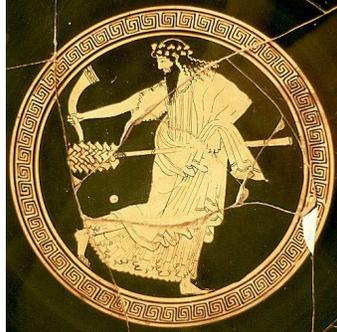


[**Note:** A few lines from the poems are included in the essay, in purple type].

Four Songs of Dionysus



'Ivy-haired
loud-roaring
Dionysus

I begin to sing...¹

The inspiration for the Creative Portfolio arose out of the Module 4 essay on the role of the symbolic in the initiation rituals of Dionysus. The material interested me greatly and since I am inclined to think of all deity, including the Greek gods, in terms of archetypal presence and living reality rather than something belonging to the past, I wanted the opportunity to explore it more personally.

Jeffrey Kupperman concludes, in his essay on emic versus etic perspectives on the Western mysteries, that the gaze of the outsider can only go so deep – we also need an 'insider' perspective to complete our understanding (Kupperman 2010, p.76). Or as Jung puts in the final chapter of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* when talking about his views on life after death: 'Even now I can do no more than tell stories – "mythologise"' (Jung 1974, p.330). Initially I thought about attempting to construct my own version of the rites, finding a way to work around the lack of information on their form and content, but in the end I was more interested in exploring the often perplexing and disturbing image of Dionysus himself and why he should have inspired both terror and ecstatic joy. Both Karl Kerényi and Walter Otto, for instance, talk at length about the relationship between life and death, with Dionysus as a god who enfolds both (e.g. see Kerényi 1976, pp.349-350 and Otto 1965, pp.137-142 and p.201) and it is the human response to this relationship which particularly interested me. In the end, I chose poetry, hoping to

¹ Homeric Hymn XXIV to Dionysus, translated by Jules Cashford: see References section.

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capture the dark and unsettling quality which emerges from the work Dionysian literature.

Poetry seemed an appropriate choice on another level too. I love poetry but have always considered that I have no skill at composing it, lacking the requisite imagination to move beyond factual forms of writing; indeed, I've never thought of myself as particularly creative in any artistic sense. Dionysus was known as *Eleutherios*, the Liberator, suggestive of the release of the spirit and freedom from the normal order of things. On a conscious level, I had chosen that essay title because I am interested in the nature of deity and of sacred experience, and in the power of ritual as a medium for mystical experience; but I've no doubt that unconsciously I also chose it because for me the image of Dionysus came to represent the expression of creativity as an act of passion, involving its own particular form of initiation.

As Kerényi's 'archetypal image of indestructible life', it is perhaps not surprising that Dionysian worship was widespread in ancient Greece and developed into spiritually sophisticated forms, centred around arguably the greatest of all life's mysteries, the nature and fate of the soul and the question of its survival beyond death. His worship encompassed a celebration of the power of nature, and the liberating effects of the mead and wine which nature produces by spontaneous fermentation (Kerényi 1976, p.38), but also (particularly in the Orphic religion) the process of initiation into a sacred mystery where an initiate might be offered a direct vision of the divine (Harrison 1903, p.494).

No doubt in some places or times, his worship centred around the wine harvest, a recognition of nature renewed by the grace of the god and offering a moment of freedom from the strictures of normal life. In the Rural or Lesser Dionysia in Attica, for instance, held in December-January, the key event was a procession which mimicked the *thiasos* or retinue of Dionysus in the myths – here, large *phalloi* (the phallus being the main cult object) were carried along with baskets of figs, jars of water and jars of wine, and the procession was followed by contests of dancing and singing, and performances of *dithyrambs*, sacred songs to the god. There were also the festivals in the main cities, for instance the Anthesteria in January/February which marked the beginning of spring and during which the new wine would be opened and drunk; inverting the usual social order, both masters and slaves participated in the celebrations (Harrison 1903, p.34). The City or Greater Dionysia was then held during March-April, around the time of the spring equinox. So there were perhaps many aspects to the rites which were social and celebratory, or which were important to the life of the village or city, even when they

