

2 The Two Great Gods of Earth

For the most part the immortal gods were of little use to human beings and often they were quite the reverse of useful: Zeus a dangerous lover for mortal maidens and completely incalculable in his use of the terrible thunderbolt; Ares the maker of war and a general pest; Hera with no idea of justice when she was jealous as she perpetually was; Athena also a war maker, and wielding the lightning's sharp lance quite as irresponsibly as Zeus did; Aphrodite using her power chiefly to ensnare and betray. They were a beautiful, radiant company, to be sure, and their adventures made excellent stories; but when they were not positively harmful, they were capricious and undependable and in general mortals got on best without them.

There were two, however, who were altogether different— who were, indeed, mankind's best friends: Demeter, in Latin Ceres, the Goddess of the Corn, a daughter of Cronus and Rhea; and Dionysus, also called Bacchus, the God of Wine. Demeter was the older, as was natural. Corn was sowed long before vines were planted. The first cornfield was the beginning of settled life on earth. Vineyards came later. It was natural, too, that the divine power which brought forth the grain should be thought of as a goddess, not a god. When the business of men was hunting and fighting, the care of the fields belonged to the women, and as they plowed and scattered the seed and reaped the harvest, they felt that a woman divinity could best understand and help woman's work. They could best understand her, too, who was worshiped, not like other gods by the bloody sacrifices men liked, but

in every humble act that made the farm fruitful. Through her the field of grain was hallowed. "Demeter's holy grain." The threshing-floor, too, was under her protection. Both were her temples where at any moment she might be present. "At the sacred threshing-floor, when they are winnowing, she herself, Demeter of the corn-ripe yellow hair, divides the grain and the chaff in the rush of the wind, and the heap of chaff grows white." "May it be mine," the reaper prays, "beside Demeter's altar to dig the great winnowing fan through her heaps of corn, while she stands smiling by with sheaves and poppies in her hand."

Her chief festival, of course, came at the harvest time. In earlier days it must have been a simple reapers' thanksgiving day when the first loaf baked from the new grain was broken and reverently eaten with grateful prayers to the goddess from whom had come this best and most necessary gift for human life. In later years the humble feast grew into a mysterious worship, about which we know little. The great festival, in September, came only every five years, but it lasted for nine days. They were most sacred days, when much of the ordinary business of life was suspended. Processions took place, sacrifices were held with dances and song, there was general rejoicing. All this was public knowledge and has been related by many a writer. But the chief part of the ceremony which took place in the precincts of the temple has never been described. Those who beheld it were bound by a vow of silence and they kept it so well that we know only stray bits of what was done.

The great temple was at Eleusis, a little town near Athens, and the worship was called the Eleusinian Mysteries. Throughout the Greek world and the Roman, too, they were held in especial veneration. Cicero, writing in the century before Christ, says: "Nothing is higher than these mysteries. They have sweetened our characters and softened our customs; they have made us pass from the condition of savages to true humanity. They have not only shown us the way to live joyfully, but they have taught us how to die with a better hope."

And yet even so, holy and awesome though they were, they kept the mark of what they had sprung from. One of the few pieces of information we have about them is that at a very solemn moment the worshipers were shown "an ear of corn which had been reaped in silence."

In some way, no one knows clearly how or when, the God

of the Vine, Dionysus, came to take his place, too, at Eleusis, side by side with Demeter.

Beside Demeter when the cymbals sound
Enthroned sits Dionysus of the flowing hair.

It was natural that they should be worshiped together, both divinities of the good gifts of earth, both present in the homely daily acts that life depends on, the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine. The harvest was Dionysus' festival, too, when the grapes were brought to the wine-press.

The joy-god Dionysus, the pure star
That shines amid the gathering of the fruit.

But he was not always a joy-god, nor was Demeter always the happy goddess of the summertime. Each knew pain as well as joy. In that way, too, they were closely linked together; they were both suffering gods. The other immortals were untouched by lasting grief. "Dwelling in Olympus where the wind never blows and no rain falls ever nor the least white star of snow, they are happy all their days, feasting upon nectar and ambrosia, rejoicing in all glorious Apollo as he strikes his silver lyre, and the sweet voices of the Muses answer him, while the Graces dance with Hebe and with Aphrodite, and a radiance shines round them all." But the two divinities of Earth knew heart-rending grief.

