

The Tragedy of the Patriarchy

In a very brilliant book called *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche describes the fertility festivals of the Pelasgian peoples who surrounded the Greeks and survived among them as a peasant underclass, occasionally erupting in a terrifying manner.

Almost universally the centre of these festivals was an extravagant lack of sexual discipline, whose waves engulfed all the venerable rules of family life. The most savage beasts of nature were here unleashed, , even that repellent mixture of lust and cruelty which I have always held to be a witch's brew (....)

The problem here is, how did Nietzsche know all this, because he certainly wasn't there? It is a problem of the same order as 'how did anybody ever believe the second myth of Genesis? How could how could a cry of loyalty so unconditional as 'I believe because it is impossible' ever happen? One reason is the fear of the human ego for the power of its own instinct—especially in the unformed state of its early stages, when any defence against it would be better than none. A repugnance such as Nietzsche's suggests the nightmares of childhood, when the ego is nightly threatened by its own instinctual energies, the more so, in my opinion, in especially gifted children. In time, some of it will be integrated, enough for the ego to expand, The balance between them will change and the nightmares fade away. The nightmare is a good diagnostic if the psychologist can recognise it. . It points to where there is work needing to be done.

Nietzsche's tone is the same as that of the Old Testament prophets who thundered against their own people for fornicating, as they said, with strange gods; and they were the same gods. Both Jews and Greeks were trying to establish a patriarchy amid an ocean of agrarian, goddess-worshipping peoples, and their problem was the same: that their people were continually drawn away from the commandments of a warrior god to the infinitely more attractive rites of the neighbours. The institution of sacred prostitution was still alive in various forms among those neighbours. Sexuality certainly had place in these festivals, sometimes prominent enough, and it was that itself which the prophets inveighed against. Sexuality is the way that the Goddess creates Being—and Being is what is important in these cultures. I is the is-ness of God. But while the prophets invoked the wrath of Yahweh to bring their people back, for Nietzsche (as generally for nineteenth century culture) it was the enlightenment. Apollo, the sun-god with his logic and his science, would pull into the light all ;the occult power of instinct and destroy it. Freud thought his 'sexual theory' would do that job. 'We must make a bastion of it, an impregnable bastion', he perpetually says to us. said. And when Jung perpetually asks 'A bastion? Against what?' he still replies the 'black tide of mud—of occultism'. It was the same phobia, the same fear of the unknown, the 'uncanny', and the seemingly bottomless nature of its power. The leading images of the patriarchy were therefore always of slaying. Apollo slew the great serpent of Delphi: he who from ancient times had curled round the umbilicus of the world, with close by the birth-passage up from the depths, where the priestess sat on her tripod and gave voice to its always paradoxical oracles. Apollo had not been intimidated. . He had simply shot the snake full of arrows and taken over the sanctuary for himself. The tragedy now was that when he fell in love with Daphne and so many other nymphs of Nature, (for always the attraction to the opposite will express itself) they simply fled from him. Delphi kept much of its ancient character, including the Oracle, but it was now in the service of the male. But never did Apollo find love.

The Delphic snake was only one of many myths of dragon-slaying that marked the conquest of the agrarian Goddess culture of the Mediterranean, sometimes by nomads from the Desert but generally by Bronze Age Aryans who came down from the North. Apollo stood for the new world which man would create in place of Nature: and it would be man who would create it, not woman. That was itself a rupturing of the Syzygy: the creator would be simply the male. For Nietzsche, the birth of tragedy was man's realisation that it was hopeless, for like it or not he was irremediably involved in the mystery and emotionality of Nature, and his whole panoply of idealist philosophy and religion was no only a failed attempt to hide from that. Nietzsche was not alone in this, it was the underlying thesis of the culture. What was for him the 'witch's brew' was for Western religion Original Sin. Nature had become, by some supposed 'Fall', disobedient, indifferent to the commands of God and that logic which Aquinas explained, was God's nature. Yet the whole culture was marked by a complete ignorance of how this disobedient Nature actually worked. Science had confined itself to the inorganic, because it was predictable. When it came to live Nature we knew nothing, and negative projections themselves filled the void.

