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The Power of Patriarchy: Everett's Work on the Dionysus Myth in *Frenzy*

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This interpretation of Percival Everett's novel *Frenzy* focuses on the author's rewriting of the myth of Dionysus and other Greek myths referenced in the text, as it is through the revisions of classical versions of the myths that Everett expresses his social criticism. In order to understand the character of the main protagonist Dionysos, the article also discusses Everett's appropriation of *The Bacchae* by Euripides, in particular of the English translation by C.K. Williams as well as the author's drawing on the Nietzschean concepts of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Finally, the analysis of major literary devices (narrative structure, first-person narrator, leitmotif of seeing, elements of humor) reveals various strategies Everett uses to incline readers to grapple with the severe critique of patriarchy and capitalism he offers.

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While the notorious diversity of Percival Everett's extensive and ever-growing oeuvre presents an increasing challenge to the literary critic, the author's largely parodistic take on literary genres, themes, and motifs provides for a constant stylistic feature: the employment of a broad range of devices of humor. In fact, it is obvious that Everett takes great "pleasure in playing with form, with intertexts, with hiding and masks."¹ In view of this penchant for both playfulness and changeability, it does not come as a surprise that in his novel *Frenzy* (1997) Everett draws on a figure of Greek myth recognized as "the god of the mask": Dionysus.² Moreover, the god of many names is also known for ambiguity, polarity, transgressing boundaries, in short, for his strangeness and unpredictability.³ He makes his appearance in "contradictory and paradoxical guises, at once masculine and effeminate, bearded and youthful, sober and intoxicated, tragic and comic, ephemeral and timeless, an embodiment of life as well as death."⁴ A writer of fiction like Everett, who loves to challenge stereotypical concepts, is likely to share this propensity for the unpredictable. However, Everett's playfulness must not be mistaken for superficiality. As he disclosed in an interview on the recently published novel *The Trees* (2022), he uses techniques of humor to seduce readers into dealing with problems they prefer to ignore:

It would be very easy to write a dark, dense novel about lynching that no one will read; there has to be an element of seduction. Humour is a fantastic tool because you can use it to get people to relax and then do anything you want to them. The absurdity of the inattention to the subject was the driving force of the comedy, but the novel lives as much in turning around stereotypes as it does in revealing the truth of lynching.⁵

What, then, is the "truth" of Dionysiac frenzy Everett tries to reveal in his humorous retelling of a myth that also abounds in brutal violence? In appropriating the ancient Dionysus myth, Everett deals with "undoubtedly the most complex and multifaceted

¹ Claude Julien, "Introduction," in *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*, eds. Claude Julien and Anne-Laure Tussit, Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2007, 9–20; due to lack of access to the printed book, I quote from the open access version: <https://books.openedition.org/pufr/5452>, paragraph 4.

² Albert Heinrichs, "He Has a God in Him": Human and Divine in the Modern Perception of Dionysus," *Masks of Dionysus*, eds. Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997, 13–43; 37.

³ "What makes Dionysus the Other par excellence is his tendency to change into whatever one least knows, least expects, or least sees the necessity of fearing." *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ Heinrichs, "He Has a God in Him", 41.

⁵ Anthony Cummins, "Percival Everett: 'I'd love to write a novel everyone hated.'" Interview. *The Guardian*, March 12, 2022; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/mar/12/percival-everett-id-love-to-write-a-novel-everyone-hated>.

of all the Greek gods,”⁶ but his likewise complex intertextual take on the myth neither stands in the tradition of the symbolism of Modernist mythmaking, nor does it serve the playful arbitrariness of postmodernist eclecticism. Instead, in analogy to his revision of the Medea myth in *For Her Dark Skin* (1990),⁷ Everett pursues a political agenda by highlighting the brutality and cruelty of power relations in patriarchal and capitalist societies.⁸

But what is the appeal of drawing on myth in dealing with contemporary societal grievances? As Hans Blumenberg pointed out in his seminal *Work on Myth*, myths “are stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation. [...] Their constancy produces the attraction of recognizing them in artistic or ritual representation [...] and their variability produces the attraction of trying out new and personal means of presenting them.”⁹ Myth can seduce readers to engage in a story that seems to present a fictional reality too far removed from their own reality to concern them. But such distance is deceptive, since, according to Blumenberg, myths, to the surprise especially of Enlightenment intellectuals,¹⁰ tend to retain their significance. Moreover, authors will always try “to bring myth to an end, to venture the most extreme deformation, which only just allows or almost no longer allows the original figure to be recognized.”¹¹ The paradoxical consequence of such “violence of reversal”¹² is that it enhances the possibility of laying bare the relevance of the myth in our time. In the following, I will first focus on the author’s deviations from former versions of the myth, concentrating on Euripides and Nietzsche, as they reveal Everett’s intertextual strategies in using

⁶ Christopher A. Faraone, “Introduction,” *Masks of Dionysus*, 1–10; 1.

