

cinders, tendrils from putrefaction, motion from what was petrified. . . . There are green vines on the slag of ruin. Mine. As on the mountain slopes, clustering and swelling. They flush, they flood the long-parched throats of men and release their joy. This sacrament of earth is life. Dionysos.

[From the direction of the 'crucifixion slope' comes a new sound, a liturgical drone—lead and refrain—a dull, thin monotone, still at some distance. A Herdsman carrying a jar darts across the stage to the threshers. Dionysos stands still, statuesque.]

HERDSMAN: I think I hear them coming.

SLAVE LEADER [*eagerly seizes the jug and takes a swig.*]: What did you say?

HERDSMAN: The Masters of Eleusis. They've begun the revels.

[*The slaves gather round and listen. The jug is passed round.*]

LEADER [*spits.*]: Revels!

HERDSMAN: Which of us is the victim this year?

SLAVE: That old man of the king's household. The one who looks after the dogs.

HERDSMAN [*shrugs.*]: He's old enough to die.

LEADER: He had better survive!

HERDSMAN [*fearfully.*]: Sh-sh!

LEADER: I have said it before. If another of us dies under the lash . . .!

[*The jug is passed to him again. He takes a long draught, sighs.*]

There is heaven in this juice. It flows through my lips and I say, now I roll the sun upon my tongue and it neither burns nor scorches. And a scent-laden breeze fills the cavern of my mouth, pressing for release. I know that scent. I mean, I knew it once. I live to know it once again.

HERDSMAN: I think I understand you. Forget it friend.

LEADER: A scent of freedom is not easily forgotten. Have you ever slept, dreamt, and woken up with the air still perfumed with the fragrance of grapes?

HERDSMAN: There is no other smell at this time of the year. If you live in the hills that is. It gets oppressive sometimes, to tell the truth. You know, rather cloying.

LEADER: Surrounded by walls one can only dream. But one day . . . one day . . .

HERDSMAN: Not you. No one will ever trust you outside of the city walls. Dissimulation is an art you will never master. You need

the sly humility, the downcast eye. Yes Sire, King Pentheus, no Sir Honourable Eunuch of the Queen's Bedchamber . . .

LEADER: Let's speak of better things. Tell me of those hidden vineyards. They are like my buried longings: I know each precious acre of the forbidden terrain, inch by inch. And I know I envy you. The air of Thebes is sterile. Nothing breathes in it. Nothing—really—lives. Come closer . . . distend your nostrils . . . now breathe in, deeply . . . smell!

HERDSMAN: Look, if every time I bring you wine you have to . . .

LEADER: Do you smell anything? Anything at all? After the hills and the vines and the wind can you smell me? Do I live?

HERDSMAN: You promised . . .

LEADER [*He makes an effort, takes a deep breath.*]: What does it matter anyway. An open-air slave or a walled-up slave . . . we all fold our arms and thank the gods for a generous harvest.

HERDSMAN: Generous is not the word for it. The vines went mad so to speak; they were not themselves. Something seemed to have got under the soil and was feeding them nectar. The weight that hung on the vines even from the scrubbiest patch, each cluster . . . [*his hands shape them.*] pendulous breasts of the wives of Kronos, bursting all over with giant nipples.

LEADER: I felt it on my tongue. The sun has left the heavens and made a home within the grapes of Boetia.

HERDSMAN: You may say that. It was a joy to tread them.

[*The liturgical drone is now very close.*]

They are nearly here. I must go.

LEADER: Wait. [*Takes hold of him.*] Suppose the old man dies?

HERDSMAN: We all have to die sometime.

LEADER: Flogged to death? In the name of some unspeakable rites?

HERDSMAN: Someone must cleanse the new year of the rot of the old or, the world will die. Have you ever known famine? Real famine?

LEADER: Why us? Why always us?

HERDSMAN: Why not?

LEADER: Because the rites bring us nothing! Let those who profit bear the burden of the old year dying.