The trouble was not that Nature had no logic: it was a different logic. Actually it was the Logos of Heraclitus, present in the very roots of the culture, but lost in the swelling chorus of Platonic logic, infinitely more in keeping with the homo-erotic nature of Greek culture. The Logos of Heraclitus was the way the live world 'hangs together', always in the attraction of its opposites. The life-studies which came in the twentieth century (psychology, ecology, ethology and the rest) inevitably brought it to the fore again, but we have not yet called it the Logos (to distinguish it from Logic) but we should. The life-studies are an orientation in the objective world totally lacking before. Konrad Lorenz's study 'On Aggression' came only in the 1950s, after the vast self-destruction of the early twentieth century. Among many surprising things it brought news that when wolves fight, the weaker exposes his throat to the stronger, who is utterly inhibited by instinct from hurting him. Thus priority is established and the pack does not lose a wolf. It is an eminently rational solution, and it does not come from man. That in itself was a revolutionary discovery. The venerable rule homo homini lupus, man is a wolf to man, was exposed as a . fantasy. Jung's researches into the unconscious had been in many ways forerunners of Lorenz's: the collective unconscious is after all what man shares with the beasts. In both, it became clear that the instinctual structures both of Nature and the human psyche are not seeking to destroy each other but find their right relationship: that is, they are basically erotic. It became possible to think that the problem of human aggression was not a too-great a proximity to the world of instinct but the very opposite. The great institutions of the culture, religion, government and science, continued, of course, on their way. Founded on the opposite thesis, the eternal war with Nature, Jung was felt by them as a traitor, undermining the very foundations of the civilisation—and Lorenz probably was too. .

The dragon-slaying heroes stretched back as far as Gilgamesh (see chapter...) the mythic conqueror of the Sumerian Goddess, killer of the monster Humbaba who guarded the sacred Cedar Forest and had to be killed before that great treasury of Nature could be broken open. As the epic admits, Humbaba had offered to share it all with Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu, who had conquered him. but that was not enough: they had to kill him. All Western heroes killed monsters, and it was always Nature itself which was the enemy. The celibate saint would later be the greatest of them, for he would conquer even the desire for the opposite which is Nature. Ultimately Gilgamesh slew the Great Bull of Heaven which the Goddess sent against him. He and Enkidu simply pulled the giant beast apart and cast the pieces in her face. Or so the myth said.

But they couldn't kill death, the ultimate syzygy. In the culture of the Goddess, death had been no tragedy. It was the final return into the sacred, but only to come again. There was always a symbol of resurrection within it, yet Gilgamesh wanted none of it. His main taunt against the Goddess when she courted him was that one day she would betray him into death, as she did all her other lovers. He was referring to the great myth of the Goddess and her Son-Lover, always born, always the lover and always dying. It was the most profound myth of consciousness in any culture, and the basis of all Western religion, whatever its distortion by the great image of the One. But for Gilgamesh it was the foe. Later, the male god Marduk would slay Tiamat, the monster of the sea who was the primal mother herself. Marduk, himself, being a god, could not save man from death but he could adjust things among the immortals. Henceforth the goddesses would take minor roles; and creation (the fact that anything at all exists) would cease to carry the high value it does in a mother-culture. It became, if anything, rather contemptible: power was now in the place of honour. A host of male heroes followed, all of whom killed snakes or dragons: Perseus, St George, Beowulf with his monster of the marshes. The greatest hero of all would be Christ, who would be virgin and conquer even death.

The killing of instinct within the human body itself went furthest among the Greeks. Nietzsche continues, in the same passage:

Against the febrile excitement of these festivals, knowledge of which forced its way to the Greeks along every route of land and sea, the figure of Apollo rose up in all its pride and held up the Gorgon's head to the grotesque, barbarian Dionysiac, the most dangerous force it had to contend with.

