Dionysus and Liquidity

Classical mythology, like classical psychiatry, presents a dichotomy between Apollo and Dionysus, between the cerebral, intellectual and mechanistic and the instinctual, emotional and spontaneous. This conflict between Apollo and Dionysus is still with us today. James Hillman has suggested that modern Western culture is prejudiced towards ‘the masculine over the feminine, the principles of light, order and distance over emotional involvement, or what has, in short, been called the Apollonic over the Dionysian’. He goes on to argue that ‘the fields of psychiatry and mythology ... have been for the most part in collusion against the Dionysian, resulting in a repression, and thus a distortion, of all Dionysian phenomena so that they have come to be regarded as inferior, hysterical, effeminate, unbridled and dangerous’.¹

It is precisely those ‘inferior, hysterical, effeminate, unbridled and dangerous’ aspects that I want to explore in this essay.

What strikes me as important about the passage I have just quoted is that Hillman emphasizes that the Dionysian is distorted because it has been repressed. Dionysus is the god most closely related to song, inebriation, wetness, delirium, swelling and decomposition, the instinctive and the driven. Alfred Ziegler comments that ‘Dionysus [is] closely related to wetness and fluids. [He is] the god of the instinctive and the driven ... who tend(s) towards motility, delirium, swelling, and decomposition.’² Everywhere that there is an anti-Dionysian stance there is deeply engrained repression of emotion. In

² Alfred Ziegler, Archetypal Medicine, Dallas, 1983, 161.
fact, repression of Dionysus spells trouble, which is why the classical myths attribute such terrible ends to those who deny the god: typically this meant being ripped into shreds, being torn apart, either by wild beasts or by the maenads, Dionysus’ frenzied women followers. We can identify this ripping apart, or tearing into pieces, as a metaphor for the emotional shredding that an individual suffers if he or she denies the presence of Dionysus in their lives.\(^3\) In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, King Pentheus suffers a literal dismemberment at the hands of the maenads:

> But Agave was foaming at the mouth, eyes rolling in their sockets, her mind not set on what she ought to think – she didn’t listen – she was possessed, in a Bacchic frenzy. She seized his left arm, below the elbow, pushed her foot against the poor man’s ribs, then tore his shoulder out. The strength she had – it was not her own. The god put power into those hands of hers. Meanwhile Ino, her sister, went at the other side, ripping off chunks of Pentheus’ flesh, while Autonoe and all the Bacchae, the whole crowd of them, attacked as well, all of them howling out together. As long as Pentheus was still alive, he kept on screaming. The women cried in triumph – one brandished an arm, another held a foot – complete with hunting boot – the women’s nails tore his ribs apart. Their hands grew bloody, tossing bits of his flesh back and forth, for fun. His body parts lie scattered everywhere – some under rough rocks, some in the forest, deep in the trees. They’re difficult to find.

\(^3\) It is also the fate of those who abuse Dionysus by daring to think that they can emulate the God. The world of music and show business is riddled with such casualties; men and women (although especially men) who think that rather than be adherents of the god, they are the god. The film *The Doors* (1991) portrays the band’s singer Jim Morrison as a kind of incarnation of the god Dionysus, an identification with which the singer is alcoholically and erotically attuned. At one point in the film, one of the band’s members salutes Morrison’s *hubris* with the words: ‘at least I will be able to tell my children that I made music with Dionysus.’