HERDSMAN: Careful. [*Points to the row of crosses.*] The palace does not need the yearly Feast of Eleusis to deal with rebellious slaves.

[*He takes the jug and turns to go.*]

LEADER: Look, tell them on the hills, tell your fellows up there . . .

HERDSMAN [*instantly rigid.*]: What?

LEADER [*hesitates, sighs.*]: Nothing. Tell them—we also are waiting.

[*The Herdsman goes off the same way as he entered. Led by a solemn figure who is the Master of Revels, a procession emerges and proceeds over the rise.*

*First, the Master of Revels, next black-robed priests intoning a liturgy, punctuated by hand-bells. After them comes a group of vestals in white. The first pair carry fresh branches, the middle section garlands and flowers, the last pair carry bowls. The vestals are followed by an Old Man, completely white-bearded, dressed in what might approximate to sackcloth-and-ashes, who carries a bunch of used twigs. Behind him are four stalwart figures in red, armed with strong, supple lashes. At every three or four paces the priests ring their bell, upon which the two maidens in front of the Old Man turn and sprinkle him with what might be ashes or chaff, while the four men lay into him from all sides with their whips. A straggle of crowd follows. This sedate procession passes through and around Dionysos without seeing him and proceeds downstage towards the gates of the palace. The slaves have stopped work and are watching. A small ceremony of 'cleansing' is performed on the palace gate. The priests take branches from a bundle borne by the two leading girls, symbolically scour the gates with them, then pile the used twigs on the bunch already borne by the Old Man. He is sprinkled and flogged as before.*

*At the sight of the Old Man, there is distinct surprise and agitation among the slaves.*

*Suddenly the Old Man appears to wilt, collapse. A further stroke of the lash brings him to his knees. The intoning continues without stopping, and the lashes. As he falls prone, a bright flash reveals Dionysos on the tomb of Semele. All action ceases. The music of Dionysos.]*

DIONYSOS [*smiling.*]: Sing Death of the Old Year, and—welcome the new—god.

[*A prolonged, confused silence. In the threshing-hut the slaves forcefully restrain their Leader who seems bent on giving immediate vocal acknowledgement to the god.*]

SLAVE: You'll get us killed. We'll be wiped out to a man.

ANOTHER: Remember the helots. Don't be rash.

[*Dionysos comes down among the procession. The priests retreat in terror as he turns towards the vestals.*]

DIONYSOS: And the vestals of Eleusis?

VESTALS [*hesitant and fearful.*]: We . . . welcome the new . . . god.

DIONYSOS: Oh, but joyfully, joyfully! Welcome the new god. joyfully. Sing death of the old year passing.

VESTALS [*liturgical, lifeless.*]: Welcome the new god. Joyfully. Sing death . . .

[*They stop, look at one another foolishly. One or two begin to titter and Dionysos bellows with laughter. The vestals regain some relaxation.*]

DIONYSOS: And now try again. Together, with joy.

VESTALS [*courageously.*]: We . . .

[*A vestal detaches herself from the group, her eyes riveted on the face of Dionysos. She scoops up a garland as she passes the flower-bearers and comes up to the stranger. He bows his head and she garlands him.*]

THE VESTAL: Welcome the new . . .

[*Keels over in a faint and is caught by Dionysos. Carrying her he moves towards the priests.*]

DIONYSOS: And now the priests of Eleusis?

PRIEST: We welcome . . .

ANOTHER: . . . a miracle, a miracle.

[*They hurriedly edge their way out and flee in the direction from which they made their entry. The floggers also retreat a little way, watchful.*]

LEADER [*breaking loose after the priests' retreat.*]: Welcome the new god! Thrice welcome the new order! [*hands cupped to his mouth, he yodels.*] Evohe-e-e-e! Evohe-e-e-e!

