Euripides and the Nature of Tragedy

The physical destruction that now faces the whole globe faced Greece in the time of Euripides on a miniature scale, the bowl of the Mediterranean. The bones of their splendid cities still lie scattered around its shores, and if we enquire, all were destroyed by war, often many times. Behind them are the barren hills and valleys where the rain once fell, streams flowed and harvests ripened as splendid as the cities themselves. The first experiments in the destruction of the environment were made in the Mediterranean.

The seventy four years Euripides' life spanned the imperial stage of Athens, possessed by the vision of mastering the whole known world, in comparison with which all other considerations, particularly the ethical, faded into nothing. Fifteen years into the long war with Sparta it was decided to destroy the small island state of Melos unless it joined in on Athens' side. The Melians had chosen to take no part in the war on either side. They had known independence for a thousand years and were not about to give it up. At the meeting of the two sides before the all-out attack opened, the Athenian delegates declared as follows:

> *As far as right and wrong are concerned, the Athenians think there is no difference between the two, and that those states who still preserve their independence do so because they are strong, and that if we fail to attack them it is because we are afraid…Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that in obedience to an irresistible instinct, they rule wherever they can. We neither enacted this law, nor were the first to carry it out . . . we merely avail ourselves of it, as you would yourselves in our place."*
> *Thucydides (Book V, para 85)*

We have heard this sort of language in our own time. It is in Mein Kampf, stripped of the hypocrisy that usually masks it, but it has been the underlying belief of every triumphant empire through Western history, where empires rise and fall like waves in the sea. Psychologically, the seeds of its destruction are already within it, for at root it is a belief that power is holy, in which it is not difficult to detect the One Male God whose principal attribute is his power, so as to be referred to generally as 'Almighty God'. The God-image in the psyche is simply the Whole. But taken within the limits of any part whatever, it simply splits them. The psyche fragments. It is the psychosis which afflicts unfailingly the over-powerful, when their judgement fails. It marked tragically the fall of the Third Reich and in different styles the fall of every empire in history.

Thucydides describes the decay of language that is the first sign of its onset.

To fit in with the turn of events, words had to change their meaning. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect in a party member. To think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character. The ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. (Book III, para. 82)

W.B.Yeats described the same phenomenon in our own time, using the term 'the ceremony of innocence' for everything that is lost and which the human soul more truly strives for.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold...
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

The mystery of Evil is as unfathomable as its opposite, the mystery that anything exists at all. For Jung it is the dark face of God, the Sol Niger, the black sun of the alchemists, which is constellated by the human psyche probably because it is only element in the world which has the faculty of choice. The attack on Melos went ahead. The island was conquered, its men of military age massacred and the rest of the population sold into slavery. It was different to better known catastrophes, in that immediately Euripides put it on stage. It was not about Melos, it was about Troy, the underlying myth of Greek culture itself, which was where Euripides, as a great psychologist, was most at home. He saw that it was endlessly repeated by all the Greek city states, like some piece of archetypal behaviour which repeats in the life of an individual, unless perchance they become conscious. Making a whole people conscious is more difficult, but it is what the theatre tries to do. It tries to make them *feel.* The play was called the Women of Troy. It opens with the great God Poseidon grieving for the beloved city—built by himself and Apollo, he says, who 'squared every stone of it'. It cuts to a small group of women awaiting the ships which will take them away into slavery. Their husbands and sons are dead, their daughters captive like themselves, their homes destroyed, the ancient city which bred them is in flames. One of them is the great queen Hecuba herself, destined for the slave-quarters of a Greek lord.

Euripides is saying, 'This is the reality of your heroic myth!' And he spares them nothing. Imagine ourselves, sitting on the stone benches of the theatre, waiting to receive the latest offering from the great playwright. We are ordinary, patriotic, right-thinking people, of moderate intelligence, moderate sensibility. Some of us are uneasy about the crime, only last year, of Melos, but not many. Yet we all hear that the meaning of Hellas, the meaning of our civilisation and individual lives, is sacrilege—and not only in the distant past but repeated last year, yesterday, *now.*

When Poseidon plots his revenge, where can it fall except on us, and all those others that are with us in this amphitheatre? The theme of sacrilege gathers weight as the play continues. Cassandra, vowed to virginity in the temple of our own goddess Athene, is dragged off to the bed of our own war lord, Agamemnon. Even the link to the sacred ground of Athens itself is broken.

Perhaps we are women, sitting there, and we hear that the infant son of Hector has been hurled from the battlements, on logical grounds identical with those deployed by Himmler in regard to the Jewish children, that they would one day want to avenge their fathers. In Shakespeare it is Macbeth ordering the murder of Banquo, and Fleance too, to make perfect the work. Euripides spares us nothing of what this means: the broken little body put into the arms of his grandmother, Hecuba, since his mother has already left on her journey into slavery. "Poor little head!" she weeps:

> *Your soft curls were a garden where your mother planted kisses . . .*
> *Now the blood shines through the shattered skull. (p. 128, l. 1176)*

She goes on to speak of that central act of piety, the burial of ancestors,
:

> *You made a promise once, nestled against my dress.*
> *'Grandmother, when you die,' you said, 'I will cut off a curl of my hair for you, and bring my friends, and grace your tomb with gifts and holy words.'*
> *"You broke your promise, son; instead I bury you." (p. 128, l. 1184)*

The meaningful order of the Greek world is upturned, the interplay between generations, the harmonious dance together between life and death, all that Yeats understood as 'the ceremony of innocence', all that makes up the fabric of the meaningful world. 'Mere anarchy is loosed' instead. That, says Euripides, is what your heroic myth actually means.

