

The “Body” of Dionysos and Its Preannouncements: Theatre as an Ecumenical Diasporic Phenomenon

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RÉSUMÉ

Le caractère oecuménique du théâtre transpire déjà dans les aventures sanglantes de Dionysos, le dieu de l'espace principal de représentation, qui se déplace sans interruption dans toute «l'étendue globale» (χώρος οικουμένης) créant des miracles (exploits), devenant parfois un agresseur, parfois une victime fabuleusement extraordinaire. Le moment culminant de sa carrière pendant ses errances incessantes – s'est produit à Icaria, l'île où il avait été capturé par les Tyrrhéniens – les célèbres pirates, qui, ignorant la nature divine de leur victime, l'ont vendu comme esclave en Asie.

Dionysos y a établi la première scénographie de la mythologie théâtrale. Une vigne magique s'est développée sur le pont tandis que les avirons du bateau de pirates étaient transformés en serpents. Le caractère oecuménique et diasporique du théâtre s'affiche aussi avec les voyages d'Eschyle en 470 av. J-C en Sicile, où il a mis en scène *Les Perses* et a écrit une nouvelle tragédie inspirée par la région, *Les femmes d'Aitna*.

ABSTRACT

The ecumenical character of the theatre seems to be preannounced in the bloody adventures of Dionysus, the god of the main performance space, who moves continuously throughout the “global expanse” (χώρος οικουμένης) creating miracles (exploits), sometimes becoming an aggressor, sometimes an extraordinary fabulous victim. The crowning moment of his career during his undeterred wanderings – occurred at Icaria, the island where he had been captured by the Tyrrhenians – the famous pirates who, ignoring the divine nature of their victim, sold him as a slave in Asia.

Dionysus then established the first scenography in theatre mythology. A magical vine grew on the deck while the oars of the pirates' ship were transformed into snakes. The ecumenical and diasporic character of the theatre is also heralded by Aeschylus' journeys in 470 BC to Sicily where he performed *The Persians* and wrote a new tragedy inspired by the area, *The Women of Aitna*.

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The theatre, from its cell form, is linked to migration, displacement and artistic creation. The adventure of Dionysus—the eminent god of tragic poesy, the guiding light of the dramatic poets—is truly indicative. Dionysus appeared first as a σώμα, a body repeatedly born and transformed while newborn. The Titans cut him into pieces, boiled them in a cauldron, while from the blood of his massacre a pomegranate grew. His grandmother Rhea, however, saved him by assembling his body fragments and reintroducing him to life. So Dionysus from his embodiment has within himself the meaning of, βροασμός “effervescence” (what Nietzsche would later call the Dionysiac element in *The Birth of Tragedy*, by opposing it to the Apollonian element).

Dionysus’ first stop on his undeterred movements from place to place – in an adventure of ecumenisation of his “body” – was at Orchomenos. Here Persephone persuaded the royal couple, Athamas and Ino, to raise the child by keeping him, disguised as a girl, in the palace apartments provided for women (from that time the meaning of disguise will accompany the actors’ creative work in the theatre).

In a following stop, Hermes, obedient to Zeus’ suggestions, temporarily transformed Dionysus into a ram and delivered him to the nymphs of Helicon who kept him in a cave and nourished him with honey. The ode (ωδή), the song sung in the ancient festivals by the company of men who were wearing the skin of a ram (τράγος), is connected to this form of the horned animal and both elements in combination gave their names to the tragedy (τράγων+ωδή>τραγωδία).

When Dionysus reached maturity, despite his effeminacy caused by the kind of education he received in Orchomenos, Hera recognized him as a son of Zeus but at the same time she drove him mad. Madness, the fury (μένος), at this point is a preannouncing attribute of the art of theatre, of the ecstasy that is the exodus from one’s self and the frenzied permeation into another self which is not what it used to be, or is himself and somebody else.

Dionysos wandered the whole world in a passionate adventure, accompanied by Seilinos, his tutor, and the frenetic chorus of Satyrs and aenads (frenzied women), bearing swords, snakes, and sticks wrapped with ivy and a pine cone at the top.