[*The sound is taken up by echoes from the hills. It roves round and round and envelops the scene. All heads turn outwards in different directions, listening. A mixture of excitement and unease as the sound continues, transformed beyond the plain echo to an eerie response from vast distances.*

*From the same responsive source, intermingled strains of the music of Dionysos. It swells inwards to the attentive listeners. The vestal in the arms of Dionysos stirs, responding. She lowers herself to the ground slowly, moves into a dance to the music. As the dance takes her close to the Slave Leader he moves away with her; the dance*

*soon embraces all the vestals and slaves.  
Dionysos, smiling, slips off as they become engrossed in the dance.  
The music stops, the enchantment is cut off. The fainting vestal  
looks round her in growing panic.]*

VESTAL: Don't leave us!

*[She runs out in pursuit, the other vestals following.]*

LEADER: Let's follow.

*[The slaves hang back. The euphoria has melted rapidly.]*

SLAVE: I think we've gone too far already.

LEADER: You hesitant fools! Don't you understand?

Don't you *know*? We are no longer alone—

Slaves, helots, the near and distant dispossessed!

This master race, this much vaunted dragon spawn

Have met their match. Nature has joined forces with us.

Let them reckon now, not with mere men, not with

The scapegoat bogey of a slave uprising

But with a new remorseless order, forces

Unpredictable as molten fire in mountain wombs.

To doubt, to hesitate is to prove undeserving.

SLAVE: There is such a fault as rashness.

LEADER: When the present is intolerable, the unknown harbours  
no risks.

ANOTHER: I don't know . . . why make ourselves conspicuous.

Let the free citizens of Thebes declare for this stranger or  
against him.

LEADER: Whose interest will direct their choice? Ours?

SLAVE: No, but . . .

*[The slaves look away from one another, uncomfortable but afraid.  
After an awkward silence, the Leader sighs in defeat.]*

LEADER: Let us go as far as the gates then. We should know at  
least how the Thebans receive him. In our own interest.

*[They follow him out, guiltily.]*

*[The Old Man is left alone with the floggers. As he begins to pick  
himself up painfully, they rush forward to help him up. He brushes  
them off angrily.]*

TIRESIAS: Take your hands off!

*[He rises, tries to dust himself and winces.]*

1ST MAN: Were you hurt?

TIRESIAS: Animals!

1ST MAN: Oh. We . . . didn't mean to.

TIRESIAS: You never do.

2ND MAN: Who was he?

1ST MAN: Yes who was he? Where did he spring from?

TIRESIAS [*snorts.*]: Who was he? Where did he spring from?

Fools! Blind, stupid, bloody brutes! Can you see how you've  
covered me in weals? Can't you bastards ever tell the difference  
between ritual and reality.

1ST MAN: I was particularly careful. I pulled my blows.

TIRESIAS: Symbolic flogging, that is what I keep trying to drum  
into your thick heads.

4TH MAN: I could have sworn I only tapped you gently from time  
to time.

3RD MAN: It's all that incantation. It soaks in your brain and you  
can't feel yourself anymore.

TIRESIAS: I suppose you would have carried on like you do year  
after year. Flogged the last breath out of my body.

3RD MAN [*among shocked protests.*]: How could you think such a  
thing? You are not a slave. I mean, we do have some  
control.

TIRESIAS: Yah, you showed it. Anyway what are you standing  
there for?

1ST MAN: Well . . . we . . . I mean, we don't quite know what  
to do.

3RD MAN: I mean, it's a bit of a departure isn't it? Never known  
anything like this happen before. Well damn it, who was he?

4TH MAN: And the vestals, gone with him.

TIRESIAS: Go after them. You've been cheated of your blood this  
time so your throats are a little parched. Go up in the mountains  
and you'll find other juices to quench your thirst.

1ST MAN [*irritated.*]: You will speak in riddles!

TIRESIAS: The feast has shifted to the mountains—is that simple  
enough?

1ST MAN [*wearily.*]: Just tell us what we are now expected to do  
when we get there?

TIRESIAS: Whatever you wish. Just take your violent presences  
away from me!

3RD MAN: Well, that's plain enough.

1ST MAN: You know who he was.