But opposite was still the Sol Niger, the dark sun embedded, it seemed unmovably, in the collective psyche. As the play went on stage, Athens was

preparing to do it again. Throughout the city, every man, ship, and piece of gold was being called in for great armada they would send to conquer Syracuse. Like Hitler's plunge into Russia, which is a close parallel, it was militarily mad. Thucydides scrupulously records the debate before the great fleet sailed. The argument in favour was presented not by a dictator but by an unelected rabble-rouser, the vain and popularity seeking Alkibiades. It went something like this: Since Syracuse is the first city in that part of the Mediterranean, she may one day attack us. If we make a terrible example of Syracuse, the other cities in Sicily and Southern Italy will come in with us. With them we can cross the Mediterranean and do the same thing to Carthage and finally can come back to the Aegean and deal with Sparta and the whole world will be Athenian. It was the fatal lure of the Whole.

Nicias, the general who would in charge of the expedition, argued against it. It all depended on the first premise, the conquest of Syracuse, which was far from sure. The Syracusans would fight courageously and skilfully, fighting on their own ground, for their lives and their city. The Athenians would be logistically well beyond the reach of home and if they failed, Athens would be left stripped of resources and with no friends left in the world. The vote went to Alikibiades. The expedition to Syracuse went ahead and was simply lost. The quarries from which the city had been built filled up with Greeks, and no one knew how to feed them or bury them when they died. Scarcely a man got home. Like Hitler's plunge into Russia, it hastened the end. Even the salt mines in which so many of Hitler's men ended their lives were uncannily like the quarries in which the Athenians ended theirs. But Euripides became the most unpopular man in Athens, for at what point does the audience of ordinary patriotic people have too much of him and begin to shout, 'Euripides is a traitor!'

His last two plays were performed in Athens, several years after his death in exile and after the great fall of the city which he had foreseen, the confiscation of the fleet, the dismantling of the famous Long Walls that stretched all the way to the Piraeus, and the installation of a Spartan backed government . Very narrowly had it escaped the fate which it had dealt to Melos, its great buildings destroyed, its men massacred and its women and children sold into slavery. Thebes and Corinth voted for that solution , but Sparta, the leader of the Alliance against Athens, would not go so far. There followed a recovery as remarkable as that of Germany's after 1945, with Plato and Aristotle still to come but dreams of world-empire cut off no as if by a tourniquet, and the energy flowing back into the true aim of civilisation, Yeats's 'ceremony of innocence'.

Yet it is remarkable how accurate is the commentary of the Euripides, Sophocles, and the historian Thucydides, who all saw it just as clearly, how modern their voices sound and how far they are still beyond the capacity of audiences to comprehend them. That is the strangest thing, the immense power of the dark face. It is as if the collective consciousness has not changed at all in twenty-five centuries. The question arises more critically than ever before: Can this species of human being ever be made conscious, or have the forces of collectivism passed beyond that point? That means: Can this species ever bear those depths of feeling that is compassion, the suffering-with? Its great symbol is, of course, the cross and it is at the heart of the culture, but not in the individual sense. The Church successfully foreclosed on that with the tendentious doctrine of baptism: that . Jesus felt it all for you, and therefore you don't need to. Just do what you're told is the good.

The great escape from feeling has always been into collectivism, with always some real or invented threat from abroad to make it hold, so that it becomes part of the myth of war. The collective can be moved by waves of archetypal passion, but feeling happens only in that outside point which is the individual. Only the individual can be conscious.

In the sequence of events that leads up to a great act of self-destruction there is a pattern which does not change. Shakespeare who, as much as Euripides analysed archetypal situations, describes it in Macbeth. It clicks in at the moment that Macbeth knows he *can* be king. It is the lure of the Whole. , a piece of information brought to him by the witches, who set the whole drama moving. The image of total power fatally unbalances him, and in spite of his profound understanding he cannot resist it, for something other than consciousness is required. If the ego identifies with the Self, catastrophe follows, for the ego effectively disappears. The greatest lines in the play are in the unavailing pathos with which he feels its loss but can do nothing about it. There is no greater invocation of the 'ceremony of innocence' than when he r ealises that he will sleep no more.

> Methought I heard a voice cry sleep no more,
> Macbeth hath murdered sleep. The innocent sleep,
> Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
> The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great Nature's second course,
> Chief nourisher in life's feast…
> Still it cried sleep no more to all the house
> Glamis hath murdered Sleep, and therefore Cawdor
> Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more.