Then we follow him to Egypt, to his next step where he accomplished the first of his military exploits: with the help of the Amazons defeating the Titans and restoring King Ammon to his throne.

From Egypt he migrated to India, met resistance from the King of Damascus, crossed the Tigris River, taught the art of viticulture (since he himself had conceptualized wine on Mount Nysse, an innovation which would bring him glory), established major cities and proceeded to enact a famous legislative work.

On his return from India Dionysus encountered resistance from the Amazons whom he pursued all the way to Samos and Ephesus. He slaughtered many of them. The field of battle was named Panaima (*Παν + αίμα* – all + blood).

He returned to Europe where his grandmother Rhea purified him from the innumerable murders he had committed in the course of his madness. Later he entered Thrace where the king of Hedonia Lycurgus (*βασιλεύς των Ηδωνών*) captured his whole army. Dionysus himself found refuge in the cave of Thetis. Rhea drove Lycurgus mad and he in a next step slaughtered his son Drius. Returning from the sea, Dionysus prophesied that if Lycurgus was not assassinated, the land would fade away. The people of Hedoni then led their king to Mount Paggeon and delivered him to the wild horses to be torn to pieces.

Dionysus also visited Thebes where, after Euripides (*Bacchae*), he invited women to take part in the orgiastic ceremonies on Mount Kithairon. Pentheus opposed the advent and spread of the new religion. Dionysus disguised him as a woman and leading him to Kithaeron delivered him to the Maenads where his own mother Agavi cut him into pieces and carried off his head thinking, in her fury, that it was a lion's head.

In Orchomenos he disguised himself as a young girl and drove the daughters of Minya mad because they refused his invitation to take part in the revelry. He then changed form again and became a lion, bull and panther. One of Minya's daughters offered her son Ippasos for sacrifice and all the three sisters slaughtered and devoured him ravenously. Ever since then the murder of Ippasos is celebrated at the festival of Agrionia (*Αγριώνια*), which means "invitation for wildness".

However Dionysus' migratory adventures continued. He arrived at the island of Icaria where he realized that his ship was unable to sail. He then rented another one from the famous Tyrrhenian pirates. They kidnapped and sold him as a common slave in Asia – as they were unaware of his divine nature. Then Dionysus worked the most extraordinary dramatic miracle, creating the first "scenography" in theater mythology: a magical vine branch

sprang up from the deck, wrapped the mast, while ivy became shrouds and oars became snakes. Dionysus transformed himself into a lion filling the vessel with animal ghosts and flute sounds. In terror the Tyrrhenian sailors jumped into the sea and became dolphins.

Later Dionysus visited the island of Naxos, where he found Ariadne (Minos' daughter) abandoned by Theseus (son of Aegeus, Prince of Athens) on his return to Athens after having killed the Minotaur. Dionysus married Ariadne producing five children. In globalizing his achievement he placed Ariadne's wedding wreath in the sky among the stars.

At Argos, Dionysus punished his enemy Perseus who had opposed him and drove mad the women of Argos who started to eat their own children.

Finally, having established the worship of himself throughout the world, he ascended to Heaven, sitting on the right of Zeus. He also descended to Tartarus, where he bribed Persephone with a myrtle (*μύρτο*) to release his dead stepmother Semele, changing her name to Theoni so that the other souls would not become envious and also ask to be released.

The mythical wandering of Dionysus presignifies with his successive actions (the ecstasy, the effervescence, the transformations) the theatre as an art under his "protection". Dionysus is followed by a troupe of Satyrs and Maenads as he would later appear with all the creative rationalised achievements of the dramatists in the theatre orchestras. Although inherent in all these mythical depictions is the meaning of a universal dynamic triumph of the theatre as art, not only of ecstasy (*έκστασης*) (this pertains to the external elements of the same art achieved with different techniques), but also as the expression of human destiny, as a verification of the horrific fate which captures the mortals' sufferings on earth. This fate appears in the child-eating events which follow the displacements – arrivals of Dionysus from country to country. The bloodstained universe signifies man's fate, destined to suffer, to be plagued and die – a death caused from man to man.