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contained symbolic cult acts such as the ritual marriage of the god to the *basilinnna*, wife of the city's high magistrate (Otto 1965, p.83). But clearly there was also the potential for individual engagement and profound transformative experience – and particularly within the Orphic Mysteries, the process of initiation seems to have offered an experience of the highest spiritual significance. I wanted to try and address these different levels, to imagine what manner of initiation the rites might offer to the individual, from the celebration of nature's power and cyclical return, to the desire for communion with the god or the survival of the individual soul after death – the 'mystical yearnings after a union between man and god' described by Guthrie (Guthrie 1993, p.6).

I was also intrigued by Fierz-David's interpretation of the images in the initiation chamber at the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii – here the transition experienced by the initiate is likened to Jung's process of individuation, with Naxos representing the alchemical vessel in which this individuation takes place (Fierz-David & Hall 2005, p.39). Whether or not one can retrospectively impose such an interpretation, it perhaps stands as a testament to the power of the Dionysian myth as a story relevant beyond its time (as the Roman writer Sallust says in his essay *On the Gods and the World*: 'Now these things never happened, but always are' (Murray 1955, p.205) I was, at the least, interested in death as borderland and as a symbol in itself, of transition and transformation. James Hillman observed that suicide expresses the urge for hasty transformation, 'the late reaction of a delayed life that did not transform as it went along' (Hillman, 1964, p.73) and there is perhaps a potency in this statement which allows death to be at once both literal and symbolic, which is arguably the territory we enter when considering the image of Dionysus.

So I chose to write the poems as a quartet, in acknowledgement of the 'four senses' hermeneutic – the literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical levels of understanding of a text or symbol – even though I knew this would be tricky territory. For instance, thinking of Dionysus as a god of vegetation takes on quite another level of meaning if the celebrant invests nature and its cycles with deep mystical significance – similarly, a belief in the survival of the soul as a distinct entity might suggest a kind of literalness and perhaps a failure to engage with subtler interpretations of the notion of 'resurrected life'. At the anagogic level, all experiences of the symbol somehow unite, and I was attempting to describe something of this in the fourth poem, with language that would be open enough to weave together literal, metaphorical and mystical explanations. Poetry seemed an appropriate medium – capable of being shaped into a particular form, but free enough for the reader to attach their own meaning at each stage

On another level, I experienced the 'four senses' within myself, in the process of writing the poems. I don't pretend the work has any particular quality or objective value, but the experience overall felt like a movement through different levels of engagement and understanding of Dionysus as a sacred or archetypal image. In this sense, in my head the four levels equated themselves to the process of initiation, going deeper until one reaches the trope, at which point one ceases to be just an external observer of the material and can recognise the properties of the deity moving within oneself. Perhaps this reflects something of the quality of becoming 'filled with the god'. Without wishing to sound pretentious, I came to experience a sense of Dionysus in which the distinctions between literal and mystical seemed not to matter any longer. On one level, I struggled – on another, the poems dictated themselves.

Considering the complexity of the material, both from a scholarly perspective and in terms of a contemplation of 'afterlife' and of death as the most profound mystery of all, I took to heart the tutorial observation that I would in fact be posing a question – about whether the Dionysian rites involved the notion of a literal rebirth or if this to be read on some other mystical, imaginative or psychological level, and what it might mean to attempt communion with a deity who represents the quintessence of the life force.

The Song of the Vine

The first poem explores what might be thought of as the most literal level of understanding – here I was trying to express the idea of the myths arising out of the vegetative cycle. Robertson makes this link for us – he talks of the story of Dionysus and the ritual actions unfolding together, reflecting the life cycle of the vine and the wine-making year (Robertson 2003, pp.230-232). In the festivals, the women ran over the hills calling the god back from his long absence – and the myths talk of him returning as if from a far place with the Muses or from the depths of the sea, a sudden potent presence (Otto 1965, p.79). The seemingly dead vines, pruned back fiercely at the end of the grape harvest, burst into life – and when the grapes are ripe they are 'dismembered' to extrude the juice and make the wine, which is then ritually opened at the ceremony of the 'opening of the jars' as part of the celebrations. I tried to capture here the idea of nature's force returning in a very literal sense.

