

DIONYSUS IN THERAPIST
AND ANALYSAND

RUNNING HEAD: *Dionysus*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I demonstrate how the archetype of *Dionysus* is constellated in the dreams of a male therapist and his female analysand. Amplifications on the nature of this archetype, by drawing on story, myth and cult practices, help in understanding the meaning of each of their dreams. I also attempt to relate the meaning of the dreams to every day reality and life circumstances. Although they are each of a different gender, in different stages of life and with different conscious attitudes and values, their psychodynamics are, in either case, being influenced by this archetype, although different aspects of it. Essentially, however, in both circumstances, it involves having a high regard for feminine values.

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Introduction

James Hillman (1972) makes an appeal for the end of analytical approaches to psychological therapy which, he argues, “coincides with the acceptance of femininity (p. 29).” He observes that, in fact, for many people therapy is experientially Dionysian, that is to say it involves a psychological “moistening” and deepening through Eros. Therapy therefore ought to encourage the vicissitudes of the libido, as well as interiority and psychic spontaneity. There is also a need to embrace community, which is experienced both externally with other people and within between the different components of the psyche. In this case then, following Jung, Hillman is advancing here a psychotherapy at the service of the god *Dionysus* and individuation of the heart.

Given this background I will presently examine the constellation of the archetype of the god *Dionysus* in a therapist, a fifty-one year old man and his analysand, a twenty-five year old woman. I do so by studying each of their dreams, one of the therapist’s and four of the analysand’s in relationship to each of their life circumstances. Before I do that, however, I make some amplificatory notes on the qualities of *Dionysus* in order to gain an overview on the nature of the psychological complex of energies that he represents. In the process and throughout the paper, inasmuch as I am capable, I attempt to write in a lyrical fashion that evokes the god.

Amplifications on the Archetype of the God *Dionysus*

The story of *Dionysus* has been told and retold for thousands of years. The Hungarian mythologist Kerényi (1970) traces his European roots back to Minoan Crete and notes that he became settled in Greece by at least the second millennium BCE. In keeping with his nature and long history, the tales surrounding him are many and varied. In addition to being worshipped in his own right he later became the principal actor in religious cults that spread throughout ancient Greece and into the Roman Empire with the sweet song of *Orpheus* and his many-stringed lyre (Fierz-David, 1988).

At least in the exuberant portrait painted by Nietzsche (1956), *Dionysus* represents a power that seems alien to the spirit of ancient Greece and its search for moderation and restraint. Indeed *Dionysus* was the last of the gods to be elevated to Olympus, significantly replacing Hestia, goddess of the hearth and protector of the home (Johnson, 1987). He also shared Delphi with Apollo, god of illumination and the reflective mind, a god who, according to some, represented the apotheosis of the Greek way. In point of fact, in a profound sense it is the very combination of *Apollo* and *Dionysus* that is testimony to the Greek genius and its search for moderation and balance (Morford, Lenardson, 1971, 1977).

Who then is *Dionysus* and what qualities does he embody? In sharp contrast to Apollo, a distant sky god, *Dionysus* is of the earth, chthonic, whose presence is immediately felt. Whereas *Apollo* reflects the hot summer sun, *Dionysus* is found in the cool light of the winter sun. Whereas Apollo represents the reflective mind, *Dionysus* represents the

light of nature (Fierz-David, 1988), the innate intelligence found at all levels of being including the collective unconscious and the body (Hillman, 1972). *Dionysus*, as light of nature, is graphically portrayed in his relationship to the “mythology of the leather sack,” where a leather sack made from a bull’s hide is found containing clear golden yellow fermented honey mead (Kerenyi, 1976). The leather sack represents the cave where *Dionysus* was born and the contents suggest that *Dionysus*’ inherent qualities as Zoë, that is to say eternal life, include both sweetness and the light of consciousness.