TIRESIAS [*draws himself up.*]: Since when has it been the custom for common no-brain wrestlers to cross-examine the seer of Thebes.

1ST MAN: Let's go. [*They exit.*]

TIRESIAS: Swine! [*He feels his body tenderly, then shouts.*] Wait! Which of you kept my staff?

DIONYSOS [*re-enters.*]: Borrow my thyrsus.

TIRESIAS: Thank you, Dionysos I presume?

DIONYSOS: You see too well Tiresias.

TIRESIAS: As if the gentlest emanations from the divine *maestro* would not penetrate the thickest cataract.

DIONYSOS: Yet there is one here who has no defect in his eyes but will not see.

TIRESIAS: I know. Handle him gently Dionysos, if only for his grandfather's sake.

DIONYSOS: Kadmos was pious. Consecrating this ground in memory of my mother at least kept her alive in the heart of Thebes . . . but that is Kadmos. Let every man's actions save or damn him. We shall see what Pentheus chooses to do.

TIRESIAS [*shrugs.*]: I knew that would be the answer. Anyway, thank you for stepping in just now. You were just in time.

DIONYSOS: Were you really in trouble?

TIRESIAS: I was. One can never tell how far the brutes will go. Mind you, I took the precaution of wearing your fawn-skin under my gown. You see how the sack-cloth has been flogged to ribbons. I had to collapse to remind them they were getting carried away again.

DIONYSOS: But what made the high priest of Thebes elect to play flagellant?

TIRESIAS: The city must be cleansed. Filth, pollution, cruelties, secret abominations—a whole year's accumulation.

DIONYSOS: Why you? Are you short of lunatics, criminals, or slaves?

TIRESIAS: A mere favour to Kadmos whom I love like a brother. Kadmos is Thebes. He has yielded all power to Pentheus but I know he still rejoices or weeps with Thebes. And Thebes—well, let's just say the situation is touch and go. If one more slave had been killed at the cleansing rites, or sacrificed to that insatiable altar of nation-building . . .

DIONYSOS: Quite a politician eh Tiresias?

TIRESIAS: A priest is not much use without a following, and that's soon washed away in what social currents he fails to sense or foresee. As priest and sage and prophet and I know not how else I am regarded in Thebes, I must see for the blind young man who is king and even sometimes—act for him.

DIONYSOS: And if you have been flogged to pieces at the end, like an effigy?

TIRESIAS: Then I shall pass into the universal energy of renewal . . . like some heroes or gods I could name.

DIONYSOS: Go on.

TIRESIAS: Isn't that it? Is that not why Dionysos?

DIONYSOS: Is that not what?

TIRESIAS: Why you all seem to get torn to pieces at some point or the other?

DIONYSOS: Don't change the subject. Go on about you.

TIRESIAS: I've said it all. What more do you want me to say?

DIONYSOS [*He moves close to Tiresias, tugs gently at his beard.*]: Poor Tiresias, poor neither-nor, eternally tantalized psychic intermediary, poor agent of the gods through whom everything passes but nothing touches, what happened to you in the midst of the crowd, dressed and powdered by the hands of ecstatic women, flagellated by sap-swollen birches? What sensations coursed your withered veins as the whips drew blood, as the skin of the birches broke against yours and its fragrant sap mingled with your blood. You poor starved votary at the altar of soul, what deep hunger unassuaged by a thousand lifelong surrogates drove you to this extreme self-sacrifice. Don't lie to a god Tiresias.

TIRESIAS: I never lie. I told you the truth.

DIONYSOS: Yes, but only a half-truth, like your prophesies. Tell me the rest.

TIRESIAS [*cornered. Finally.*]: Yes, there was hunger. Thirst. In this job one lives half a life, neither priest nor man. Neither man nor woman. I have longed to know what flesh is made of. What suffering is. Feel the taste of blood instead of merely foreseeing it. Taste the ecstasy of rejuvenation after long organizing its ritual. When the slaves began to rumble I saw myself again playing that futile role, pouring my warnings on

deaf ears. An uprising would come, bloodshed, and I would watch, untouched, merely vindicated as before—as prophet. I approach death and dissolution, without having felt life . . . its force. . . .