Dionysus himself is the narrator of the poems and he asks his first questions here – am I simply this, an image of nature returning in the spring? There is a reference here to the stories of the miracles surrounding the god and in particular the belief that vines at his

cult sites could grow to maturity in just one day, such is his power (Otto 1965, pp.97-98).

Even in this first poem though, I am aware that it would be almost impossible to remain at this level of understanding – indeed, I barely do this. If the vines spring back following dismemberment and death, then why not a human being? Kerényi talks of mead as the first drink of Dionysus, and of wine and mead as the spontaneous fermentation of nature's juices into a kind of *aqua vitae*, suggestive of life erupting out of decay (Kerényi 1976, p.38) – from here it would be a short step to believing that this capacity for self-renewal is intrinsic to the life force itself. But as pointed out in the feedback to my essay, there is a clear ontological difference between Dionysus as an image of life renewed each spring or erupting out of nature, and the belief which came to be central to Orphic practice that the human soul might negotiate its passage through the underworld, either to return, like Er in Plato's myth, with a full remembrance of its former life or to escape entirely from the 'circle of heavy grief' referred to in one of the Orphic gold tablets (Greene 2005, p.36). The extrusion of the juice from the grapes could become in itself a metaphor for the soul leaving the body at death, something which I wanted to presage here in the final two stanzas of the first poem, where the spirit of the god is distilled in the wine and emerges with force when the wine jars are opened, bringing not only the wine's liberating effects but an image of wine as entheogen, capable of revealing the presence of the divine (and setting the seed for references in poems three and four to the Christian imagery of wine as sacrament or divine 'blood').

In the House of Persephone

This then leads into the second poem, in which I wanted to explore some of the elements of Orphic belief. Herodotus tells us that the doctrine of reincarnation came to the Greeks from Egypt (Guthrie 1993, p.170) and from the 6th century BCE Orphism developed in Greece, incorporating reincarnation and techniques of initiation involving encounter with underworld deities. The Orphic version of the Dionysian myth involved distinct underworld elements – Dionysus as son of Persephone (accorded the cult title of Nestis, she of the water), entering the underworld to rescue his mother Semele who becomes 'Thyone' the resurrected one, and as a deity who is himself torn to pieces by the Titans and reconstituted. Guthrie talks of the centrality of the Titan element to Orphic belief – how they ate the flesh of Dionysus and how Zeus, enraged at the fate of his son and chosen successor, destroyed the Titans; from their ashes mankind arose. Orphism crystallised around this story, revealing to the worshippers that humans, whilst

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essentially of base Titan nature, also contain the Dionysian spark of divinity within, and the goal of the rites was to recognise and release this (Guthrie 1993, p.83 and p.153).

In the second poem, then, Dionysus goads the reader – 'do I offer you this? Your soul's atonement for primordial sin', in a reference to the Orphic belief in the birth of mankind from the gross matter of the Titans and the intrinsic corruption of the body in which the soul resides uneasily (Greene 2005, pp.22-23). I think I take a slightly disparaging tone in this poem – as someone who finds both nature and the body intrinsically beautiful, I find it hard to understand the Orphic desire to release oneself from it. I also struggle with the concept of an immortal soul which reincarnates as a distinct entity; the final line of the poem captures this perhaps, stealing Plato's words – I guess if you believe in the transmigration of the soul and that choices in this life will materially shape your lives yet to come, it would encourage you to make the most of living now. As Socrates says at the end of the myth of Er in Book X of *Republic*: 'And so, Glaucon, the tale was saved, as the saying is, and was not lost. And it will save us if we believe it' (Plato 621b-c, in Shorey 1969).