In essence *Dionysus* is an incarnation of the archetype of Zoë or indestructible life (Kerenyi, 1976). He is a personification of the eternal force of life that finds various expressions in the multiple forms of Bios or limited life. He finds kinship with the mysterious alchemical Mercurius and the Egyptian god Thoth, with whom Jung (as reported in Fierz-David, 1988) draws a parallel. As such he has more epiphanies than any other god, making himself manifest at all levels of life. He is a god of vegetation and the grape laden vine, ivy, pine and fig trees are all particularly sacred to him (Otto, 1981). As an animal he is the vine eating he-goat, he leaps forth as a savage panther and he has the regal presence of the world conquering lion. In particular he reveals himself as the powerful bull of god (Otto, 1981). In human form he comes accompanied by ithyphallic satyrs and fauns.

Dionysus is not twice-born but thrice-born, first by a human mother, *Semele*, after being impregnated by *Zeus*, then from the thigh of *Zeus* himself and finally from the earth, especially through the upward striving yet shade seeking entangled tendrils and leaves

of ivy with its red berry (Johnson, 1987). He is half mortal, half god. He is born of fire yet has a home at the bottom of the sea and is referred to as “god of the sea” (Otto, 1981). He is, according to an early account, a son of Persephone and *Zeus* and called variously *Chthonios*, the Subterranean, and *Zagreus*. *Dionysus* is therefore of the elements fire, water and earth. In the cult of *Orpheus* he is also of air and a penetrating wind, like the Holy Ghost, who brings self-knowledge and engenders transformation.

Dionysus also comes in human form manifested at various levels of maturity. He was born in a cave emitting a golden light, which betrays his divinity. He was suckled at the breasts of nymphs who nursed him with the honey-milk of love. He is, above all, a divine child (Kerenyi, 1976) representing futurity and intelligent spontaneity. *Dionysus* is also the vigor and ecstatic joy of youth (Johnson, 1987). When depicted as an old man he is the embodiment of knowledge and wisdom.

In his childhood he was dismembered by the Titans although later resuscitated (Otto, 1981). He is a suffering god whose followers realize the same fate. *Dionysus* is the great hunter who is hunted, the sacrificer who is sacrificed. As mask and “unphallic” idol he confronts one as the Lord of Death (Kerenyi, 1987). But as god of indestructible life he always returns. Even in death there is the eternity of Zoë.

Although *Dionysus* has male disciples he is pre-eminently a god of women, whom he loves. He is androgynous, although male and a god whose secret resides in the erect and excited phallus with its inexorable uprising of procreative life (Otto, 1981). He is the

Lord of souls who discovered and married a stranded and forlorn maiden on the isle of *Naxos*, a pure soul who had been abandoned by her former lover, the hero, *Theseus*. The marriage of *Dionysus* to *Ariadne*, whose name is a Cretan-Greek form of *Ariagne*, meaning the “utterly pure” (Kerenyi, 1976, p.99), represents the union of the divine and the human soul through love and transformation of the human heart. This is made possible not only because of *Ariadne*’s purity but because *Dionysus*’ heart is both indestructible and the source of renewal (Fierz-David, 1988 p.21). Whereas *Dionysus* here embodies the divine love for the human soul, *Ariadne* is the purified soul surrendered in spiritualized love. He is the generative masculine spirit that gives birth through *Ariadne*, the pure in heart.

As indestructible life, *Dionysus* personifies the stillness and deep interiority behind both life in all its manifestations of *Bios* and the darkness of death. Through his own giant dance he both creates and destroys. He is dismembered in *Bios* and resurrected in *Zoë*. He is the god of sudden comings and goings like the vicissitudes of the libido.

Music, especially with rhythm, finds its source in *Dionysus* as does drama, both as comedy and as tragedy. The etymology of the word tragedy is based on the Greek word *tragodia*, which means “the song of the he-goat” (Kerenyi, 1976, P.331-333). This song was sung in commemoration of the suffering *Dionysus*, his dismemberment and death re-enacted in cult ritual by a goat sacrifice. Tragedy is systolic, a concentrated involvement of life seeking depth. The word comedy points to *komos* and is derived from the Greek *komodia*, meaning “song on the occasion of a *komos*” (Kerenyi, 1976, p.

333-334). *Komos* or *komazein* refers to bands of men rejoicing in dance and song in honour of *Dionysus* (Kerenyi, 1976). Comedy therefore suggests liberation and unrestraint and is systolic, life seeking free expansion.