⁷ In this satire, Everett’s revision goes so far as to turn Medea into a genuine heroine whose infanticide becomes a last resort in her fierce battle against racism and patriarchy; see my interpretation “Greek Passion Revisited: Appropriations of Medea in African American Fiction”, *The Public Mind and the Politics of Postmillennial U.S.-American Writing*, eds. Jolene Mathieson, Marius Henderson, and Julia Lange, Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2022, 85–107.

⁸ Everett’s adoptions of Greek myth have not attracted much attention among Everett scholars or among scholars of Afro-classicism; he is not even mentioned in the chapter on satire in the seminal study by William W. Cook and James Tatum, *African American Writers and Classical Tradition*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010. When in the 1990s he wrote the two novels, Everett still experienced a reluctance of publishers and booksellers towards a Black writer’s interest in classical texts. Thus in 1997, he complained to his editor at Graywolf: “Sadly, it seems that the publication of black writers is confined to that material which deals with what the culture wants to understand as ‘being black.’” Quoted from Graywolf Press Records by Dan Sinykin and Edwin Roland, “Against Conglomeration”, *Journal of Cultural Analytics* 6.2 (April 2021), 72–107; 93 and 105 n 73.

⁹ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*. Trans. Robert M. Wallace. Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 1990, 34.

¹⁰ “Nothing surprised the promoters of the Enlightenment more [...] than the survival of the contemptible old stories—the continuation of the work on myth.” Blumenberg, *ibid.*, 274.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹² *Ibid.*, 274.

myth for the purpose of social criticism.¹³ Secondly, I will discuss the use of humor as Everett's major strategy of bringing his readers to face the critique that comes in the tragic-comic mask of myth.

Master-servant relationship in *Frenzy*

The setting in *Frenzy* is Greece in prehistoric times. As in the most famous literary adoption of the myth, *The Bacchae* by Euripides (406 BC),¹⁴ the plot centers on Dionysus's appearance in Thebes. The god entices the women of the city to leave their homes and follow him into the wilderness, whereupon a conflict develops between him and those who refuse to recognize him as a god, in particular king Pentheus and his grandfather Kadmos, the founder of the city. Everett interweaves this main story line with retellings of other classical myths associated with Dionysus. Blumenberg states that "[i]n myth there is no chronology, there are only sequences,"¹⁵ and, analogously, *Frenzy* has an episodic, non-linear structure. Yet all the narrative fragments are interlinked by the novel's most important narrative device, the first-person narrator Vlepo, the companion and servant of Dionysos.¹⁶ Vlepo's name, which means "I see" in Greek (βλέπω), defines his function. He serves as a kind of extended sensory organ, whose task is to report to the god what he sees and feels observing others. Vlepo's name also introduces the leitmotif of the novel. There are innumerable references to the whole semantic field of vision¹⁷ that point to the epistemological question the novel addresses, namely how we may obtain truth.

Vlepo is completely subjected to the capriciousness of his master, who constantly transposes him into various creatures or objects, where he is supposed to give detailed accounts on what he witnesses. The narrative gains further surreal dimensions with

¹³ My interpretation necessarily neglects important aspects of this multifaceted work. For a comprehensive, multidimensional interpretation that investigates the 'blackness' of the text, see Michael Feith, "Black Bacchus?: Signifying on Classical Myth in Percival Everett's *Frenzy*." *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*. Claude Julien and Anne-Laure Tissot, eds. Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2007, 91–118. The conclusive reading of Anne-Laure Tissot covers relevant philosophical issues, e.g. problems of identity and concepts of time as well as strategies of reading: "Frenzy: Practical Philosophy and Fictive Jokes." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 43.2 (Summer 2013), 286–300.

¹⁴ For an interpretation that refers to further adoptions of *The Bacchae* and positions *Frenzy* in a cultural continuum of Western, African, and African American literary history, see Ronald Dorris, "Frenzy: Framing Text to Set Discourse in a Cultural Continuum." *Perspectives on Percival Everett*, eds. Keith B. Mitchell and Robin G. Vander. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013, 35–59.

¹⁵ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 126.

