

DODONA: FEELINGS

Before Zeus came to be the greatest of the gods of Greece, there was the Great Goddess at Dodona in the hills of Epirus. When the cult of Zeus was introduced by the invading Greek tribes they gave her a name derived, in accordance with their patriarchal tradition, from a form of his name, calling her Dione, and honoring her as his consort. A sacred oak, believed to be the abode of the divine couple, was the locus of the oldest oracle in all Greece. A long-lived tree, it was cut down and uprooted some centuries into the Christian era.

Games were held here in honor of Zeus, and part of the stadium remains. The greatest reminder of past glories, however, is the theatre, now restored and functioning again. One of the largest in Greece, with seating for some 17,000 spectators, it was built by King Pyrrhus in the third century B.C. Pyrrhus was the ultimate warrior, fighting not only the Romans, but Carthaginians, Gauls, Macedonians, and other Greeks as well. The Epirots at that time were on the margin of Greek civilization, a mountain folk far remote from its acknowledged centre, Athens. The building of this theatre was an affirmation of the cultural unity of a people for whom political unity was virtually unthinkable.

By this time the golden age of Greek drama was over. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were long dead and no writers of comparable genius had succeeded them. But the classic works had lost nothing of their pristine power, for their themes were timeless and their language great. Sitting today in the semi-circular auditorium it is not difficult to imagine actors in mask and cothurnus performing, say, the *Andromache*, a play about Pyrrhus's namesake and ancestor, the son of Achilles, before the king and his rugged compatriots.

Dodona is a long distance from Pyrrhus's capital, Arta, just north of the Ambracian Gulf. Why did he build his theatre there, in a place, too, which Homer had fixed forever with the epithet 'wintry'?

Dodona was, as said above, an immemorially sacred site, with its oracular oak, its priestesses and their doves, and its barefoot priests who always had to be in contact with the earth; and the drama in its origins was also sacred, arising as it did from the revels of the god Dionysus. In one version of his genealogy, he was believed to be a son of Zeus and Dione, and to have consulted the oracle here before setting out on his wanderings, which would take him as far away as India. Thence he would return with a retinue of wild women, exotic animals, and half-human creatures – fauns

and satyrs, at their head Silenus, prototype of all fat funny-men. They shout the dithyramb and are drunk with the spirit of the vine, Dionysus' special gift to mankind. The Greeks, though, tended to weaken its virtue with water, fearing perhaps that at full strength it might weaken their humanity and let out the animal lurking in the human breast.

The Greeks had a word for the condition induced by the orgiastic forces represented by Dionysus, a word whose significance has been weakened as it has spread to other languages. The word was *enthusiasmos*—having the god in oneself. It was recognised as a dangerous condition, with its swings from gentleness to extreme violence. Women who felt called by the god went into the hills to perform his rituals. They would take young animals to themselves and nurse them while in the gentle mood; then the mood would darken and the animals perished at their hands. The Greeks were conscious of the terrific forces that lay beneath the civilized surface of life; in Dionysus and his followers they saw them personified. They were not a soft people, as their history demonstrates, but like the Indians they had a profound sense of order. Even if something in human nature itself was a threat to order, it had to be faced and dealt with. And if the disorderly bacchanalia exhibited the threat, where else should they look for the cure but in the thing itself? – in the part of it which, in spite of every excess, still remained human: the word, the *logos*, as found in the dithyramb.

So they took that wild outcry and from it in the course of time they created the drama. We tend to have a false notion not only of what the drama meant to them but of how it was presented. Not unlike Christian artists later, working on a number of themes from the Bible and the lives of the saints and each giving his version of them, the Greek dramatists took their themes from the Trojan War, the Fate of the House of Atreus, the Theban Tales and other tragic subjects, each treating it in his own way with the aim of winning a prize at the Festival of Dionysus, in competition with his peers. But at the end of the tragedy, with its high poetry and its pity and terror, another kind of drama was staged, a satyr play from the same author, a comical romp harking back to a time before tragedy had been discerned in the affairs of men. Only one has survived, from the hand of Euripides, but all the great tragedians wrote such pieces, and without them we inevitably miss something of the total experience the Greeks enjoyed in the theatre. The pity and the terror were followed by a belly-laugh, and the good folk of Athens – or Dodona – went home both purged and good-humored.