There is a kinship between the wine of *Dionysus* and [wine as] the blood of Christ, the latter having taken over some of the attributes of the god. Yet, traditional Christianity mainly portrays Christ as suffering and not joyful while the grapes and wine of *Dionysus* are connected to both tragedy and comedy. Although *Dionysus* is the god of wine and his followers, the *maenads*, are depicted in ecstatic dance, the cult of *Dionysus* did not involve drunkenness. His orgies, from the Greek word *orgia*, meaning “worship of the god *Dionysus*,” needs to be understood as religious acts of devotion and not in the profane sense that we understand the word today (Johnson, 1987, p. 13). *Dionysus* himself is reputed to have become drunk only once in his life and didn’t like it (Johnson, 1987).

The celebrants of *Dionysus*, the *maenads*, are depicted whirling joyfully in ecstatic dance, accompanied by the entrancing sound of the flute, the jangling of cymbals and the beating pulse of the drum (Otto, 1981). Although some whirl enraptured, some stand silently apart in a trance of stillness (Otto, 1981). Here we come close to the purpose of the revelry -- to be seized by *Dionysus* and transported through enthusiasm into a meditative stillness and harmony with the living source of life. In this context the word enthusiasm needs to be understood as being derived from the Greek word

enthusiazein meaning, “to be inspired or possessed by a god” (Campbell, 1986, p. 134), in this case *Dionysus*.

But what are we to make of the stories of the *maenads* rushing about in frenzy across the countryside, tearing apart living animals and eating their raw flesh. There are even accounts of the dismemberment of children and of the ruler *Pentheus* by his own mother. We can begin to understand these brutal stories by realizing that the name *Pentheus* means “full of suffering” and that he was originally an embodiment of *Dionysus* himself (Kerenyi, 1976, p. 70). It also helps to understand that these stories originated in a distant time in a hunting oriented society (Kerenyi, 1976) as an enactment of the dismemberment of *Dionysus-Zagreus*, where *Zagreus* means “catcher of game” (Kerenyi, 1976, p. 76-82). Not only is *Dionysus-Zagreus* dismembered but his followers, too, suffer the same fate, at least spiritually and psychologically. The individual, as hunter on the path of individuation, is also hunted (by the god), a profound spiritual truth. Such scenes relate the god to tragedy.

Dionysus is the archetype of indestructible life, the source of the tragic entanglements of destiny and the loosening and detachments implicated in comedy. He is the great binder and loosener and exists in the interiority of all manifestations of life at all levels of being, at least from the first stirrings in vegetative nature up through the animal kingdom to the human. In psychological terms this suggests that *Dionysus* can be found in the sensations and intuitive intelligence of the body’s somatic processes and the instinctual drives as well as the intelligence of the human heart. Since the god’s

heart is both indestructible and the source of renewal, one could say that *Dionysus* also stands behind the spiritual transfiguration of the human heart (Fierz-David, 1976, p. 70).

This portrait of *Dionysus* is not that of Nietzsche's with his riotous outbursts, although he may be found there as well. He is more essentially interior with roots that spiral gently in the quietness of vegetative nature and that not only bursts out in the fire of fermented grapes but also seeks shadow, coolness and moisture in the tangled growth of ivy. Such images reflect the spiral-like way of individuation. They speak of a god that entangles one in destiny and the tragic experience of life where, along with psychological and spiritual dismemberment and death and a reflective attitude, one eventually finds laughter and joy close to heart of things. The ecstatic dance of *Dionysus* destroys rigidities based on formations from the past, sweeping away all obstacles and barriers while making room for the generation of new life.

Following Jung, Fierz-David (1988) observes that men and women have somewhat different relationships with this god. She argues that the latter are by nature highly involved in life through Eros and find fulfillment in symbolic death, interiority and engagement with the spirit of *Zoë*, that is to say with *Dionysus* himself. This allows for increasing spiritual discernment to rule in relationships whether inner or outer. Men, on the other hand, who are already generally somewhat detached from life, are drawn into more involvement through Eros, although this too requires a death of closely held values. In either case Eros becomes expressed in community whether it be between different parts of one's psyche or with others, where the outer and the inner become

one. *Dionysus* has to do with individuation of the heart as suggested by the fact that the heart is the only part of the god that is indestructible (Fierz-David, 1988).

