

## BOOK REVIEWS AND REJOINDERS, COMMUNICATIONS

**Anne-Françoise Jaccottet**, *Choisir Dionysos. Les associations dionysiaques ou la face caché du dionysisme*. AKANTHUS Verlag für Archäologie Kilchberg (Zurich) 2003, ISBN 3-905083-18-3, 2 vols. 207+367pp., EUR 85.

(Herbert Hoffmann)

Dionysus has struck yet again! J.-P. Vernant once summed it up succinctly, pointing out that this idea which we call Dionysism is not a given fact, but a product of the modern history of religion since Nietzsche.

The first Dionysus was German, the brainchild of Nietzsche, Wilamowitz, Rohde, Deubner, Otto and Kerényi, to mention but a few of his brilliant begetters. He was a god of trance and of irrationality, a shaman, a *Jenseitsgott*, and a proto-Christ in one. German Dionysus was dethroned some twenty years ago by French Dionysus, the enigmatic “Other”, of interest mainly in his psychic and politico-social function. French Dionysos presupposed sociological theory: religion and deviance, religion and power, religion as social control.

French Dionysus was originally begotten in the nineteen-fifties by Louis Gernet, after whom J.-P. Vernant’s renowned Centre de Recherches Comparés sur les Sociétés Anciennes in the house of August Comte is named. Today he has become first and foremost Vernantian, a god who is good to think with. Re-reading Gernet, one cannot, however, escape the impression that French Dionysus has undergone a subtle mutation in the course of his fifty-year career. Whereas Gernet had called him “*un dieu qui joue, et qui fait jouer*” and had significantly added “*il joue avec une espèce d’équivoque entre le monde « réel » et l’autre*” - meaning the Divine (*Anthropologie de la grèce antique*, 83), there is nothing sacred about Vernantian “otherness”, which “by its very proximity – its intimate contact with you – remains intangible and ubiquitous, never there where it is, never enclosed within a definite form” (quoted by Jaccottet, my translation). Deprived of divinity, the “otherness” of Dionysus has lost its metaphysical flavour and become mundane. Often fascinating and delightful, *jeux d’images, jeux d’esprit, jeux de paroles*, but play of ideas all the same.

More than ten major Vernantian studies on Dionysus have appeared during the last twenty years, some authored by the master himself, others by his students and former associates. Vernantian Dionysus has, moreover, spread like wildfire: first to the United States, then to Italy, and most recently to Switzerland (see Ingeborg Scheibler’s review of Isler-Kerényi in the last issue of this journal). The Triumph of Dionysus is a logical upshot of the triumph of Vernantianism in classical studies.

So much, then, for the context. Anne-Françoise Jaccottet’s book is manifestly Vernantian. But it is also more than merely that.

The concept for *Choisir Dionysos* was born twenty years ago at the symposium ‘*L’Association Dionysiaque dans les Sociétés Anciennes*’ organised by the French School in Rome on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1984. The parameters for the present study, as indeed all of its basic

assumptions, will be found in J.-P. Vernant's conclusion to the acta of that symposium (*Collection de l'École Française de Rome*, 89, 1986). The author herself thoughtfully provides the explanation for the book's quirky title. By "choosing Dionysus" she means to underscore what sets her book apart from its predecessors. "*Choisir Dionysos*" signifies "*se laisser guider par Dionysos*", meaning to adopt a subjective approach to one's subject (rather than, as she puts it, "*sacrifier à Descartes*"). But more importantly, the title refers us to the fact that this book is not primarily about Dionysism, but about its ancient associations: those corporate bodies of people, who in Hellenistic and Roman times "chose" Dionysus over, say, Mithraism or even Christianity. Anne-Françoise Jaccottet has approached her Dionysian associations from a "hands-on" epigraphic perspective, and herein lies the strength of her study.

The book's weighty second volume – its meat, as it were – consists of a *corpus* of two hundred Greek inscriptions which the author has patiently and laboriously assembled, translated and annotated - the epigraphic evidence left behind by Dionysian associations throughout the Mediterranean. Some of these are honorific decrees or dedications, others are gleaned from the tombstones of association members, yet others are lists of members' donations. Taken together, they provide irrefutable evidence to the effect that by the third century B.C. at the latest Dionysism was not a private and sectarian affair but a religion like any other, complete with an elaborate clergy.