The satyr plays hark back, as said, to a primitive period, but the development of drama is actually a taming of the dionysiac spirit, a conversion of its energies to a higher purpose. The wild dithyramb gave way to measured verse, the disorderly followers were transformed into the chorus, and their leader became the single actor of the early stage.

Something mysterious and wonderful was happening. Apollo was taking Dionysus in hand; order was setting limits to orgiastic overflow. The fundamental quality of the native genius was reasserting itself, and forms were being conceived to incorporate the outcome, and that unique edifice, the Greek theatre, was constructed in Athens and the other cities, and eventually up north in Dodona among the wintry hills.

Buddhism is emphatically Apollonian. The sculptors of Gandhara knew what they were about when they conceived the first images of the Buddha, and, as said earlier, an Indian Apollo emerged from their workshops. This is not to say that Dionysus is unknown to Buddhism. How could he be? Dionysus is human nature in the state where mood, feeling, emotion predominate and threaten to unbalance the psyche. The Buddhist discipline is very much to do with bringing them healthily to order. Dionysus symbolically returned from India with tigers and panthers, not wisdom and compassion. These are human virtues for which few of the gods of Greece or India had much capacity.

It is a most interesting thing that the golden age of tragedy ends with a drama in which Dionysus himself is a figure. This is the *Bacchae* of Euripides, the last of the great tragedians, a compassionate, sceptical man, with an unflattering, if not unbelieving attitude to the gods. The drama is set in Thebes, that city where so many tragedies unfold. Dionysus has appeared among the hills and the women have gone out to him. The king is perturbed, and, dressed as a woman, ventures out to see the rituals for himself. His disguise is penetrated and he is torn to pieces by the maenads led by his own mother. In few dramas, ancient or modern, are pity and terror so powerfully evoked. Classical tragedy comes full circle with the *Bacchae*: Dionysus, whose revels gave rise to the form, ends with himself on stage as the villain of the piece, luring a deluded monarch to his death.

The Greek gods passed away, but the forces they represented are part of human nature and do not pass away. Stresses of various kinds release them, and all too often the consequences are terrible. Uncontrollable urges drive normally decent people to cruel and shameful acts. These are the moments when their own resources are found to be inadequate. Buddhism counsels meditation as a sort of solvent of such drives. In many cases no doubt it is effective. But not everyone can meditate effectively, and some say they cannot meditate at all. How are such people to be helped?

In contrast to the Theravada, with its resolute concept of 'own-power' or self-reliance, the Mahayana developed the concept of 'other-power'. The troubled individual recognized his helplessness in certain situations or against certain temptations and prayed for help from a being higher than the human. It might be a bodhisattva such as Avalokita, or some glorified apotheosis of the Buddha himself, as found in the Lotus Sutra. This

brings us to a dimension where the western mind, colored by the sceptical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, is not entirely at ease. We are happier with history than theology, to say nothing of buddhology. We do accept, however, that the Buddha was an historical figure; and this historical figure is reported to have said 'Who sees me sees the Dharma, and who sees the Dharma sees me'. If the Dharma is universal and immortal, so also, to the believer, will the Buddha be. The concept of Nirvana is compatible, I believe, with that of the Buddha as a universal, immortal being who can and will help, out of an inexhaustible store of merit, those who call upon him in times of trial. Here is not the place to enlarge on this idea; only to state and affirm it for the benefit of those who have known a degree of emotional perturbation beyond their capacity to deal with. Injury, loss, bereavement can bring us to a state of helpless distress. So also can those forces called by the Greeks dionysiac, which under other, more modern names are ever with us, on the dark side of our nature, and with which at one time or another every culture and every individual may have to deal.