His friend Banquo has that which Macbeth lacks and is un-tempted by the witches' offer. He has what we might call integrity, which includes, for a mediaeval man, allegiance to the charisma of one's king. Therefore he will be the ancestor of kings but not himself. keeps his "bosom franchised and allegiance clear", keeps his integrity. No amount of consciousness (and Macbeth is very conscious) can do it for him. Macbeth is falling into that vortex downwards, which is like a black hole in the universe, an irresistible pull downwards out of being. Shakespeare ponders that in all his studies in Royal history. There is a point, both with individuals and groups, when the spectre of total mastery beckons. It is the God-image in the psyche, but in its malign form, the Sol Niger. The particularity of all things in the world is dissolved in the dark blaze of its wholeness. The history of the patriarchy is the history of that. Whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad. After the murder of Banquo, Macbeth does not care if the whole world is destroyed. He does not feel. "Though you untie the winds", he says to the witches, ,

and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yeasty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature's germins tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken—answer me…

After a certain threshold of crime is crossed, the unconscious longing for oblivion becomes the major player in the drama. If the *Women of Troy* is still the greatest anti-war document in any literature, it was not Euripides' last. There are two plays which are posthumous to him, and posthumous also to imperial Athens. One is *Iphigenia in Aulis* which concerns the sacrifice of the High King's daughter so that the ships can sail to conquer Troy. The other is The Bacchae. Both are statements of Nature and that link that men have to Nature, which is women, and they are his last testament.

Iphigenia in Aulis

When the play opens we are at Aulis, the port opposite Troy. The great expedition is gathered there, thousands of men hungry for loot and wanting to get on with the job or go home. But there is no wind. It is any general's

nightmare. There will be no wind, says the High Priest, until Agamemnon cuts the throat of his daughter, Iphigenia.

If we take the story literally, which Euripides certainly didn't, it is merely a story. For him the sacrifice of the feminine so that the ships can sail for war is the core of Hellas's founding myth. Iphigenia is everything that Agamemnon has known as beauty. She herself is the 'ceremony of innocence' and as the play opens, she is on her way to death.. Her father sits on a stage empty except for a table and a lamp, scribbling a letter, crossing it out, pacing up and down, weeping, returning to his letter. He calls a servant. "Old man," he calls, and a slave comes onto the stage. What's his poor master up to now? he wonders. What makes this great agitation, these tears, this pacing up and down? And Agamemnon tells him the whole story, and tells it to us—tells of the suitors for Helen, the most desirable woman, it was said, in the world, and of the pact the suitors made—that whoever was chosen would have the support of all the others in keeping her. He tells of the choice falling on Menelaus, his brother, and then of the Trojan prince Paris to whom appear three goddesses, asking him to choose between them—that is, to judge *which represents the highest value*. There is Athene, the patron of the State and all its benefits. There is Hera, patron of home, peace, wifehood; and there is Aphrodite, who is that more mysterious thing, sex. Paris chooses her; and as a reward he is promised the best sex there is in the world. It happens to be in the household of Menelaus, "but," says Aphrodite, cheerfully, "that can be managed!"

Aphrodite, like all gods, is not human. She doesn't feel and she can't suffer. She is a force of Nature and that is her divinity. Iphigenia is the human feminine, and it is that which will be sacrificed—and with her all those values of hearth and home which are the 'ceremony of innocence.' So Paris sets off for Greece—'seductive, perfumed, barbarous,' as Agamemnon describes him—and returns with the unresisting Helen. The Greek lords, answering the call, and not averse to the opportunity ofiplunder for Troy is famously rich, gather to fetch her back; and he, Agamemnon, the high king, has bowed to the general clamour, and called his daughter to Aulis on the pretext of marriage to Achilles—when what is actually planned is her death. The old man, unencumbered by politics since he is but a slave, says simply, 'It's wrong! Stop it at any cost. Give me this other letter quick and I will take it for you.' And Agamemnon is persuaded, completes the letter he was already writing to cancel the visit, and gives it to the old man with instructions to stop any carriage coming toward him that may contain the happy and excited bride.

Then the Chorus enters, and the plot becomes more complex. For these are women, and they are as enamoured of the war as any man. They tell of the great fleet lying at anchor, and of their delight in counting the ships, spying out the

squadrons, and the famous warriors at their heads. 'What a sight beyond description!' they say, 'And how women's eyes love looking! We looked and looked, gorging on honey.'

Let's imagine it in our own terms. Think of a naval review at Spithead at the height of empire, with another just across the water at Keil, where the Kaiser is building up his own great fleet to make the challenge: battleships, cruisers, destroyers, corvettes, frigates, stretched in long lines; the royal yachts passing up and down, sailors cheering, pennants fluttering; and women lining the shore—lace shawls, silk parasols, big hats, excited chatter. They count the ships, mark the pennants, Admiral Lord this, Admiral Sir Somebody that, gold braid, medals, cocked hats; and always the women, beautiful, excited, admiring.

Then from this Chorus of women, cut back to the messenger; and, lo, he has been caught by Menelaus, who has read the letter and is enraged that his brother could even consider refusing the sacrifice—a mere girl. And Iphigenia is still on her way to death and the real meaning of all this pageantry—blood, torn entrails, torched buildings, rape and death.

The play pursues its way with argument, counter argument. Menelaus quickly admits the absurdity of trading a loving daughter for an unfaithful wife. Suddenly he sees, he says, what it is to kill one's child. Briefly, Menelaus is feeling a moment of consciousness.

Achilles, himself the bait that brings Iphigenia here, swears now to defend her. But the destructive archetype that has been constellated is too strong—it is, after all, the Dark Sun itself, moving by its own momentum toward its fulfilment. The great mass of soldiers are hungry for loot and far beyond scruples about a girl. The whole camp is crying out that their officers must obey the oracle and the war must go ahead. Even the great Achilles is threatened by his own men. At this point, with every path blocked, Iphigenia takes on her fate and resolves to die.