What happens to the corn plants and the luxuriant branching vines when the grain is harvested, the grapes gathered, and the black frost sets in, killing the fresh green life of the fields? That is what men asked themselves when the first stories were told to explain what was so mysterious, the changes always passing before their eyes, of day and night and the seasons and the stars in their courses. Though Demeter and Dionysus were the happy gods of the harvest, during the winter it was clear that they were altogether different. They sorrowed, and the earth was sad. The men of long ago wondered why this should be, and they told stories to explain the reason.

DEMETER (CERES)

This story is told only in a very early poem, one of the earliest of the Homeric Hymns, dating from the eighth or the beginning of the seventh century. The original

has the marks of early Greek poetry, great simplicity and directness and delight in the beautiful world.

Demeter had an only daughter, Persephone (in Latin Proserpine), the maiden of the spring. She lost her and in her terrible grief she withheld her gifts from the earth, which turned into a frozen desert. The green and flowering land was ice-bound and lifeless because Persephone had disappeared.

The lord of the dark underworld, the king of the multitudinous dead, carried her off when, enticed by the wondrous bloom of the narcissus, she strayed too far from her companions. In his chariot drawn by coal-black steeds he rose up through a chasm in the earth, and grasping the maiden by the wrist set her beside him. He bore her away weeping, down to the underworld. The high hills echoed her cry and the depths of the sea, and her mother heard it. She sped like a bird over sea and land seeking her daughter. But no one would tell her the truth, "no man nor god, nor any sure messenger from the birds." Nine days Demeter wandered, and all that time she would not taste of ambrosia or put sweet nectar to her lips. At last she came to the Sun and he told her all the story: Persephone was down in the world beneath the earth, among the shadowy dead.

Then a still greater grief entered Demeter's heart. She left Olympus; she dwelt on earth, but so disguised that none knew her, and, indeed, the gods are not easily discerned by mortal men. In her desolate wanderings she came to Eleusis and sat by the wayside near a well. She seemed an aged woman, such as in great houses care for the children or guard the storerooms. Four lovely maidens, sisters, coming to draw water from the well, saw her and asked her pityingly what she did there. She answered that she had fled from pirates who had meant to sell her as a slave, and that she knew no one in this strange land to go to for help. They told her that any house in the town would welcome her, but that they would like best to bring her to their own if she would wait there while they went to ask their mother. The goddess bent her head in assent, and the girls, filling their shining pitchers with water, hurried home. Their mother, Metaneira, bade them return at once and invite the stranger to come, and speeding back they found the glorious goddess still sitting there, deeply veiled and covered to her slender feet by her dark robe. She followed them, and as she crossed the threshold to the hall where the mother sat holding her young son,

a divine radiance filled the doorway and awe fell upon Metaneira.

She bade Demeter be seated and herself offered her honey-sweet wine, but the goddess would not taste it. She asked instead for barley-water flavored with mint, the cooling draught of the reaper at harvest time and also the sacred cup given the worshipers at Eleusis. Thus refreshed she took the child and held him to her fragrant bosom and his mother's heart was glad. So Demeter nursed Demophoön, the son that Metaneira had borne to wise Celeus. And the child grew like a young god, for daily Demeter anointed him with ambrosia and at night she would place him in the red heart of the fire. Her purpose was to give him immortal youth.

Something, however, made the mother uneasy, so that one night she kept watch and screamed in terror when she saw the child laid in the fire. The goddess was angered; she seized the boy and cast him on the ground. She had meant to set him free from old age and from death, but that was not to be. Still, he had lain upon her knees and slept in her arms and therefore he should have honor throughout his life.

Then she showed herself the goddess manifest. Beauty breathed about her and a lovely fragrance; light shone from her so that the great house was filled with brightness. She was Demeter, she told the awestruck women. They must build her a great temple near the town and so win back the favor of her heart.

Thus she left them, and Metaneira fell speechless to the earth and all there trembled with fear. In the morning they told Celeus what had happened and he called the people together and revealed to them the command of the goddess. They worked willingly to build her a temple, and when it was finished Demeter came to it and sat there—apart from the gods in Olympus, alone, wasting away with longing for her daughter.