DIONYSOS: And just now?

TIRESIAS: You forget. That goes by role. Ecstasy is too elusive a quarry for such tricks. Even if I did shed a few drops of blood.

DIONYSOS [*lays his hands gently on the Old Man's shoulders.*]: Thebes shall have its full sacrifice. And Tiresias will know ecstasy.

TIRESIAS: Something did begin. Perhaps those lashes did begin something. I feel . . . a small crack in the dead crust of the soul. Listen! Can you hear women's voices? Strange, just then I almost felt my veins race.

DIONYSOS [*drawing back.*]: Dance for me Tiresias. Dance for Dionysos.

TIRESIAS: That's like asking the elephant to fly. I've never danced in all my life.

[*The music of Dionysos is heard. Tiresias stands entranced for some moments, then moves naturally into the rhythm, continues to dance, rapt.*

*Dionysos watches for a while, then slips off. Enter Kadmos, stands amazed and watches. Tiresias senses his presence after a while and stops, clutching his thyrsus defensively.*]

TIRESIAS: It's someone else. Who is it?

KADMOS: Your good friend, Kadmos of the royal house. How goes it with you Tiresias? Are you well?

TIRESIAS: You must be blind to need ask such a question.

KADMOS: Well I confess I do not believe my eyes.

TIRESIAS: Oh Kadmos Kadmos, how I wish you were still king of Thebes.

KADMOS: That's not like you to wish undone what is already done. What's biting you?

TIRESIAS: Your grandson, the foolish, blind, headstrong, suicide-bent king.

KADMOS: Not suicide-bent I hope. His faults I readily admit. But what's he done now?

TIRESIAS: Nothing yet. It's what he's going to do. I know how it

will all end. Oh Kadmos, wisdom is what we need in a king at this moment, a sense of balance and proportion.

KADMOS: You didn't seem a model of proportion when I came on you a moment ago. What did you think you were doing?

TIRESIAS: Saving Thebes again, though I fear that is too late. It is far far easier to save Thebes from the anger of disgruntled classes than from the vengeance of a spited god. Neither your piety nor my new-found ecstasy can help him now.

KADMOS: Tiresias, you know I have no head for conundrums . . .

TIRESIAS: Yes, your son takes after you there. But at least you don't go at every riddle with sledgehammer and pitchfork.

KADMOS: Is there yet another danger that threatens Thebes?

TIRESIAS: None that you or I could help. [*Sounds in the distance.*] Listen to them! Can you hear that? Can you feel the power of it Kadmos?

KADMOS [*The significance dawns on him.*]: But you are not with them. You promised me Tiresias. You promised Thebes.

TIRESIAS: What you hear is another sound, a new order. Your other grandson took my place. The wanderer has come home. He's here.

[*The Bacchantes enter to shouts of Bromius! Evohe-e! Zagreus!*] Quickly. Stand aside and be silent. They sound already possessed.

[*They hide themselves.*]

BACCHANTE: Where?

BACCHANTE: Where?

BACCHANTE: Where?

BACCHANTE: Where?

[*That cry is taken up, repeated fast from mouth to mouth, ending with a long, impassioned communal cry.*]

BACCHANTES: Bro-o-o-o-o-mius!

BACCHANTE: Bromius . . .

BACCHANTE: Bromius . . .

BACCHANTE: Bromius . . .

[*Again the name is tossed from tongue to tongue, beginning as a deep audible breath and accompanied by spasmodic, scented movements. It swells in volume and breaks suddenly into another passionate scream by the leader of the Bacchantes.*]

1ST BACCHANTE: Bro-o-o-o-mius! Be Manifest!  
 Be manifest Bromius, your Bacchantes have taken the field.  
 You've led us. Lead us now.

ANOTHER: We've journeyed together. Through Lydia and Phrygia...