It means that she takes on the value system that condemns her, becomes possessed by the spirit of Father and Fatherland, and accepts the sacrifice of aall that she herself stands for. As we have seen with the women's admiration of the great fleet, gorging their eyes, she may have been not far from it anyway. Now she wants to be like a man and give her blood for victory; and the shop-soiled platitudes of patriotism begin to drop from her mouth. One man is worth a host of women because they can die for Hellas. The contra-sexual element in the unconscious rises up and overwhelms her; she becomes identified with the father. This is Euripides at his psychologically most brilliant. He puts the platitudes of militarism into her mouth, as if she were her father's mouthpiece.

She will die so that Greek women will be raped no more! She will die for 'freedom!' She will set Hellas 'free!' She was not born for herself but for Hellas. She has performed the projection of Self onto the symbols of the State that will mark the whole of Western history. Finally comes the vulgar, brain-splittingly illogical fantasy of empire: 'Greeks were born to rule barbarians, Mother', she says, 'not barbarians to rule Greeks. They are slaves by nature; we have freedom in our blood.' (p.419, l. 1399). When the knife falls and the blood gushes, it is no more than the confirmation of what has already occurred. The drama has reached its tragic resolution.

But as in other plays of Euripides, an ending, incongruous because wholly conventional, is substituted for anything that we might imagine Euripides to write. The play passes bizarrely into mould, probably because theatrical producers then, as now, needed to succeed commercially. The play was supposedly discovered in manuscript after Euripides' death and produced in Athens by his son, who either completed the unfinished manuscript or changed it.

First, the Chorus of women pray to Artemis, but a change has occurred in her nature. She is no longer as the Great Goddess of middle eastern worship, Nature herself—nor yet to her later form, inhabitant of the wilds, protector of its virgin integrity, patroness of childbirth. This is Artemis as the goddess of a war—lover of blood sacrifice, a Kali figure

You who rejoice in human sacrifice, they sing,
Dread goddess, bring our army
Safe to the plains of Phrygia
And grant that Agamemnon,
With Hellene spears to aid him,
May crown his head with glory,
And by his victory win undying fame. (p. 423 l. 1523)

If that is Euripides, we might say, we are donkeys. Secondly, we get a happy ending. A deer is substituted for the maiden, and Iphigenia is carried off to the temple of Artemis to be her priestess in the land of Tauris. It reminds us of Abraham, with his knife to the throat of Isaac, saved by the angel in an equally unlikely turnabout. The fact is that the patriarchy regularly sacrifices its children. It is wholly logical that it should. ,who brings a goat instead. It is the essence of the patriarchy to sacrifice children to the dignity of the father. It happens again and again in all its wars; but we can't accept that truth so we give it happy endings.

It runs counter to the whole drift of his argument. The last words of the Chorus, as the delayed expedition sets off, return to his fundamental theme: *"We hope you will capture splendid spoils from Troy*!" That is what the "glory" is really al about. Euripides hurled at history his great protest against war, and the wind of the patriarchy blew it back.

There is something elliptical, something solipsistic, about our relation to reality. Not only the unconscious but the conformation of the world itself shows back to us the face we show to it. Causally, the women feasting their eyes on the ships has nothing to do with the king's daughter on her way to death. Synchronistically they are part of the same pattern. Do we merely suffer fate, or do we make it? Euripides thought both. Without that 'both', there would be no point in the sustained attempt to make the people conscious. We are creators not only in the world of cause and effect but in that of our karma too—in the realm of synchronicity. In that space the buck stops with us, and the consciousness that we have or don't have is the fulcrum on which all human history turns.

THE BACCHAE

From the catastrophes of Melos and Syracuse in the outer world Euripides moves into an inner, or mythical dimension. More even than his other plays, *The Bacchae* must be treated psychologically—its central image, the king's head torn off by his own mother, a metaphor for nothing less than a psychosis. It is psychologically accurate that it is done by the Mother, for it is the repressed feminine that does it, as in King Lear:

'O, how this mother swells up towards my heart!' He feels a vast energy rising upwards into his consciousness and dreads that it will makes him mad. '*Hysterica passio*—down, thou climbing sorrow.' It is the sorrow of his own flesh, his own blood, his own heart:

> 'I prithee, Daughter, do not make me mad . . . .
> But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter
> Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
> Which I must needs call mine.' (Act 2 Scene 4)

And when he finally knows there is no escaping that overthrow, he knows too that it is because he will not crack, will not *stain*, as he says, his

manly cheeks with womanish tears—will not go easy into that element, so must be pulled there, in a fragmented state. 'Or e'er I'll weep this heart will break into a hundred thousand flaws'. Ultimately, in the form of Cordelia, he is reconciled, but only in death. And it is exactly so with Pentheus, the great king of The Bacchae.

The scene is the royal palace in Thebes. At one side of the stage is the monument to Semele. Above it burns a low flame, and around it are the remains of ruined and blackened masonry. Dionysus comes on stage. He has a crown of ivy on his head, a fawn-skin draped over his body, long, flowing hair and a youthful, almost feminine beauty. In his hand is the thyrsus, a stick which ends in the multiple seeds of the pine-cone, and represented, for the Greeks, the phallus. He sets the scene and tells the story.