(Nietzsche, 1991 p19)

The great bastion (for we are reminded of Freud's image of the bastion) was the snake-wreathed head of the Gorgon which Perseus had cut from Medusa, the most terrible denizen of the underworld, so terrible (or so it was said) that any man or woman who looked on her would be turned to stone. At the command of a king, who as often in fairy tales hoped that this inconvenient youth would not come back ('The Devil's Three Golden Hairs, appendix 1 for an interesting parallel) Perseus went down to find her. Using his shield as a mirror, he cut the head from the body and brought it back to the upper world where it ended up on the shield of Athene, the good, virginal female creature, the supreme model of a patriarchalised feminine. In this way the terror of the unknown deeps could be turned against itself. This was for Nietzsche the greatest achievement of Greek culture.

And yet it was the essence of its tragedy, for by gap between a man and his own roots in Nature was, in theory at least, complete. From it rose the most homo-erotic of any culture ever created by man. At its high point, women were for having children and ordering the household, and had often been captured in war for just that purpose. They were not for love. Love was between men. Since the meaning of the culture was not Being, now, but war, it was the martial qualities in each other that they loved. The army of Thebes was wholly composed of pairs of lovers, it was said, who lived and fought and died together.

People have puzzled over Greek sexuality but offered no explanations, partly because of the sculptured images of the feminine that came from the same period. The classical tradition of the female nude started there, in some mysterious kinship with the Gorgon myth.

The mystery seems insoluble until we realise that it was all image and no empirical reality. These were not real bodies. Above all, they did not carry the sign of the pubic triangle which in Neolithic art had been the universal symbol of the Feminine—and was that which the

patriarchy now needed to destroy. All this was contained in the ban on pubic hair in all images of the body.

(See: Line-drawings of triangles from Gimbutas, 'Civilization of the Goddess.'

The new sculpture glorified a post-Medusa feminine, an Athene-feminine. In an astonishingly resilient way the tradition passed into the celibate culture of the Church, where a pope might have many such images around him but be undisturbed, since that great sign was not there. It came through into our own time, enshrined in all the laws of censorship and fading only in the 1960s. The symbol for all this in Greek culture was Apollo, the killer of the serpent. In the Church that would be credited to the Virgin Mary who in so many statues has the snake trampled beneath her feet. Pentheus in *The Bacchae* of Euripides worshipped Apollo but not Dionysus. The unity of those two would be a syzygy which is easy for Dionysus, who deals continually with opposites, but for Apollo's logic it is impossible, as Euripides understood. In *The Bacchae*, his last testament, the tragedy of Greek culture itself turns on that failure. We may be sure that there is pubic hair on the maenads who pulled King Pentheus to pieces: plenty also in the fertility festivals that Nietzsche feared—and with good reason since the psychosis symbolised by the dismembering of Pentheus awaited the formidably gifted Nietzsche too, and it was only a few decades before the whole prudish, racist and snobbish culture pulled itself to pieces in the great war.

There were compensatory myths to that of the Gorgon in which she had not always been ugly. They came probably from the folktale tradition of the countryside which put the myths of the ruling class under constant critique and were never successfully wiped out. According to these, Medusa was not always ugly, and the ugliness was not caused by Nature but by the culture itself. ellini thought likewise, for in statue of Perseus in the Loggia at Florence it is no monster who sinks down beneath the triumphant sword, but just a girl. She and her two sisters had been as lovely as the Three Graces: unlucky only in attracting the attention of Poseidon, one of that great triad of father-gods which ruled the classical world, who took Medusa and raped her in the temple of Athene. Poseidon himself suffered no obloquy for this act. The culprit, thought Athene, was obviously Medusa, specifically her beauty; so Athene cursed that. Inevitably, she cursed her own beauty as well. In the Homeric hymn to Aphrodite, she is one of only three gods unmoved by the power of Love, which otherwise held all gods and men in thrall. There may be something more than ugly under that armoured breastplate, as well as turned outwards on her shield. It is a burden that Western women have carried themselves. All could imagine the Gorgon's head in their own hearts and fear to look on it; while their religion would constantly remind them of their treacherous closeness to Nature, making it necessary to obey the man. So the lineaments of the 'venerable rules of family life', as Nietzsche calls them, took shape: a safe a container for demonic energies (or at least as safe as could be devised.) Meanwhile, a visit to the red light area in any of the patriarchal cities would show what the culture does with the Sacred Syzygy, the lovely acts of generation.