The titles accorded various officials of the Dionysian hierarchy reveal a complexity of ecclesiastical insignia hitherto unsuspected. They include such dignitaries as the *archiboukolos* (Arch-Herdsman, the original meaning of English "pastor"), *archimystes* (Arch-Initiate), *archineaniskos* (Chief of? Youth), and *antrophylakes* (Guardian of the Sacred Cave). The reference to a *hydraules* tells us that organ music was played in Dionysian associations, as still in churches today. Here are a few more nomenclatural gems Jaccottet has uncovered: *liknaphoros* (Bearer of the Sacred Winnowing Fan), *narthekophoros* (Bearer of the Sacred Fennel-Stalk), *pyrphoros* (bearer of the sacred flame), *appas Dionyson* (Dionysian Father = priest), *anthiereus* (Vice-Priest), *grammateus* (Secretary), and *tamias* (Treasurer). Some of these survive in Greek (Byzantine) ecclesiastic terminology.

Jaccottet's argument, if I have understood it correctly, is that an earlier, pre-rational, Dionysism, representing a form of deep religion involving the trance state and a merging with the divine essence, later became a shallow, or conventional, religion involving an administrative bureaucracy and offering solace to the faithful with the promise of everlasting bliss ("mythic thiasos") in a "Hereafter" contingent on membership in one of the associations. As in churches of all ages, *synousia*, "belonging", is what counted most, and surely she is right in this. As to what else may have motivated the associations' members, we are told that we cannot reach any conclusions, for each association was different from every other, and that each reflected the "needs and expectations" of its members. This is pluralistic relativism, the dominant stance in academia today. The well-known Vernantian aversion towards anything "mystic" may also have contributed to this rather limited view. The fact is that religion has always existed at two levels: *synousia*, "belonging" (shallow dualistic religion, diluted spirituality) for the many; true (nondual) spirituality, or Spirit itself, for the few. Like most religions, Dionysism must surely have offered its initiates both perspectives.

How the worship of Dionysus *really* looked, then – its grit, as it were – Jaccottet doesn't tell us, and I have my doubts as to whether any future "*éclairage archéologique*" will yield vital

missing evidence. At this point, the logical next step would be to go beyond the internal evidence and attempt a full-spectrum investigation. A twenty-first century integrative approach to Dionysus, as well as including the social, anthropological, literary and art-historical aspects of religion, would have to take into account the enormous amount of work that has been done in recent years on the phenomenology of religious experience, including trance and other states of “altered consciousness”. It would also consider recent American advances in the field of consciousness studies – some highly relevant to the subject at hand.

Set in a multi-dimensional and multi-cultural perspective, Dionysism might turn out to be not so radically different from Shivaism, Tantric Buddhism, or even Sufic Islam, albeit with a Greek flavour. Indeed, as Dodds suggested, its *ek-stasis* may for many of its adherents – men *and* women alike! - have been primarily a technique for transcending the separate self and getting a taste of nondual reality, or “Godness”. In fact, one might well ask whether some of these Dionysian “churches” might not, rather, have more resembled mystery schools such as still exist throughout the world today for the purpose of offering individuals a framework for spiritual transformation. What is the evidence? Greek thinkers – seers and philosophers alike – rarely engaged in non-dualistic discourse, for reason that non-dualism defies conceptualisation. But Heraclitus’ terse statement on Self (Frag. 101 DK) is in effect a poignant affirmation of non-dualism; and the inscriptions on many of the ivory and golden “Orphic-Dionysian” lamelles from Olbia and South Italy hint clearly at what the Zen roshi calls “one taste” (e.g. “Life:death:life: Dionysus”).

So if the German Dionysus may have been too “vertical” – overly concerned with deep essence – and the French Dionysus too “horizontal” – exclusively concerned with form and socio-political function – the time may be ripe to combine the horizontal with the vertical, uniting the empiric with the transcendental, in order to arrive at a comprehensive view. Jaccottet’s *corpus* will be of immense value to any such future undertaking. A daunting challenge, for it presupposes a revival of interest in teamwork in our narcissistic post-modern age.

This is not only an important book, it is a beautiful book as well. The publisher, herself an eminent archaeologist, is to be complimented for its flawless editing and printing, and elegant cover design.

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