Semele was his mother. She was daughter to Cadmus, who founded Thebes. Zeus came to her often by night but warned her that she must never ask to see him. Her sisters mocked her when she told rhem. They said it was an ordinary, lustful man who came to her, and that if she became pregnant they would all be shamed. Driven on by their taunts she demanded one night to see him, and was incinerated by the sight. These blackened walls are what are left of her house, and Dionysus is now returned to avenge her.

The Jews believed that no man could see the face of God and not be destroyed by it. They did not look on their leader when he came down from the mountain, with the commandments of Yahwe—his face was so bright. *Seeing* is a continuous theme in Euripides. It is the great metaphor for the consciousness of the ego. If there is too great an inrush into it, the boundaries break. At the end of this play it will be the *sight* of the maenads sporting on the mountain that will break the mental structures of the king.

A god can come in to the human psyche and make it fecund, as Zeus came to Danae, or Europa, or many another human girl. But it must be done in the dark. No god or even angel can be contained in so small a space as the human ego. If we think of this in terms of creativity, for which it is a metaphor, we can see more clearly what is going on. The ego does not create anything; it cannot even gestate anything. The inspiration always comes from beyond the ego, and the gestation occurs in a womb-place, an inner space which the ego knows very little about either.The ego is doctor and midwife, but it is always protected by the darkness.

Are theses sisters jealous of their sister's special destiny? Or is it Hera, Zeus's wife, who is jealous? In many of the myths of Greece, Hera menaces some mortal female whom Zeus has made pregnant. Maybe anyone who brings

something new into the world must be menaced by Hera, since she represents the order of the family, the stability which is so necessary yet always disturbed by the new. Her resistance is as much part of the archetype as the spermatic energy that brings it. In the 1925 Seminar on Analytic Psychology, Jung spoke of his sense that the libido splits spontaneously into negative and positive streams—produces always *the thing that checks itself.* Hera and the sisters would then be seen as the counter-stroke to Zeus, parts of one conspiracy. They nearly succeed in smothering the birth (they always nearly succeed). Zeus takes the child from the burning womb and sews it into his own thigh, where it stays until its time comes. And here we have the child on the stage, the child who is born of death as well as life, born of a man as well as a woman, born out of fire—representing, in his person, all that nature which was expelled in order to make the city—all that, from the moment the city wall was built, lay beyond it.

He continues the story. Pentheus, son of Agave, one of the jealous sisters, is now king. He has heard of Dionysus but calls him a bastard and no god, so leaves him out of all religious rites. Cadmus, the old ex-king, loyally tends his daughter's shrine but and now the son has come back. As a start, he says, he has turned the sisters mad, driven them out of doors, and with them, all the women of Thebes.

> *Their home is now the mountain;*
> *Their wits have gone . . . one and all*
> *Sit roofless on the rocks under the silver pines.*
> *For I must show myself before the human race*
> *As the divine son whom she bore to immortal Zeus*. (p 192, l.35-)

The city is womanless—no one to cook the food or look after the children. Like the coming of Christ in the Gospels, the coming of Dionysus is an *epiphania,* a showing of the divine, and it gravely disturbs the *status quo*.. Like Christ's coming, too, it is a judgment, in the sense that it has that intense reality which judges the quality of our own—which is either strengthened by it or broken. It depends on *what* one is.

Dionysus leaves the stage, and as he does so the Chorus enter. They are women fresh from the mountain. For them the encounter with the god has been a liberation. They tell of the joy they found there:

> *O Thebes, they sing, old nurse that cradled Semele,*
> *Be ivy-garlanded, burst into flower . . .*
> *Bring sprays of fir, green branches torn from oaks,*
> *Fill soul and flesh with Bacchus's mystic power . . .*
> *There's a brute wildness in the fennel-wands—*

Reverence it well." (p 195 l. 104-)

'There's a brute wildness in the fennel-wands.' As Aeschylus says in *Promethheus Bound*, repeating ancient folklore, the stalk of a fennel was used by Prometheus tocarry fire to men. From stone age times, fennel stalks have been used in that way, for the fire slumbers in the pith and bursts into flame when whirled in the air. It was used in the night-time revels of Dionysus, and symbolised perfectly that sort of consciousness, which is not that of the sun but of the pith and marrow—glowing in animals' eyes, and in human eyes too when moved by passion. Fennel symbolises, then, the consciousness of instinct. Reverence it well, they sing.

In Sicily fennel is called *finocchio*—and *finocchio* is the term used by country people for the man who shows too much, as it is judged, of the feminine. Dionysus, with his fawn skin, his long hair, his almost feminine grace, is a *finocchio.* And androgyny has something about it of that divine face on which the ego cannot look, because the opposites can almost be seen in it, and they are too bright. In this world of the gods the canons of culture are reversed. Another example of this in the chant of these women, is that meat is eaten raw.