That year was most dreadful and cruel for mankind over all the earth. Nothing grew; no seed sprang up; in vain the oxen drew the plowshare through the furrows. It seemed the whole race of men would die of famine. At last Zeus saw that he must take the matter in hand. He sent the gods to Demeter, one after another, to try to turn her from her anger, but she listened to none of them. Never would she let the earth bear fruit until she had seen her daughter. Then Zeus realized that his brother must give way. He told Hermes to go down to the underworld and to bid the lord of it let his bride go back to Demeter.



The rape of Persephone (Proserpine)

Hermes found the two sitting side by side, Persephone shrinking away, reluctant because she longed for her mother. At Hermes' words she sprang up joyfully, eager to go. Her husband knew that he must obey the word of Zeus and send her up to earth away from him, but he prayed her as she left him to have kind thoughts of him and not be so sorrowful that she was the wife of one who was great among the immortals. And he made her eat a pomegranate seed, knowing in his heart that if she did so she must return to him.

He got ready his golden car and Hermes took the reins and drove the black horses straight to the temple where Demeter was. She ran out to meet her daughter as swiftly as a Maenad runs down the mountainside. Persephone sprang into her arms and was held fast there. All day they talked of what had happened to them both, and Demeter grieved when she heard of the pomegranate seed, fearing that she could not keep her daughter with her.

Then Zeus sent another messenger to her, a great personage, none other than his revered mother Rhea, the oldest of the gods. Swiftly she hastened down from the heights of Olympus to the barren, leafless earth, and standing at the door of the temple she spoke to Demeter.

Come, my daughter, for Zeus, far-seeing, loud-thundering, bids you.
Come once again to the halls of the gods where you shall have honor,

Where you will have your desire, your daughter, to comfort your sorrow

As each year is accomplished and bitter winter is ended.

For a third part only the kingdom of darkness shall hold her.

For the rest you will keep her, you and the happy immortals.

Peace now. Give men life which comes alone from your giving.

Demeter did not refuse, poor comfort though it was that she must lose Persephone for four months every year and see her young loveliness go down to the world of the dead. But she was kind; the "Good Goddess," men always called her. She was sorry for the desolation she had brought about. She made the fields once more rich with abundant fruit and the whole world bright with flowers and green leaves. Also she went to the princes of Eleusis who had built her temple and she chose one, Triptolemus, to be her ambassador to men, instructing them how to sow the corn. She taught him and Celeus and the others her sacred rites, "mysteries which no one may utter, for deep awe checks the tongue. Blessed is he

who has seen them; his lot will be good in the world to come."

• • •
Queen of fragrant Eleusis,
Giver of earth's good gifts,
Give me your grace, O Demeter.
You, too, Persephone, fairest,
Maiden all lovely, I offer
Song for your favor.
• • •

In the stories of both goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, the idea of sorrow was foremost. Demeter, goddess of the harvest wealth, was still more the divine sorrowing mother who saw her daughter die each year. Persephone was the radiant maiden of the spring and the summertime, whose light step upon the dry, brown hillside was enough to make it fresh and blooming, as Sappho writes,

I heard the footfall of the flower spring . . .

—Persephone's footfall. But all the while Persephone knew how brief that beauty was; fruits, flowers, leaves, all the fair growth of earth, must end with the coming of the cold and pass like herself into the power of death. After the lord of the dark world below carried her away she was never again the gay young creature who had played in the flowery meadow without a thought of care or trouble. She did indeed rise from the dead every spring, but she brought with her the memory of where she had come from; with all her bright beauty there was something strange and awesome about her. She was often said to be "the maiden whose name may not be spoken."

The Olympians were "the happy gods," "the deathless gods," far removed from suffering mortals destined to die. But in their grief and at the hour of death, men could turn for compassion to the goddess who sorrowed and the goddess who died.

DIONYSUS OR BACCHUS

This story is very differently told from the story of Demeter. Dionysus was the last god to enter Olympus. Homer did not admit him. There are no early sources for his story except a few brief allusions in Hesiod, in the eighth or ninth century. A last Homeric Hymn, perhaps even as late as the fourth century, gives the only

account of the pirates' ship, and the fate of Pentheus is the subject of the last play of Euripides, in the fifth century, the most modern of all Greek poets.

Thebes was Dionysus' own city, where he was born, the son of Zeus and the Theban princess Semele. He was the only god whose parents were not both divine.