After all, Dionysus with his troupe –and their terrible weapons – heralds the ever shifting status of the theatre, the resettlement, the re-installation in "space" (*σκηνη*), the displacement from town to town from country to country. This is known by Thespis Chariot (*Αρμα Θέσπιδος*) and later by the entertainers who move their art throughout the whole world.

I would call to mind here – for the strengthening of the ecumenical nature of the theatre – that Aeschylus traveled twice to Sicily, in 470 BC., invited by the tyrant of Syracuse Hieron, who had defeated the Carthaginians in

480 BC. On this trip Aeschylus wrote and represented the *Aitnaie* or *Women of Mount Etna* to celebrate the founding of the city Etna. Aeschylus visited Sicily once more after 458 BC, that is, after the first performance of the *Oresteia* (*Ορέστεια*). It is also known that he was residing in Gela, where he died in 456 BC.

Notwithstanding the above, the ecumenical nature of the theatre lies in the fact that it enables man, as a single person, to participate in the life of another person, to expand into it, to experience its concerns, problems, and destiny, which is the common fate for both the characters invented by the poet in his drama work and the reader as a civilized being.

I proceed now to a re-reading of the famous passage 29 of *Nikias* by Plutarch, where the power of tragic poetry is revealed and hence its ability to give ecumenical dimensions to the art of Dionysus:

«Most of the Athenians perished in the stone quarries because of disease and malnutrition, their daily rations being a pint of barley meal and a half-pint of water. Several of them were kidnapped and sold into slavery, or succeeded in passing themselves off as serving men. When sold, they were branded on the forehead with the mark of a horse. Actually there were some freemen who suffered this indignity although they were not slaves.

But even these were helped by their restrained and decent bearing and were soon set free. Some had their honour restored and remained with their masters. Some also were saved thanks to Euripides. For it seems that the Greek Sicilians, more than the Hellenes of the homeland, had loved his poetry. They were forever learning by heart the little specimens and bits of it which visitors brought them from time to time, imparting them to one another with fond delight. In this case, at any rate, they say that many Athenians who reached home in safety greeted Euripides affectionately, and recounted to him that they had been set free because they rehearsed what they remembered of his works. Others said that when they were roaming about after the final battle they were offered food and water for singing some of his choral hymns. Surely, then, one need not wonder at the story that the Caunians, when a vessel of theirs took refuge in the harbour of Syracuse to escape the pursuit of pirates, they were not admitted at first, but kept outside, until, when asked if they knew any songs of Euripides and they declared that they did, they were allowed to bring their vessel safely in».

Euripides and his plays, as it is evident in the previous passage, were universal. His reputation had transcended the borders of Greece and had

conquered the whole world. Tragic poetry, the Dionysian art, won supporters everywhere. I will not lapse here into the dilemma of the *ηδύσματα*, the inner embellishments that all arts employ to fascinate the people.

It is essential for the universal dimensions of the art of the theatre that it liberates man from the slavery of habit, from its grand enemy of the everyday life of violence, that it reconciles people. It converts the enemy to a friend, the amoral hostility (*νείκος*) to sympathy (*φιλότης*), the slave to a master. Through poesy (the dramatic poesy in the previous passage of *Nikias*) the Athenians convert defeat into victory, into a humanitarian victory, a triumph of spirit against the measures (*μέτρα*), the material quality (*ύλη*).

The victory of the Syracusans appears to have been a material, weak resource that was incapacitated by the power of the spirit. The preannounced struggles of Dionysus with the bloodshed, the displacements, the wars and the battles to establish the new religion were upheld.

The theatre was ready to repel any resistance.

Finally it is known that the Greeks, at any geographical point, established cities, transferred the art of Dionysus, the worship of the god of *μέθη* (drunkenness) and ecstasy. They built up theatres, churches, temples. The auditorium of the theatre and the orchestra arrived, as Pausanias pointed out, to be the core document, the nucleus around which the *Πόλις* (city) was being formed. *Πόλις* and *Θέατρο* were two recommendations of solidarity. One does not exist without the other.

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