O what delight is on the mountains!
There the celebrant wrapped in his sacred fawnskin
Flings himself on the ground surrendered,
While the swift-footed company streams on;
There he hunts for blood and rapturously
Eats the raw flesh of the slaughtered goat.
Hurrying on to the mountain heights,
Possessed, ecstatic, he leads their happy cries;
The earth flows with milk, flows with wine,
Flows with nectar of bees;
The air is thick with the scent of Syrian myrrh . . .
And like the foal with its mother at pasture
Runs and leaps for joy every daughter of Bacchus. (p. 196 l 138-)

Civilised meat is wrapped for the supermarket, unrecognisable as the flesh of beasts. This meat is of one kind with the wine, milk, nectar, gifts from the all-plentiful Mother. Her skin is the earth itself, where they need only scratch for her milk to flow. The milk these women eat is the body of the goddess—existence itself. The honey is its sweetness, utterly beyond the logic of the city. To understand this chant we must remember the difference between food eaten when we are hungry, and food eaten because it is some meal-time. It is the essence of consciousness.

At this point in the play, we have heard Dionysus, and heard the Chorus of women. Now two old men shuffle on and bring a piece of light relief. They are Cadmus, the old founder, and Tiresias, the great Merlin-figure or shaman of Greek myth, celebrated by Eliot as “old man with wrinkled female dugs”. He knows it all. He has

sat by Thebes below the wall
And walked among the lowest of the dead.

The two old men have sensed the spirit moving in the city, and are off to join the dance, clad in fawn-skins, with wreathes of ivy on their heads and the thyrsus in their hands. Cadmus stamps about, beating his thyrsus on the floor:

I could drum the ground all night,
And all day too, without being tired. What joy it is
To forget one’s age! (p.197, l. 180)

To which Tiresias answers,

I feel exactly the same way, bursting with youth!

This is no biological youth but the spirit of Dionysus himself, eternal. Like the clowns in Shakespeare they bring the humour necessary for all discussion of deep matters, but one sign of the presence of Dionysus is when joy and duty join to become the same thing, and they have felt that. Now they are off to the mountain on foot (it would be dishonourable, they think, to go in a cart); and as they move off the young king, Agave’s son, stumbles onto the stage, “extremely agitated.” He does not notice the old men, but addresses himself to the audience:

I happen to have been away from Thebes; reports
Of this astounding scandal have just been brought to me.
Our women, it seems, have left their homes on some pretence
Of Bacchic worship and are now gadding about
On the wooded mountain-slopes, dancing in honour of
This upstart god Dionysus…

Then comes the prurient fantasy that will later catch him:

Amid these groups of worshippers, they tell me, stand
Bowls full of wine; and our women go creeping off
This way and that to lonely places and give themselves
To lecherous men. (p. 198 l.220)

We see what is going on in Pentheus's own unconscious. The invasion by Dionysus is the rise of unconscious forces into what is in his case a very frail structure. Dionysus is not the same thing as sex, but sex is all Pentheus knows of him. Dionysus is Nature in its entirety. Pentheus has too long kept it eyond the walls and he is terrified. He has chained up all the women he could get his hands on, and he will hang the foreigner when he catches him. Then he notices the two fathers of the City clad in fawn-skins and his rage and contempt can find know boundaries. But Tiresias answers him calmly, and delivers to him and to us the deep rationale of the play. Tiresias is the Merlin figure of Greek mythology, and there are two things he tries to explain now. The first is that the world of the gods cannot be touched, felt or seen, but is still real, The second is that it is free of time and space and that it somehow 'knows' the future.

> *The Bacchic ecstasy, and frenzy, ,*
> *Holds a strong, prophetic element.*
> *When the god fills irresistibly a human body*
> *He gives those so possessed power to foretell the future. (p201. line 303)*

This was the essence of the Greek belief in prophecy. At Delphi, the Sybil went into a trance, like that of the shaman in many cultures, and entered into another dimension, where the future unfurls out of that inner dimension, like the plant from its tuba—as when Jung writes that a lifetime 'is a story of the self-realisation of the unconscious'. (MDR Fontana p 3). The unconscious itself has We meet again the distinction of Aristotle's between two sorts of being, *tekne onta,* that which is that sort of being created by human planning and work, and *physei onta*, that which is specific *produces itself by rising out of itself.*

The second thing that Tiresias tries to explain is that Nature has its own inviolable ethic, which is that everything she makes has purpose, and works towards its fullness. Thus, in the matter of sexuality,

> *Dionysus will not compel*
> *Women to be chaste, since in all matters, self-control*
> *Resides in our own natures…*
> (p. 201 l. 315-)

Chastity is an integrity of the heart; and if we follow this thought through something very interesting happens: for the two gods, Apollo and Dionysus, come together—which is the underlying message of the play. For it is in the outer world of Apollo that the inner world unfurls, and it can do so in no other way. As in Jung's remark that "everything in the unconscious seeks outward

manifestation", it in the outer world that judgment and discrimination are required in order to guard that unfurling. The integrity of the personality is the unity of both these realms, inner and outer. In the inner realm no boundaries can exist or need to. In the outer realm, they structure the world. Choices have to be made—to be in this work not that one, here not there, with this person not that one. The fine question of priorities rises, what is more or less important than other things? That fine discrimination of the heart has meaning in the outer world and not te inner. In this way the human is superior to the gods. Therefore at this level that the Chorus makes the great affirmation of Apollo and Dionysus together:

> *What you have said, Tiresias, shows no disrespect*
> *To Apollo; at the same time you prove your judgement sound*
> *In honouring Dionysus as a mighty god.* (p. 202 l.330)

The two gods meet in the purely human phenomenon of *judgement,* weighing this against that, testing out values (or intensities of Being) on the strings, in some way, of the heart.