¹⁶ Everett uses the Greek spelling. When referring to the god in general, I use the common English spelling, Dionysus; in quotations I follow the spelling applied in the respective texts.

¹⁷ In the first twenty pages alone the following words occur, some of them multiple times: to see, to watch, to gaze, to view, to regard, to look; sightless, blind, blinding; blindness, sight, foresight, view, gaze, glare, vision, eyes, observer, witness, voyeur, seer.

Vlepo's special capability of gaining access to other individuals' thoughts by looking through an opening directly into their head. Vlepo is utterly dependent on the god, who thoroughly controls his actions and without whom he would not even exist. Yet, in turn, Dionysos also totally depends on Vlepo's services: "Vlepo, Vlepo, what would I do without you, my eyes? Why, without my eyes I would not exist" (71). Moreover, when Vlepo remonstrates that the god seems to "know already what is there," Dionysos explains: "Yes. But you don't understand. I'm not listening to what you describe to me so much as I am attending to what it is you feel about these reports. It is your feelings I need, Vlepo"—whereupon Vlepo calls his master "a parasite" (88), an appellation with which the god agrees. While Dionysos often adopts a tone of camaraderie towards his "friend" (10), his attitude towards Vlepo is nevertheless paternalistic, for example when he addresses him as "my mortal bug" (69). As Vlepo confesses, "I hate my Bakkhos, love my Bakkhos" (3). This strong ambivalence of feelings is typical of the paternalistic relationship between master and slave as it is paradigmatically expressed in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where in a daydream the narrator meets an old slave woman who just having poisoned her master confesses that she "dearly loved" her master and "hated him too."¹⁸ Obviously, Everett playfully draws on the genre of (neo-) slave narratives as well as on the genre conventions of the picaresque novel, whose protagonist of lower social rank survives multiple involuntary adventures by displaying a mixture of naivete and shrewdness.¹⁹

Everett's appropriation of *The Bacchae*

Everett's rewriting of Dionysus's confrontation with the rulers of Thebes is greatly inspired by Euripides. But while he adopts major features of Euripides's tragedy, Everett's take on the myth is equally formed by significant deviations from the ancient source. In *The Bacchae*, Dionysus, resenting the rumor originally spread in Thebes by the sisters of his mother Semele "that Dionysus was *not* the son of Zeus," cruelly

¹⁸ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Random House, 1980, 10. For an explicit reference to Ellison, see Everett's satire on the literary market, *Erasure*, which according to Sinykin and Roland is "a direct outgrowth from how booksellers treated *Frenzy*" ("Against Conglomeration", 92). In *Erasure*, the fiction writer Thelonious Ellison remembers that a "book agent told me that I could sell many books if I'd forget about writing retellings of Euripides [...] and settle down to write the true, gritty real stories of black life." Everett, *Erasure*, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2011, 4; cf. Sinykin and Roland, "Against Conglomeration," 92.

¹⁹ Cf. Johannes Kohrs, who points out that "most of Everett's satires [...] are based on the generic contrafactum of the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque novel: a paradoxical protagonist, i.e., an inherently problematic figure of identification, and a (pseudo-)picaresque plot, i.e. an episodic, non-linear, simplified adventure story." "You People Almost Had Me Hating You Because of the Color of Your Skin': Symbolic Violence and Black In-Group Racism in Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*." *Power Relations in Black Lives: Reading African American Literature and Culture with Bourdieu and Elias*, ed. Christa Buschendorf. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2018, 123–143; 128 n. 6.

takes revenge on them and, in extension, on all women of the city by having “stung them/with madness.”²⁰ He finally brings utter ruin to the mortal branch of his family, when Agave, Pentheus’s mother, in a state of Dionysian trance, mistakes her son for a wild beast and tears him apart like a sacrificial animal. But notwithstanding his vindictiveness, Dionysus is also known for his precious gifts to humankind. In *The Bacchae*, Tiresias, the blind seer, sings his praise: Dionysus “invented/and introduced to mortals the liquid of the grape,/which gives weak humans surcease from pain, [...]and gives us sleep, to forget the evils of our days./There is no other remedy for our affliction.”²¹ The classicist Walter F. Otto conceptualizes the core of the god’s inherent polarity as follows: “His duality has manifested itself to us in the antitheses of ecstasy and horror, infinite vitality and savage destruction [...]. At the height of ecstasy all of these paradoxes suddenly unmask themselves and reveal their names to be Life and Death.”²²