Amplifications Applied to Life Situations of Therapist and Analysand

How do these reflections help us to understand the dynamics of the psyche of ordinary people today in the daily play of life? First, as a kind of bridge from the archetypal world of *Dionysus* to life, let us briefly examine how Shakespeare dealt with one archetypal theme, romantic love, from both a tragic and a comic dimension. The two plays in question are Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer's Night's Dream. The inner meaning of both plays refers back to the same Greek myth found in Ovid's Metamorphosis, the tragic love story of Pyramus and Thisby. In Romeo and Juliet the two main protagonists suffer their destined entanglement according to the constellated archetype of romantic love and their individual characters. In the tragic denouement of this archetypal constellation there is both human love and death. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, the identical archetypal story of Pyramus and Thisby is at the centre of the Drama. There is here a comic play of human love which, from the human perspective, is made to look altogether arbitrary and absurd. Moreover, in the final analysis, all the lovers are happily reconciled to each other. Not the suffering of tragic involvement but release and detachment from the perils of human love is evoked. For purposes of this paper the point of this discussion is not so much the theme of romantic love per se but the workings of the archetype of *Dionysus* in both its tragic and cosmic dimensions.

I now discuss the case of a fifty-one year old male therapist and his twenty-five year old female client, applying what seems to be relevant from the above amplifications to understanding each of their psychodynamics. There is also the intriguing question of the meaning behind the fact that the archetype of *Dionysus* had been constellated in each of their psyches at roughly the same time. If nothing else it is a demonstration of the principle of synchronicity. Needless to say the fact that the therapist can directly relate to Eros and the feminine would certainly facilitate his analysands' relationship to Eros as well.

The Therapist

I begin with a discussion of the following dream of the therapist:

I am with an attractive woman who is, in fact, supervising me in my work with my analysands. She is seated in an easy chair in front of me and says: "I can tell that you are in touch with the Dionysian because of your laughter." I then find myself on my knees in front of her sucking the nipple of her right breast. Her nipple, I notice is well defined.

In the dream, the woman's observations regarding the dream ego's connection to *Dionysus* suggests that she herself is deeply related to the god. Perhaps she represents an Ariadne – like figure, a divine nurse with purity of heart. At any rate, the dream ego responds as if she were a goddess by propitiating her and sucking her breast. There is not only acceptance of the feminine depicted here but a worshipful attitude

The woman's well defined nipples imply that the dreamer can now begin to differentiate more clearly his relationship to the archetype personified by *Dionysus*, particularly as symbolized by laughter with its loosening effect, diastolic expansiveness and joyful engagement in the comedy of life that comes with detachment. To come to this point requires a certain transparency to the unconscious and considerable personal involvement in Eros, psychological moistening, dismemberment and the tragic suffering of life. An opening to a genuine sympathetic humanism of the heart, which will certainly stand him in good stead as a therapist, is also indicated. His relationship to the laughter of *Dionysus* should also infect his analysands and help them to detach from their suffering and tragic involvements. It is no doubt this intuition that led Nietzsche (1956) to have Zarathustra declare that laughter is blessed and that those who aspire to greatness need to learn how to laugh.

Analysand

In the case of the analysand, a single mother with two small boys, one six months of age and the other eighteen months, there is a split between her conscious ego and the unconscious as she has only recently become interested in the significance of her dreams. Her presenting problem was, in addition to feeling lonely, fear of her husband although they were separated and living two thousand miles apart. After a few sessions she indicated that she also suffered from panic attacks.

Over time the woman in question has gained in self-confidence and a sense of independence. She is now able to take a more confident stand against her husband

and is initiating divorce proceedings. She has also recently successfully completed a career-training programme, which will give her a measure of independence in a positive sense. As one would expect, coincidentally, her panic attacks have almost completely subsided. In the meantime we have been discussing her dreams, some of which can be understood with amplifications from the myth of Dionysus and his fate in Western civilization.