Pentheus will have none of it. It is a challenge in the place that he is weakest and it terrifies him. He reacts with a sort of scream which is the fear of his own madness, though he does not know it: "Keep you hands off me. Don't wipe your crazy folly onto me!"

And at once the crazy folly begins to break out, and he moves into destruction-mode:

> *Go, someone, quickly, to his seat of augury,*
> *Smash it with crow-bars, topple the walls, throw all his things*
> *In wild confusion, turn the whole place upside down,*
> *Fling out his holy fripperies to the hurricane winds!*
> *The rest of you, go comb the country and track down*
> *The effeminate foreigner* . . . (p.303 l.348)

So Pentheus and the guards depart, about that business, and the old men and Chorus are left on stage, in a mounting atmosphere of frenzy. "Before, you were unbalanced," calls the prophet to the departing king. "Now you are insane." And the sounds of great shouts and crashing walls come to us from offstage, as the Chorus, like a mantra against that chaos, sing of the peace that is beloved by Dionysus:

> *Dionysus, son of Zeus, delights in banquets;*
> *And his dear love is Peace, giver of wealth,*

Saviour of young men's lives—a goddess rare!
His enemy is the man who has no care
To pass his years in happiness and health
His days in quiet and his nights in joy. (p. 205 l.424)

The famous choice of Achilles was between a long, obscure life, with wife, children, farm, fruit trees, olives, corn, grandchildren, friends to dinner—and a short violent one, with death in battle. He chose the latter, and most Greeks of the time would have done likewise. That is the tragedy of the patriarch. The natural unfurling of his life, the "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends" of which Macbeth speaks of as things he can no longer hope for, is not for him. The farm, the fruit trees, the peace and long life are all gifts of Nature and he has declared against them.

At this point Euripides brings in on one side the guards escorting a prisoner, and on the other the king. It is one of those great set-piece confrontations in which the Greek drama delighted. First speaks the guard:

Sir, we've brought the prey you sent us out to catch;
We hunted him and here he is. But, Sir, we found
The beast was gentle; made no attempt to run away,
Just held his hands out . . . telling us to tie him up and run him in;
Gave us no trouble,
At all, just waited for us. Naturally I felt
A bit embarrassed. 'You'll excuse me, Sir,' I said.
'I don't want to arrest you; It's the king's command!'

Another thing, Sir, those women you rounded up
And put in fetters in the prison, those Bacchants;
Well, they're all gone, turned lose to the glens; and there they are
Frisking about, calling on Bromius their god.
The fetters simply opened and fell off their feet;
The bolts shot back, untouched by mortal hand; the doors
Flew wide. Master, this man has come here with a load of miracles.
(p.205 l.440)

We think of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles myth, set free from prison in just the same way: "And behold, the angel of the lord came upon him, and a light shined in the prison: and he smote Peter upon the side saying, Rise up quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands" (Acts 12). Euripides wrote long before Christ, but the same archetype is present: it is that when Dionysus is aroused, normal cause and effect is suspended. The expectation that if you chain people up they will remain chained, is no longer reliable. Another sort of

causality is at work. From this point on we see that Pentheus has no defence against this stranger, for he is betrayed from within himself, and is increasingly deluded, mad.

First comes a sort of repressed homosexuality:

> *Your shape is not unhandsome*
> *For the pursuit of women . . .*
> *hunting Aphrodite with your lovely face. (p.206 l.450)*

But quickly the flirting turns into irritation and rage for he is no match for Dionysus him and can only call on his kingly power to shut him up. He orders him to be chained up in the stables, but as the soldiers are doing that the very buildings begin to crash and break into flames. It is a metaphor for the king's own mind. The repressed unconscious climbs ever higher, and trained in its long repression it can only destroy. It is what possesses a mob at the mid-point of a revolution, it is only a blind passion to destroy.

At this point Pentheus returns, and there, opposite to him once more, is his prisoner, free. And a herdsman enters who tells a strange tale of peace. He is just back from the mountain, where he espied the women. They were not as the king led him to expect:

> *The leader of one company*
> *Was Autinoe; your mother Agave was at the head*
> *Of the second, Ino of the third; and they all lay*
> *Relaxed and quietly sleeping . . .*
> *But modestly, not as you told us drunk with wine*
> *Or flute music, seeking the solitary woods*
> *For the pursuit of love . . .*
> *They were a sight to marvel at,*
> *For modest comeliness; women both old and young,*
> *Girls still unmarried. First they let their hair fall free*
> *Over their shoulders. Some tied up the fastenings*
> *Of fawnskins they had loosened; round the dappled fur*
> *Curled snakes that licked their cheeks. Some would have in their arms*
> *A young gazelle, or wild wolf-cubs, to which they gave*
> *Their own white milk . . . One would strike her thyrsus on the rock*
> *And from the rock a limpid stream of water sprang.*
> *Another dug her wand into the earth and there*
> *The god sent up a fountain of wine. Those who desired*
> *Milk had only to scratch the earth with fingertips*
> *And there was the white stream flowing for them to drink*

While from the thyrsus a sweet ooze of honey dripped.
Oh, if you had been there and seen all this, you would
Have offered prayers to this god whom you now condemn. (p.215 l.678-)

If we take this play literally, we miss the point. It describes a real state of mind, of soul. Then the deranged ego breaks in. In obedience to the king, the men try to bind the women and bring them back; and the women themselves explode into super-human violence. The herdsmen flee, but their innocent cattle are not so lucky. The enraged females fling themselves upon them and tear them into bloody rags.