There was something in Ariadne that Theseus could not face, that he should leave her on the beach at Naxos and sail home without her. Yet she alone had enabled him to kill the Minotaur. There was something in Medea which Jason could not face, that he should abandon her and wed the daughter of a local king: though Medea alone had enabled him to bring back the Golden Fleece.

Medea killed their children in revenge—and went on through the story of Theseus as a principle of death and mischief, a witch, Ever since the first hero-myth where Gilgamesh rejects the Goddess, the hero has been of all men the least able to face the feminine. Brave in the outer world, he has been impotent in the inner one, the ‘uncanny’, mysterious, unpredictable and fearsome. Violence against women has dogged our world and still does, so that even Poseidon’s rape of Medusa may seem like a dragon-slaying, drawing all pathetic rapes of women by weak men behind it. The tragedy of the patriarchy is above all the psychic weakness of its men. In the light of the dimensions opened up by Jung, it was as much their own inner feminine that they betrayed as the outer, if indeed they can be distinguished; and without it, how can they be other than weak? Most men know the power of the dark triangle but what happens to a culture where it has no sacred symbol, no place on the altars? Even the wonder that things exist fades into that which is taken for granted—and thus unconscious.

Jung spoke of the mystical vision of Nicholas of Flue as something which was just too big for the mind. It was of God as Great Father and Great Mother together. It was heretical and had been for a thousand years since a Council made it so. But it had burst through, in the manner of an archetype, simply because, whether anyone liked it or not, it was and always will be part of the structure of being. In the first creation myth of Genesis, the whole story as it unfolds is Syzygy—two by two, each of them containing its share in the creative energy which made the world. When at last man arrives, he is male and female too: the conscious Syzygy, for he can make a myth, tell a story, reflect upon his own nature, realize his death.

The relation between men and women and their deaths is the most fundamental syzygy of all. Its rupturing has been at the epicentre of the tragedy. When Enkidu comes to die he gives voice to the first wholly negative image of the after-life that is to be found in any literature.

‘Those who dwell there squat in darkness,

dirt is their food and their drink is clay,

they are dressed in fathered garments like birds
they never see the light and on door and bolt
the dust lies .’ (Mitchell version)

It is not only a negative image of an after-life, it is a negative image of the womb, the triangle, the giver of life. Can we find anywhere some purpose or meaning, some evolutionary sense in the rupture? .

In the 1925 seminar, called ‘Analytic Psychology’, Jung explains to some early followers how his belief that the psyche splits into negative and positive streams of its own accord. was utterly objectionable to Freud.

Freud could see nothing in the book (Symbols of Transformation) but resistance to the father, and the point in it to which he took the greatest exception was my contention that the libido is split and produces the thing that checks itself.

Freud had to object, he could do no other, for it was grossly mythical thinking, thinking in image: and Freud had nailed his standard (tragically we may think, for so great a mind) to the ideals and methodology of Science. The image of the libido splitting and itself producing the thing that checks itself, is the statement of a myth, the deepest religious myth in our culture,

the Goddess and her Son-Lover. It is also what is repeated in the beginning of life itself, as when the first amoeba splits into two and yet remains a One; making that first foray out of the inorganic into the outrageous adventure which is life. Like the observations of Konrad Lorenz on aggression in the wolf, the image changes the way we interpret everything. Erstwhile hostile opposites shift into a complementarity. If all our dragons could be seen as worthy and necessary antagonists (as baby foxes see each other in their tussles and their play), the next step in the consciousness of man would have been achieved. This was the point at which Jung himself arrived in 'Symbols of Transformation'.

One has to ask oneself whether the apparent enmity of the maternal archetype is not a ruse on the part of Mater Natura for spurring on her favoured child to his highest achievement. The vengeful Hera would then appear as stern Mistress Soul, who imposes the most difficult labours on her hero and threatens him with destruction unless he plucks up courage for the supreme deed and actually becomes what he always potentially was. . (CW5 459).