Generally speaking, in addition to being interested in establishing herself in a career, she is concerned about her relationships with men, women and her own children. More profoundly she is struggling with issues having to do with the discernment and acceptance of her feminine self. The dreams need to be understood in this light.

In one dream her six-month-old child, who she experiences as screaming in terror, emits a blue and pink light from his eyes. The dreamer feels that her son is possessed by the Devil. In another dream her uncle, who in reality is a member of the notorious motorcycle gang Hell's Angels, gives her a bible with a white cover. In a third dream, she sees herself walking on a thick bed of ivy covering a portion of a lake along with her older son and sister-in-law. Her sister-in-law, wearing a flowing dress, gestures for the dreamer to walk in a gently rhythmical fashion. Her son then unexpectedly dives into the water, frightening her, although her sister-in-law seems unconcerned. Another dream depicts her sister and a man, each with an amputated leg. There have been other relevant dreams but this is enough to give the gist of what is transpiring in the young woman's unconscious.

The first dream can be amplified by studying the fate of *Dionysus* who, along with Pan, the goat-foot god, has been severely repressed in Christian traditions while carrying the projection of the Devil. Light is being emitted from her child's eyes reminding one of the infant Dionysus who emitted a golden light. The scream, too, may relate the child to *Dionysus*, who was known as the "loud shouter", and who was accompanied by shrill-sounding musical instruments (Otto, 1981, p.93). Given these reflections, it is understandable that the woman's dream ego would think that her dream child was possessed by the Devil while, in fact, what is being constellated is the potential for intense involvement in life.

Despite the fact that many attributes of *Dionysus* were considered to be of the Devil, Christ as god of the vine, with his suffering, dying and resurrection, also shares many traits with *Dionysus*. The message in the second dream, where a white bible was given to the dreamer by her uncle, in real life a member of Hell's [the Devil's Angels], is understandable in this light. Both dreams suggest that her path of individuation requires acceptance of repressed *Dionysian*-like energies in her life. Interestingly enough the young woman has two aunts who are Christian nuns! The psyche doesn't express itself in a language that is socially or politically correct but in a primitive language that contains the necessary message to compensate the dreamer's conscious attitudes and values. In this case, the bible comes from her dark animus, which is projected onto her uncle and not her aunts, even though they are nuns. The fact that she has this projection on her uncle, who is a member of such an unsavory group and with whom

she is sometimes in contact, also point to the risk involved in her coming to terms with these energies.

In the third dream the dreamer is encouraged to walk rhythmically on a carpet of ivy floating on a body of water. This indicates the need to relax into the rhythm of life, to cool down, metaphorically a quality inherent in the ivy itself. Ivy, which is sacred to *Dionysus*, is a plant that meanders serpent-like in an entangled web of leaves and tendrils. It seeks shade, moisture and coolness. Indeed *Dionysus* is reported to have enjoined his disciples to wreath themselves in ivy, presumably as protection against too much inner heat (Otto, 1981). One story tells of the god being born of fire and that the womb of his mother, Semele, was protected from the fire by a girdle of ivy (Johnson, 1987).

In the fourth dream there has been dismemberment of her sister, a shadow figure, and her animus. According to the myth, followers of *Dionysus* suffer the same fate as the god, which is dismemberment. This involves surrender to the Self of certain shadow qualities and opinions along with the need to find a new standpoint imposed from within.

Other dreams indicate that the young woman is not attending to her inner children, which not only affects her involvement in life but the way she treats her outer children as well. Only time will tell how she actually manages to engage life at this stage in her development. Images of nursing *maenads* and caring nymphs who nurture and raise the infant *Dionysus* convey a helpful message should it be heeded.

Conclusion

I began this essay by amplifying the archetype of eternal life as personified by the god *Dionysus*. His stories and fate in Western civilization supply interesting material to help understand the dynamics at play in the psyche of a therapist and one of his analysands, a young woman. Although they are at a different stage of life and of different gender, with different conscious values and attitudes, specific aspects of this archetype can help explain the compensatory indications given by way of dreams. In either case it essentially involves placing high value on the feminine and individuation of the heart.

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