In the first class of Module 4, we were asked to contemplate the question: If you were to be shown something that proved beyond any doubt that your soul is immortal, what would it be? My reaction was that I don't require proof, that I'm content for it to be a mystery – this seems to me how it is meant to be. The personal written accounts which support the idea of reincarnation could just as well themselves be a form of myth, a set of beliefs clustered around images held at a collective level which address the horror many people feel at the prospect of losing life and individual consciousness, and not least humanmankind's certainty of its own importance – our primal fear of the dark:

In discovering their immortality, LBL² clients see an unbroken life of succession in their existence. This gives them an understanding of their place in the continuity of life, death, and rebirth. Despite their current circumstances, people will leave your office knowing they have a permanent home in the afterlife – a place of love, peace, and forgiveness with highly advanced beings who care about them.

(Newton 2004, p.270).

I am intrigued though, by the gold burial tablets or prayer sheets, found in graves – *totenpässe* for the dead to navigate the underworld and escape the return to earthly life, or to be allowed to drink from the lake of Memory and so retain the wisdom of the life already lived. There is something deeply human about these tablets, gold as the only metal known in antiquity which does not tarnish and thus an image of immortality and

² Life between lives.

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incorruptibility – the antithesis of 'the darkness of dank Hades', as described on one 5th/4th century BCE tablet from Hipponion. It is not difficult to imagine oneself as one of those whom Plutarch describes who:

...think that some sort of initiation and purification will help: once purified, they believe, they will go on playing and dancing in Hades in places full of brightness, pure air and light.

(Plutarch, *Non posse* 1105b)

Awakening

It was through these syncretistic gnosticisms that the interpretation of the Hellenic mysteries as a *ritually guided experience of the regeneration of the soul* spread through Europe and into Asia.

(Eliade 1958, pp.113-114) [my italics]

In poem 3, I wanted to follow a broader idea of Dionysus as an image of resurrected life – so Dionysus asks the question 'What is this new life that I offer you?' bringing in the possibility that 'new life' is not (or not only) to be taken literally as the soul's survival beyond death, but metaphorically too, as spiritual or psychological transformation and 'rebirth' in this life.

'For some a crossing into death which flames the spirit' acknowledges the ritual practice in the ancient Egyptian mysteries of undergoing a crossing into the *Dwat*, the realm of the dead, whilst still alive, to return transformed. As Jeremy Naydler says:

Ancient Egyptian mysticism involved a crossing of the threshold of death while still alive in order to stand within the spirit world and know oneself as a spirit. The experience of spiritual rebirth required that one consciously undergo the experience of dying.

(Naydler 2005, p.48)

This reminded me of Otto's vision of humanity 'flung into the primeval cosmic turmoil in which life, surrounded and intoxicated with death, undergoes eternal change and renewal' (Otto 1965, p.121 and p.140). Indeed, Heraclitus holds that Dionysus and Hades are one and the same:

For if it were not to Dionysus that they made a procession and sang the shameful phallic hymn, they would be acting most shamelessly. But Hades is the same as Dionysus in whose honor they go mad and rave.

(Heraclitus trans. in Burnet 1920, p.105)

Considering Persephone's own underworld 'initiation' through marriage to Hades (or we might take the story of Inanna and Ereshkigal in Sumerian mythology, in which Inanna is stripped, killed but then reconstituted, or the story of Osiris's dismemberment, entombment and resurrection, or other 'underworld' narratives), the image arises of a

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life-changing encounter with death which acts to renew and revivify the spirit – and if Dionysus is indeed an image of the indestructible life force, then to become 'god-filled' means, at least on one level, to become filled with life, and specifically with a sense of 'life' as the power of the spirit within. As Angela Voss says, '[in the Dionysian cult], the initiates re-enacted a journey through darkness and fear before they could emerge into the light and 'see' – the altered state of awareness had to be carefully prepared through ritual means' (Voss 2010, p.223). *Prepare yourself, and well; I am no ordinary harvest.*

Later Neoplatonists such as Hermeas and Proclus wrote about the three stages of the mysteries: *telete*, *myesis* and *epopteia*. For instance, Hermeas says the following:

When also he says, "*Being initiated*," he denominates *telete* from the soul being rendered by it perfect. You see therefore, that the soul was once perfect. Hence, when it is on the earth, it becomes divided, and the whole of it is not able to energize by itself. ... But it is necessary to know that *telete* is one thing, *myesis* another, and *epopteia* another. *Telete* therefore, is analogous to that which is preparatory to purifications, and the like. But *myesis*, which is denominates from closing the eyes, is more divine. For to close the eyes, is no longer to receive those divine mysteries by sense, but to behold them with the soul itself. And *epopteia* is to be established in, and become a spectator of them.