At Thebes alone do mortal women bear
Immortal gods.

Semele was the most unfortunate woman of all those Zeus fell in love with, and in her case too the reason was Hera. Zeus was madly in love with her and told her that anything she asked of him he would do; he swore it by the river Styx, the oath which not even he himself could break. She told him that what she wanted above all else was to see him in his full splendor as King of Heaven and Lord of the Thunderbolt. It was Hera who had put that wish into her heart. Zeus knew that no mortal could behold him thus and live, but he could do nothing. He had sworn by the Styx. He came as she had asked, and before that awful glory of burning light she died. But Zeus snatched from her her child that was near birth, and hid it in his own side away from Hera until the time had come for it to be born. Then Hermes carried it to be cared for by the nymphs of Nysa—the loveliest of earth's valleys, but no man has ever looked upon Nysa or knows where it lies. Some say the nymphs were the Hyades, whom Zeus afterwards placed in the sky as stars, the stars which bring rain when they near the horizon.

So the God of the Vine was born of fire and nursed by rain, the hard burning heat that ripens the grapes and the water that keeps the plant alive.

Grown to manhood, Dionysus wandered far to strange places.

The lands of Lydia rich in gold,
Of Phrygia too; the sun-struck plains
Of Persia; the great walls of Bactria.
The storm-swept country of the Medes;
And Araby the Blest.

Everywhere he taught men the culture of the vine and the mysteries of his worship and everywhere they accepted him as a god until he drew near to his own country.

One day over the sea near Greece a pirates' ship came sailing. On a great headland by the shore they saw a beautiful youth. His rich dark hair flowed down over a purple cloak that covered his strong shoulders. He looked like a son of kings, one whose parents could pay a great ransom. Exulting, the sailors sprang ashore and seized him. On board the ship they fetched rude bonds to fether him with, but to their amazement they were unable to bind him; the ropes would not hold together; they fell apart when they touched his hands or feet. And he sat looking at them with a smile in his dark eyes.

Alone among them the helmsman understood and cried out that this must be a god and should be set free at once or deadly harm would come to them. But the captain mocked him for a silly fool and bade the crew hasten to hoist the sail. The wind filled it and the men drew taut the sheets, but the ship did not move. Then wonder upon wonder happened. Fragrant wine ran in streams down the deck; a vine with many clusters spread out over the sail; a dark green ivy-plant twined around the mast like a garland, with flowers in it and lovely fruits. Terror-stricken, the pirates ordered the helmsman to put in to land. Too late, for as they spoke their captive became a lion, roaring and glaring terribly. At that, they leaped overboard and instantly were changed into dolphins, all except the good helmsman. On him the god had mercy. He held him back and bade him take courage, for he had found favor with one who was indeed a god—Dionysus, whom Semele bore in union with Zeus.

When he passed through Thrace on his way to Greece, the god was insulted by one of the kings there, Lycurgus, who bitterly opposed this new worship. Dionysus retreated before him and even took refuge from him in the depths of the sea. But later he came back, overpowered him and punished him for his wickedness, though mildly, by

Imprisoning him within a rocky cave
Until his first fierce maddening rage
Passed slowly and he learned to know
The god whom he had mocked.

But the other gods were not mild. Zeus struck Lycurgus blind and he died soon after. None lived long who strove with gods.

Some time during his wanderings, Dionysus came upon the princess of Crete, Ariadne, when she was utterly deso-

late, having been abandoned on the shore of the island of Naxos by the Athenian prince, Theseus, whose life she had saved. Dionysus had compassion upon her. He rescued her, and in the end loved her. When she died Dionysus took a crown he had given her and placed it among the stars.

The mother whom he had never seen was not forgotten. He longed for her so greatly that at last he dared the terrible descent to the lower world to seek her. When he found her, he defied the power of Death to keep her from him; and Death yielded. Dionysus brought her away, but not to live on earth. He took her up to Olympus, where the gods consented to receive her as one of themselves, a mortal, indeed, but the mother of a god and therefore fit to dwell with immortals.

