in

⁸ See Frontisi-Ducroux's essay, “In the Mirror of the Mask” in *A City of Images*, for figures and detailed descriptions, pp. 150-156.

disguise explains to the uninitiated Pentheus the rite of initiation:

Pentheus: How did you see him? In a dream or face to face?
 Dionysus: Face to face. He gave me his rites. (467-69)

Face to face, the mask initiates us into the rites of Dionysus and estranges us from the propositional, analytical, subjective, empirical, or even phenomenal interest in the milieu of fascination. In “the indeterminate milieu of fascination” we are suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be. There is always an ecstatic and mystic aura built around our confrontation with the mask, in which the affect of the Dionysian takes its effect.

Face to face, we confront with the large, hollow eyes of Dionysus that exert fascination. They are “dilated” eyes, the eyes able to dilate (*écarter*)—to part, rift, divert, deviate, spread, wander, and dismember--until the self-conscious subject who gazes is dilated to experience the Dionysian vision of life and to see double visions like Pentheus.⁹ As Pentheus describes after he is adorned with Bacchic garb, “I seem to see two suns blazing in the heavens. And now two Thebes, two cities, and each with seven gates. And you--you are a bull who walks before me there. Horns have sprouted from your head. Have you always been a beast? But now I see a bull” (*The Bacchae* 918-923). The dilation of the eyes is the dissolution of image into the abyss of the unknown. Vision, the sense traditionally favored in the acquisition of truth and knowledge, has been altered, decentered, and rendered ex-orbitant by emptying of its visual sense of the world.

In “The Thing,” Heidegger inquires into “the thinging of the thing” but he does not delve into the thingly character of the thing directly. He takes a detour by scrutinizing “the jug.” The jug is a thing like a vessel, and not an object of mere representation. The jug's jugness or thingness is the void or the emptiness that it holds. As Heidegger argues, “the jug's void determines all the handling in the process of making the vessel. The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds” (169). The crucial importance of the void in making the jugness of the jug cannot be emphasized enough. But Heidegger's inquiry does not stop here. He demonstrates his

⁹ For Frontisi-Ducroux, the large “prophylactic” eyes are the most striking and frequent feature on drinking cups and amphoras (154). For me the monstrous eyes of Dionysus is not the “prophylactic” eyes whose function is to protect and to preserve the subject from evil forces but the “dilated” eyes.

virtuoso reasoning by linking “the holding of the vessel” with “the giving of the outpouring.” With this link, he directs the whole discussion to the gift and the gift-giving of the jug. He writes:

The nature of the holding void is gathered in the giving. But giving is richer than a mere pouring out. The giving, whereby the jug is a jug, gathers in the twofold holding--in the outpouring. . . . The jug's jug-character consists in the poured gift of the pouring out. (172)

The poured gift of the pouring out is the wine god himself, who offers himself in the destructive consumption of the potlatch.

In *The Bacchae*, Teiresias describes two supreme blessings mankind receives from god. One is the nourishment of grain given by the goddess Demeter, or Earth. The other is the gift of wine from Dionysus. With the good gift of Dionysus, “suffering mankind forgets its grief; from it comes sleep; with it oblivion of the troubles of the day. There is no other medicine for misery. And when we pour libations to the gods, we pour the god of wine himself that through his intercession man may win the favor of heaven” (279-286).

The gift of Dionysus is a gift for the living and for the dead, for the mortal and for the divine. It operates not to remember, but to forget; not to bring in a return, but to spend. This gift of wine is a gift of excess, of abundance. It is not a gift of calculated reciprocity because the fiery nature of the gift pours the epidemic drive of the wine god which overflows and affects. What is poured is the loss or the expenditure that cannot be turned into profit. The Dionysian gift-giving knows not the realm of the proper. The god of wine depropriates, expropriates himself, a pure sacrifice, a useless and sacrificial excess that denies all utilitarian knowledge and practice. The Dionysian wild orgy or festival takes no account of work and production. Unlike the principle of utility or the figure of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, the wine god gives, putting himself at stake, conserving, investing, and amortizing nothing, without a determinate negation. He gives and forgets. Forgetfulness is the best gift offered by the god. As Nietzsche writes, “forgetting represents a force, a form of *robust* health” (*GM* II, 1). The gift of wine celebrates the active forgetfulness and is a gift of counter-memory. What lies in the gift of wine is the gesture of giving that affirms the life that is always exuberant and the death that is always more of itself.

Taking several ingenious turns, Heidegger's argument for the primal importance of the gift-giving in "The Thing" helps us to better appreciate the gift-giving nature of the wine god. Meanwhile, his investigation of the thingness of the thing assists us to render the thingly character of the mask. In another article, "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger calls for a direct confrontation with the thing--an encounter without mediation (25).¹⁰ Likewise, when we encounter the mask, we should refrain our desire to grip, to violate, and to conceptualize the mask by imposing meaning on it. The mask of Dionysus, like Heidegger's thing, insists on its thingly character, resists any mediation, and refuses to be transformed into an object, into a theoretical entity capable of being put into a statement (176-177). Like the thing, the mask does not "appear" as such. It challenges our will to interpretation, to representation. To confront the mask of Dionysus face to face is to risk, to cease to be a subject, and to become imperceptible. Near the end of "The Thing," Heidegger drifts again to the metaphors of "the mirroring" and the world's worlding. For Heidegger, "this mirroring does not portray a likeness" (179). The mirror-game of the wine, like the world's worlding, cannot be explained, nor can it be fathomed.

For Frontisi-Ducroux, the intense dramatic moment of the Dionysian rite always comes when the wine cup (or Heideggerian jug) is raised, when the drinker confronts Dionysus's fascinating gaze decorated either on the side or at the bottom of the cup/jug. The wine god "offers himself, lucid and smiling, in the benevolence of the wine whose consumption is a direct communion between the god and the drinker, his celebrant" (152). At this intense moment, across the raised cup which flashes a reflection of Dionysus in a mirror-game, the cupping/jugging of the cup/jug as void and holding, the wining of the vine as remedy and poison, the masking of the mask as unconcealment and concealment, and the becoming of the coming as joyful exuberance and suffering dismemberment belong together in the giving of the wine god and in the schizo desire of the Dionysian which produces no "bipolar opposites" but "the schizophrenic experiences" of "an immanent principle" (Deleuze & Guattari, *AO* 5). Constantly flowing into each other, the cup (jug), the wine, and the mask

¹⁰ Heidegger writes: "Only, certainly, by granting the thing, as it were a free field to display its thingly character directly. Everything that might interpose itself between the thing and us in apprehending and talking about it must be set aside. Only then do we yield ourselves to the undistorted presencing of the thing. But we do not need first to call or arrange for this situation in which we let things encounter us without mediation" (25).

together enter into the flux of libidinal economy and create a space of intoxication. In addition to double visions, the mirror-game of the wine produces double-hand writing and multiple simulating of simulacrum through the mirror-play of mask, of metaphor, of language, and of writing.

Between his comings and goings, the god of the mask strolls into the open sky, into the unknown, into the boundless, beyond the ordered framework of language, polis, and civilization by employing the rites of the masking of the mask, the wining of the wine, and the giving of the outpouring. All these rites belong together at the limits of epiphany and confrontation.

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