(Hermeas' *Scholia on Phaedrus* 250b)

In other words, in the mysteries the initiate moves towards the final divine vision (*epopteia*) firstly through appropriate preparation (*telete*), and then through a symbolic 'closing of the eyes' and sensing through the soul itself (*myesis*)– and the initiate is changed at the level of soul through an encounter with the divine which makes perfect that which has been 'divided'.

I realise that I only pay lip-service in the poems to the wealth of material, both ancient and modern, on metempsychosis and on the reuniting of the soul with its divine origins. With apologies to Plato for reducing him to the odd line here and there, I tried to condense his image of the soul seeking to regain its wings in the line '*Others think to gain their wings and fly beyond the heavens, borne on love*', a reference to *Phaedrus* in which Socrates likens the soul to a pair of winged horses and a charioteer, with one noble horse and one of ignoble breed (Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a-c). The soul loses its wings through incarnation but may re-grow them in the presence of divine wisdom, goodness and beauty (the passage makes me think of Elihu Vedder's 1892 painting *Soul in Bondage* – a winged woman is shown, wrapped in bindings; she cannot see the sun which shines behind her):

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The wing is the corporeal element which is most akin to the divine, and which by nature tends to soar aloft and carry that which gravitates downwards into the upper region, which is the habitation of the gods. The divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and the like; and by these the wing of the soul is nourished, and grows apace; but when fed upon by evil and foulness and the opposite of good, wastes and falls away.

(Plato, *Phaedrus* 246d-e)

As we have seen, for those involved in the Orphic mysteries, these were 'rites of redemption, of entering the underworld to reclaim the divinity of the soul through encounter with the god' (Voss 2010, p.227). Thus, as Angela Voss suggests, Plato associated the philosophic path with the stages of mystery initiation:

The states of mystery initiation become a metaphor, in the *Phaedrus*, for the purification of the soul through the yearnings of erotic love and its final realization of divinity.

(Voss 2010, p.230)

Plato further says:

The founders of the mysteries would appear to have had a real meaning, and were not talking nonsense when they intimated in a figure long ago that he who passes unsanctified and uninitiated into the world below will lie in a slough, but that he who arrives there after initiation and purification will dwell with the gods. For 'many,' as they say in the mysteries, 'are the thyrsus-bearers, but few are the mystics,' – meaning, as I interpret the words, 'the true philosophers.'

(Plato, *Phaedo* 69c)

But I also wanted to encompass the idea of how disturbing the presence of Dionysus seems to be – if he is the image of the soul's awakening, whether one speaks of this in terms of its release to be reunited with the divine or in terms of inner psychological awakening, this is likely to be no easy process. As Otto says, Dionysus is the only god who arrives in the flesh, a sudden disquieting presence (Otto 1965, pp.82-3). Transformation – so easy to say, so hard to bring about.

But know this: mine is no easy path, a sacred road;
Many are those that bear the thyrsus, but the bacchoi few, they say.

The myths themselves attest to this, in images of violence, madness and brutal dismemberment, for instance in the tragic stories of the daughters of Minyas, who in the blind frenzy visited by the god tear one of their own children to pieces, and the fate of King Pentheus who is savaged for his refusal to embrace the rites – and the havoc wreaked in Euripides' *Bacchae* brings this imagery to life in literary form.

'Do I disturb you? It is my aim. How else to shake you from your deadening sleep!'