The God of Wine could be kind and beneficent. He could also be cruel and drive men on to frightful deeds. Often he made them mad. The MAENADS, or the BACCHANTES, as they were also called, were women frenzied with wine. They rushed through woods and over mountains uttering sharp cries, waving pine-cone-tipped wands, swept away in a fierce ecstasy. Nothing could stop them. They would tear to pieces the wild creatures they met and devour the bloody shreds of flesh. They sang,

Oh, sweet upon the mountain
The dancing and the singing,
The maddening rushing flight.
Oh, sweet to sink to earth outworn
When the wild goat has been hunted and caught,
Oh, the joy of the blood and the raw red flesh!

The gods of Olympus loved order and beauty in their sacrifices and their temples. The madwomen, the Maenads, had no temples. They went to the wilderness to worship, to the wildest mountains, the deepest forests, as if they kept to the customs of an ancient time before men had thought of building houses for their gods. They went out of the dusty, crowded city, back to the lean purity of the untrodden hills and woodlands. There Dionysus gave them food and drink: herbs and berries and the milk of the wild goat. Their beds were on the soft meadow grass; under the thick-leaved trees; where the pine needles fall year after year. They woke to a sense of peace and heavenly freshness; they bathed in a clear brook. There was much that was lovely, good, and freeing in this worship under the open sky and the ecstasy of joy it

brought in the wild beauty of the world. And yet always present, too, was the horrible bloody feast.

The worship of Dionysus was centered in these two ideas so far apart—of freedom and ecstatic joy and of savage brutality. The God of Wine could give either to his worshipers. Throughout the story of his life he is sometimes man's blessing, sometimes his ruin. Of all the terrible deeds laid to his account the worst was done in Thebes, his mother's city.

Dionysus came to Thebes to establish his worship there. He was accompanied, as was his custom, by a train of women dancing and singing exultant songs, wearing fawn-skins over their robes, waving ivy-wreathed wands. They seemed mad with joy. They sang,

O Bacchanals, come,
Oh, come.
Sing Dionysus,
Sing to the timbrel,
The deep-voiced timbrel.
Joyfully praise him,
Him who brings joy.
Holy, all holy
Music is calling.
To the hills, to the hills,
Fly, O Bacchanal
Swift of foot.
On, O joyful, be fleet.

Pentheus, the King of Thebes, was the son of Semele's sister, but he had no idea that the leader of this band of excited, strange-acting women was his own cousin. He did not know that when Semele died Zeus had saved her child. The wild dancing and the loud joyous singing and the generally queer behavior of these strangers seemed to him highly objectionable, and to be stopped at once. Pentheus ordered his guards to seize and imprison the visitors, especially the leader, "whose face is flushed with wine, a cheating sorcerer from Lydia." But as he said these words he heard behind him a solemn warning: "The man you reject is a new god. He is Semele's child, whom Zeus rescued. He, with divine Demeter, is greatest upon earth for men." The speaker was the old blind prophet Teiresias, the holy man of Thebes who knew as no one else the will of the gods. But as Pentheus turned to answer him he saw that he was tricked out like the wild women: a wreath of ivy on his white hair, his old shoulders

covered by a fawn-skin, a queer pine-tipped stick in his trembling hand. Pentheus laughed mockingly as he looked him over and then ordered him with contempt out of his sight. Thus he brought upon himself his doom; he would not hear when the gods spoke to him.

Dionysus was led in before him by a band of his soldiers. They said he had not tried to flee or to resist, but had done all possible to make it easy for them to seize and bring him until they felt ashamed and told him they were acting under orders, not of their own free will. They declared, too, that the maidens they had imprisoned had all escaped to the mountains. The fetters would not keep fastened; the doors unbarred themselves. "This man," they said, "has come to Thebes with many wonders—"

Pentheus by now was blind to everything except his anger and his scorn. He spoke roughly to Dionysus, who answered him with entire gentleness, seeming to try to reach his real self and open his eyes to see that he was face to face with divinity. He warned him that he could not keep him in prison, "for God will set me free."

"God?" Pentheus asked jeeringly.

"Yes," Dionysus answered. "He is here and sees my suffering."

"Not where my eyes can see him," Pentheus said.

"He is where I am," answered Dionysus. "You cannot see him for you are not pure."

Pentheus angrily ordered the soldiers to bind him and take him to the prison and Dionysus went, saying, "The wrongs you do to me are wrongs done to the gods."

But the prison could not hold Dionysus. He came forth, and going to Pentheus again he tried to persuade him to yield to what these wonders plainly showed was divine, and welcome this new worship of a new and great god. When, however, Pentheus only heaped insults and threats upon him, Dionysus left him to his doom. It was the most horrible that there could be.