ANOTHER: Over rivers of gold, Bactrian fastness...

ANOTHER: Through slopes of the clustering vine.

ANOTHER: Companion of forest and towered cities,  
 Of the steppes of Persia and wastes of Media.

ANOTHER: Through the dance of the sun on Ethiopia's rivers,  
 Lakes, seas, emerald oases.

ANOTHER: Rooting deep, ripeness and mysteries  
 Rooting as vine in the most barren of soils.

1ST BACCHANTE: The silvering firs have trembled, we have seen  
 rockhills  
 Shudder, earth awaken, ramparts of heaven cave  
 Beasts answer from their lairs, sap rise in the trees  
 And the sevenfold bars on the gates of Thebes  
 Splinter—at the Maenads' cry of BROMIUS!

BACCHANTES: Evohe-e-e-e-e!  
 [Re-enter the slaves.]

LEADER [in a ringing voice.]: Bacchantes, fellow strangers, to this  
 land!  
 [A gradual hush. They turn towards the sound.]

LEADER: Fellow aliens, let me ask you—do you know Bromius?  
 [The women turn to one another, still in a haze of possession, but  
 astonished at such a ridiculous question. One or two continue to moan,  
 completely oblivious to the interruption.]

1ST BACCHANTE: Do we know Bromius?

LEADER: Bromius. Zagreus. Offspring of Zeus as the legend goes.

1ST BACCHANTE [over a general peal of laughter.]: Stranger, do you  
 know Bromius?

LEADER: A god goes by many names. I have long been a spokesman  
 for the god.

1ST BACCHANTE: And yet you ask, do we know Bromius. Who  
 led us down from the mountains of Asia, down holy Tmolus,  
 through the rugged bandit-infested hills of the Afgans, the  
 drugged Arabian sands, whose call have we followed through  
 the great delta? Who opened our eyes to the freedom of sands,  
 to the liberation of waters? Do we know Bromius?

LEADER: Do you love his worship?

1ST BACCHANTE: Hard are the labours of a god  
 Hard, but his service is sweet fulfilment.

LEADER [coming forward.]: Then make way. [They part and he comes  
 among them.]

WEeping BACCHANTE [the Fainting Vestal]: What is it? What  
 does the slave want with us? I want my god, the son of Zeus.

ANOTHER: Where shall we seek him? Where find him?

LEADER: Fall back a little. Seal up the streets and let no one intrude.  
 There is a hymn all believers know.  
 [Pause. The Bacchante sizes him up, decides for him.]

1ST BACCHANTE: Let every mouth be silent. Let no ill-omened  
 words profane your tongues.

LEADER: It is the hour we have long awaited.  
 What is hidden must some day come to light  
 Now, raise with me the old old hymn to godhead.  
 [The Chorus intone beneath the prayer.]

1ST BACCHANTE: Blessed are they who know the mysteries of god  
 Blessed all who hallow their life in worship of god  
 Whom the spirit of god possesses, who are one  
 With earth, leaves and vine in the holy body of god.  
 Blessed are the dancers whose hearts are purified  
 Who tread on the hill in the holy dance of god.  
 Blessed are they who keep the rites of the Earth-Mother  
 Who bear the thyrsus, who wield the holy wand of god  
 Blessed are all who wear the ivy crown of god  
 Blessed, blessed are they: Dionysos is their god.

CHORUS: Blessed, blessed, thrice blessed are we:  
 Dionysos is our god.  
 [The first chords of music, oriental strings and timbrels.]

WEeping BACCHANTE: Bromius, Bromius...

LEADER: Blessed are they who bathe in the seminal river  
 Who merge in harmony with earth's eternal seeding  
 Blessed they whose hands are cupped to heaven  
 Their arms shall be funnel for the rain of understanding  
 Blessed are all whose feet have trodden the dance of grapes  
 Whose hands have nursed the vine, earth's gentlest binding  
 Blessed their joys in the common sacrament, whose beings  
 Open to intuitions in the liberation of the grape