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Many of the cult objects associated with the god which I list in the poem are suggestive of either pain and savagery (the whip, the panther), unsettling noise (the *aulos* double-reed flute, the bull-roarer) or generative power (the bull, the phallus), a reflection of the potency of the life force and the will of the individual spirit, but also the great difficulty experienced by the initiate. Each of these associations carries its own deeper symbolism, but we can highlight one of them particularly – the phallus as core ritual object, revealed by the hierophant at the heart of the rite. One could read it as a symbol of the life force, or a symbol of physical or spiritual transition, the metamorphosis of marriage, either literal or sacred – i.e. as more than just a fertility symbol. Indeed, Iamblichus points us to this:

But directing our attention to particulars, we say that the erection of the *phalli* is a certain sign of prolific power, which, through this, is called forth to the generative energy of the world. On which account, also, many phalli are consecrated in the spring, because then the whole world receives from the Gods the power which is productive of all generation.

(Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, book 1 ch.XI)

But I wanted also to move into the more psychological territory of Fierz-David, since it seems obvious to me that the Dionysian stories, and indeed the whole image of the release of the soul from its bondage or the release of the life spark from the clay, could be seen in terms of a movement towards inner or psychological wholeness and fulfilment – or framed by the individual in terms of their own particular longed-for 'epiphany':

The heady wine fermenting in the sealed retort,
Sweet Ariadne in the marriage bed, preparing for rebirth.

In Jungian parlance, there is the image of the sacred or alchemical marriage as inner unity of animus and anima which Fierz-David offers for the marriage of Dionysus and Ariadne (Fierz-David & Hall 2005, p.23). And although most people may no longer engage in the kind of rituals practised in the ancient world, we may each seek to free the creative spark or inner essence, our 'Self' or image of personal authenticity, a secular equivalent to the 'soul retrieval' of the shamanic tradition or Hermeas' 'undivided soul'. Fierz-David speaks of this when she says:

Once the world of archetypal images has arisen in a dramatic, moving inner drama, individuals need never again lose connection with it if they do not forget their most valuable experiences and, with that, themselves".

(Fierz-David & Hall 2005, p.147)

The Song of Life

In the final poem, I attempted to speak to the anagogic level, mindful that this is a contradiction in terms – the Dionysus that can be spoken of is not the true one – and also that my own personal biases regarding the nature of death and 'rebirth' will always shape whatever I write. To my mind, Dionysus is an image for all time, the interpretation of the mystery being unique to each individual or group of 'initiates' – one sees his image morph over time, from its supposed initial form as a reflection of the vegetative power of nature, to its development as the ecstatic, joyful and disquieting heart of a major religious cult, deepening in its mystical content through Orphism, and then seemingly transferred in some of its elements to the person of Christ, and appropriately regenerated in a new form for a new age, as the mysteries waned and Christianity gained ascendancy. Poem 4 therefore contains a variety of images, from references to physical things (the 'foliate head', pulse and sap, blood and heart, the yearly harvest), to Christian imagery ('the wine at the wedding feast', 'the true vine' (Gospel of John, 2:1-11 and 15:1), 'Jesse's tree' (Isaiah 11:1), and the assertion of the god that he is 'the way, the truth, the life' (Gospel of John 14:6).

Here is the image of madness again, too – madness as a cult form (Otto: p.133), divine vision achieved through ecstatic dancing (Voss 2010, p.223), madness as a route to *gnosis* through a movement beyond the borders of the ego, the particular kind of madness generated by 'individuation' where the existing order of things must be disturbed in order for the transformation to occur. **The force set free when bonds are loosed....**

Here too is another image from Kerényi, who talks of the marriage of Ariadne and Dionysus in terms of the relationship of the individual soul (Ariadne) to life itself (Dionysus), of *bios* as an individual life in relationship to *zoë* as never-ending life, like beads on a thread (Kerenyi 1976, pp.xxxi-xxxvi): **And so I sing: life is short, and when it is done, only Life remains.**

The images in this final poem might be taken in any number of ways, which I feel is appropriate for a contemplation on the nature of death and the fate of the soul. I might leave the last word to Angela Voss, quoting Fierz-David in relation to this:

As Linda Fierz-David has suggested, death itself is the supreme unknowable symbol, 'forever on the other side of the boundary which is set for consciousness: it is an eternally impenetrable mystery'.

(Voss 2010, pp.219-220)

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