Pentheus went to pursue the god's followers among the hills where the maidens had fled when they escaped from prison. Many of the Theban women had joined them; Pentheus' mother and her sisters were there. And there Dionysus showed himself in his most terrible aspect. He made them all mad. The women thought Pentheus a wild beast, a mountain lion, and they rushed to destroy him, his mother first. As they fell upon him he knew at last that he had fought against a god and must pay with his life. They tore

him limb from limb, and then, only then, the god restored their senses, and his mother saw what she had done. Looking at her in her agony the maidens, all sobered now, the dancing over and the singing and the wild wand-waving, said to one another,

In strange ways hard to know gods come to men.
Many a thing past hope they had fulfilled,
And what was looked for went another way.
A path we never thought to tread God found for us.
So has this come to pass.

• • •

The ideas about Dionysus in these various stories seem at first sight contradictory. In one he is the joy-god—

He whose locks are bound with gold,
Ruddy Bacchus,
Comrade of the Maenads, whose
Blithe torch blazes.

In another he is the heartless god, savage, brutal—

He who with a mocking laugh
Hunts his prey,
Snares and drags him to his death
With his Bacchanals.

The truth is, however, that both ideas arose quite simply and reasonably from the fact of his being the god of wine. Wine is bad as well as good. It cheers and warms men's hearts; it also makes them drunk. The Greeks were a people who saw facts very clearly. They could not shut their eyes to the ugly and degrading side of wine-drinking and see only the delightful side. Dionysus was the God of the Vine; therefore he was a power which sometimes made men commit frightful and atrocious crimes. No one could defend them; no one would ever try to defend the fate Pentheus suffered. But, the Greeks said to each other, such things really do happen when people are frenzied with drink. This truth did not blind them to the other truth, that wine was "the merry-maker," lightening men's hearts, bringing careless ease and fun and gaiety.

The wine of Dionysus,
When the weary cares of men

Leave every heart.
 We travel to a land that never was.
 The poor grow rich, the rich grow great of heart.
 All-conquering are the shafts made from the Vine.

The reason that Dionysus was so different at one time from another was because of this double nature of wine and so of the god of wine. He was man's benefactor and he was man's destroyer.

On his beneficent side he was not only the god that makes men merry. His cup was

Life-giving, healing every ill.

Under his influence courage was quickened and fear banished, at any rate for the moment. He uplifted his worshipers; he made them feel that they could do what they had thought they could not. All this happy freedom and confidence passed away, of course, as they either grew sober or got drunk, but while it lasted it was like being possessed by a power greater than themselves. So people felt about Dionysus as about no other god. He was not only outside of them, he was within them, too. They could be transformed by him into being like him. The momentary sense of exultant power wine-drinking can give was only a sign to show men that they had within them more than they knew; "they could themselves become divine."

To think in this way was far removed from the old idea of worshipping the god by drinking enough to be gay or to be freed from care or to get drunk. There were followers of Dionysus who never drank wine at all. It is not known when the great change took place, lifting the god who freed men for a moment through drunkenness to the god who freed them through inspiration, but one very remarkable result of it made Dionysus for all future ages the most important of the gods of Greece.

The Eleusinian Mysteries, which were always chiefly Demeter's, had indeed great importance. For hundreds of years they helped men, as Cicero said, "to live with joy and to die with hope." But their influence did not last, very likely because nobody was allowed to teach their ideas openly or write about them. In the end only a dim memory of them was left. It was quite otherwise with Dionysus. What was done at his great festival was open to all the world and is a living influence today. No other festival in Greece could

compare with it. It took place in the spring when the vine begins to put forth its branches, and it lasted for five days. They were days of perfect peace and enjoyment. All the ordinary business of life stopped. No one could be put in prison; prisoners were even released so that they could share in the general rejoicing. But the place where people gathered to do honor to the god was not a wild wilderness made horrible by savage deeds and a bloody feast; it was not even a temple precinct with ordered sacrifices and priestly ceremonies. It was a theater; and the ceremony was the performance of a play. The greatest poetry in Greece, and among the greatest in the world, was written for Dionysus. The poets who wrote the plays, the actors and singers who took part in them, were all regarded as servants of the god. The performances were sacred; the spectators, too, along with the writers and the performers, were engaged in an act of worship. Dionysus himself was supposed to be present; his priest had the seat of honor.