At this point they become identified with the Furies, the "queens of terror, their faces filled with dread", that Oedipus prays to Sophocles, who are also the "Kindly Ones"—depending on which face we ourselves, by our own choices, have called up. They are the great, elemental "ministers of justice" of whom Heraclitus speaks, who will find out even the sun if he oversteps his limits. They are present now, with all the power of nature, earthquake and tornado, in their arms—and just as little discrimination, for they are not human: the women are possessed by them.

You'd see some rib, or a cleft hoof, tossed high and low;
And rags of flesh hung from pine branches, dripping blood.
Bulls which one moment felt proud rage hot in their horns,
The next were thrown bodily to the ground, dragged down
By hands of girls in thousands.
Then skimming bird-like over the surface of the ground
They scoured the plain, and like an enemy force
They fell on Hysiae and Erithrae, two villages,
And ransacked both." (p.252 l.750)

The messenger is deeply shaken and confesses that there can be is no greater god than Dionysus.

So now that the god stands before the king as Christ before Pilate, it is the king himself who is judged. We watch as Pentheus, like a poor, senseless bullock, is led off to his slaughter. How does it happen? What is the moment of change at which the tables are turned and he himself becomes a captive? It is when Dionysus suggests that he go out to the mountain and *see* these women. In order to do that, it would be best to dress up as one of them. It is that which opens the door to the unconscious. It is the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans,* and for him and all who are like him, it is extremely dangerous. It is quite safe for the women, and the old men, but for Pentheus it is far from safe. The deeper layers of the psyche, which have the lure of the opposite sex, have been long

neglected. The ego is split by forces that in the healthy psyche are germane and kin to it. What is good food and drink for them is for him a poison.

So this most patriarchal of men is shown dressed in drag, identified with his own inner image of the feminine which is this mother and her sisters. He walks like them and adopts even a bizarre coquetry. 'How do I look? Tell me, is not this the way that Ino stands, and my mother Agave?' He doesn't have to wait to have his head pulled off: it is already happening. The mother-*imago* is doing it. 'Wait now,' says the god. 'Here a curl has slipped, not as I tucked it carefully beneath your snood!'

And the dazed king replies, 'Indoors, as I was tossing my head like a Bacchic dancer, I must have shaken it from its place.'

One sign of the ego invaded by unconscious forces is this incongruous contrasexuality. Another is the vast inflation that accompanies it. He thinks he can lift up the whole mountain of Cithaeron where the dancers gather. But the greatest of all limits to the ego is its sexual identity. If it loses that, all boundaries are dissolved.

'Could I lift on my shoulders the whole weight of Cithaeron, and all the women dancing there? . . . Shall I put my shoulder under the rock and heave the mountain up with my two arms?'

It is similar to the inflation that destroys all tyrants, even the petty and domestic. Pentheus leaves the stage, but we soon hear of his end. He has climbed up a tree, the better to spy on the women; and they have pulled down the tree and torn him limb from limb. His own mother, Agave, pulled off his head and comes exultantly on stage, holding the object but knowing not at all what it is. Cadmus, her father, alone has the courage to make her recognise the truth:

He takes her through as a psychotherapist might do it today: "Look!" he says. "Whose head is that?" And now it is a different sort of looking that she must have, a very precise looking at the outer, the real world. "It is a lion's head," she answers, "or so they say it is." "Then look again, look straight," he says. "To look is no great task."

And then she looks, and sees.

At this point in the play we might think that it has come to its own conclusion, both dramatically and psychologically. There is nothing more to be said. But as with *Iphigenia in Aulis* we have another ending, most dubiously written by Euripides. In it, Dionysus returns in judgment dealing out punishment not like

Dionysus at all, but like a king. He has become, bizarrely a patriarchal judge. "Have mercy on us, Dionysus," says Cadmus, "for we have sinned."

Yet to place among the 'sinners' in this play is absurd, for he has never doubted the reality of Dionysus and tended his daughter' grave. The play is ceasing to make sense. 'Have mercy on us for we have sinned' is a cry, utterly foreign to Euripides. Nature's natural punishments have already been dealt out. They are of the same quality as the poisoned chalice that Nature *commends* (in Macbeth's words) 'to our own lips.' There is no need to deal out more.

As with *Iphigenia at Aulis*, much of Euyripides' own text for this final scene is missing. It seems inescapable that his message was just too terrible to be grasped by minds set in the mould which he strove to change. Pentheus himself was not viable as a human being. What is not viable returns into the womb of nature and no recriminations are necessary. Nature will try again somewhere else.

Shakespeare knew this as well as Euripides. Macbeth can easily brave the judgment day. He doesn't believe in it. But

> *"We still have judgement here, that we but teach*
> *Bloody instruction, which being taught return*
> *To plague th'inventor. This even handed justice*
> *Commends th'ingredients of our poison'd chalice*
> *To our own lips."*