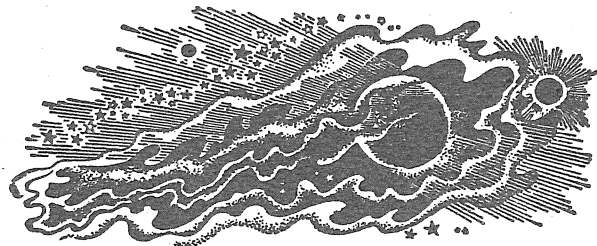
It is clear, therefore, that the idea of the god of holy inspiration who could fill men with his spirit to write gloriously and to act gloriously became far more important than the earlier ideas of him. The first tragic plays, which are among the best there are, never equaled except by Shakespeare, were produced in the theater of Dionysus. Comedies were produced there, too, but tragedies far outnumbered them, and there was a reason why.

This strange god, the gay reveler, the cruel hunter, the lofty inspirer, was also the sufferer. He, like Demeter, was afflicted, not because of grief for another, as she was, but because of his own pain. He was the vine, which is always pruned as nothing else that bears fruits; every branch cut away, only the bare stock left; through the winter a dead thing to look at, an old gnarled stump seeming incapable of ever putting forth leaves again. Like Persephone Dionysus died with the coming of the cold. Unlike her, his death was terrible: he was torn to pieces, in some stories by the Titans, in others by Hera's orders. He was always brought back to life; he died and rose again. It was his joyful resurrection they celebrated in his theater, but the idea of terrible deeds done to him and done by men under his influence was too closely associated with him ever to be forgotten. He was more than the suffering god. He was the tragic god. There was none other.

He had still another side. He was the assurance that death does not end all. His worshipers believed that his death and

resurrection showed that the soul lives on forever after the body dies. This faith was part of the mysteries of Eleusis. At first it centered in Persephone who also rose from the dead every spring. But as queen of the black underworld she kept even in the bright world above a suggestion of something strange and awful: how could she who carried always about her the reminder of death stand for the resurrection, the conquest of death? Dionysus, on the contrary, was never thought of as a power in the kingdom of the dead. There are many stories about Persephone in the lower world; only one about Dionysus—he rescued his mother from it. In his resurrection he was the embodiment of the life that is stronger than death. He and not Persephone became the center of the belief in immortality.

Around the year 80 A.D., a great Greek writer, Plutarch, received news, when he was far from home, that a little daughter of his had died—a child of most gentle nature, he says. In his letter to his wife he writes: "About that which you have heard, dear heart, that the soul once departed from the body vanishes and feels nothing, I know that you give no belief to such assertions because of those sacred and faithful promises given in the mysteries of Bacchus which we who are of that religious brotherhood know. We hold it firmly for an undoubted truth that our soul is incorruptible and immortal. We are to think (of the dead) that they pass into a better place and a happier condition. Let us behave ourselves accordingly, outwardly ordering our lives, while within all should be purer, wiser, incorruptible."



3 How the World and Mankind Were Created

With the exception of the story of Prometheus' punishment, told by Aeschylus in the fifth century, I have taken the material of this chapter chiefly from Hesiod, who lived at least three hundred years earlier. He is the principal authority for the myths about the beginning of everything. Both the crudity of the story of Cronus and the naïveté of the story of Pandora are characteristic of him.

First there was Chaos, the vast immeasurable abyss, Outrageous as a sea, dark, wasteful, wild.

These words are Milton's, but they express with precision what the Greeks thought lay back of the very first beginning of things. Long before the gods appeared, in the dim past, uncounted ages ago, there was only the formless confusion of Chaos brooded over by unbroken darkness. At last, but how no one ever tried to explain, two children were born to this shapeless nothingness. Night was the child of Chaos and so was Erebus, which is the unfathomable depth where death dwells. In the whole universe there was nothing else; all was black, empty, silent, endless.

And then a marvel of marvels came to pass. In some mysterious way, from this horror of blank boundless vacancy the best of all things came into being. A great playwright, the comic poet Aristophanes, describes its coming in words often quoted:—

... Black-winged Night
Into the bosom of Erebus dark and deep