The god’s notorious cruelty derives from his lack of empathy, which in ancient Greek philosophy was explained by a cosmological model according to which only mortals, who hold the middle ground between gods and animals, are social beings. As a consequence, neither god nor beast “fully comprehends or responds to human need and suffering: the one because it lacks all understanding, the other because it is beyond suffering and has never had the experience of a limited life.”²³ In the case of Dionysus, his emotional distance is exacerbated, because more than any other god of the Greek pantheon does he seek the company of humans; yet he hides his divinity by donning a human mask, “thus creating the illusion of a false familiarity and closeness, as his mortal opponents learn at a terrible cost.”²⁴

In *Frenzy*, Dionysos himself alludes to this theory: “You, Vlepo,” he states, “you represent the human middle” (49). But Everett turns Dionysos’s aloofness into an attitude upon which the god himself reflects. In the novel’s first dialogue between Dionysos and Vlepo, the god reveals that his presence in Thebes is not only owed to “the rumors spread by Kadmos through his daughters about my being a false god and no son of Zeus, but because –”(9). Yet, instead of finishing the sentence, he strikes the iconic pose of melancholy by resting “his forehead in his hand,” asking: “Can

²⁰ Euripides, *The Bacchae*. Trans. C. K. Williams. With an Introduction by Martha Nussbaum. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990, 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21. Adopting this speech by Tiresias, Everett closely follows these lines in *Frenzy*, Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1997, 7; further references to this edition in the text.

²² Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*. Trans. R. B. Palmer. Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1965, 121 (German edition, 1933).

²³ Martha Nussbaum, “Introduction,” in *The Bacchae*, xviii–xix.

²⁴ Henrichs, “He Has a God in Him,” 21.

apathy produce an honest quest?” (9) To Vlepo, the god speaks in riddles, but readers understand that Dionysos contemplates whether his indifference hinders him from engaging in a good cause. He initially “had come from so far to take this city, to free this city, to offer these women and slaves, and all who could see, the hand of Mother Earth” (2), to liberate the women of Thebes – “so in need of the power of libation and love” (3) – from male domination.

While Dionysos regularly shows signs of indifference or even heartlessness, he simultaneously regrets being “compelled to make such clumsy and insensitive utterances” (56). There is, then, in *Frenzy* a decisive shift from Dionysus as a vengeful god, who, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, “totally lacks compassion,”²⁵ to an understanding yet melancholy god. When Vlepo discovers “sadness in his eyes,” the god explains: “This sadness that you see [...] is for no one but me. Creatures of such power can have no concern but for the self. Godding is tough work, my Vlepo” (19).

Drawing on Euripides’s *Bacchae*, Everett specifically makes use of the translation by C. K. Williams. As Williams explains in the “Translator’s Note,” he closely followed the original, “except for one brief moment, oddly enough in the very first lines of the play.”²⁶ Whereas Euripides could count on sufficient knowledge among the spectators of his tragedy, Williams thought the modern audience needed more information about the god and added “some of his many ritual epithets,”²⁷ thus trying “to give him a brief introduction to himself”²⁸: “I am Dionysus. I am Bacchus./Bromius and Iacchus./Dithyrambus and Evius./I am a god, the son of Zeus,/but I have assumed the semblance of a mortal,/and come to Thebes, where my mother, Semele,/the daughter of King Cadmus, gave birth to me.”²⁹ Apart from choosing the Greek spelling of the respective names and, more importantly, setting a tone of humorous irreverence, Everett follows Williams’s translation almost verbatim: “Dionysos was Bakkhos, was Iakkhos was Bromius was Dithyrambos was Evius. He was the product of the looseness of Zeus, god of imprudent tool, and of Semele, daughter of Kadmos of Thebes” (1). And whereas Euripides’s Dionysus in view of his mother’s tomb exclaims: “I praise Cadmus. He made the ruins hallowed ground,”³⁰ Everett turns this line into a question, thereby again stressing Dionysos’s reflectiveness: “Should he praise Kadmos for that shrine, for that act of consecration?” (2)

²⁵ Nussbaum, “Introduction,” xix.

²⁶ C. K. Williams, “Translator’s Note”, in *The Bacchae*, xlv.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., xlvi.

²⁹ Euripides, *The Bacchae*, 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

The transformation of Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian and Apollonian

In her introduction to Williams's translation of *The Bacchae*, Nussbaum discusses Nietzsche as an important voice in the reception of *The Bacchae*. Her summary of Nietzsche's characterization of the Dionysian and the Apollonian in *The Birth of Tragedy* helps us to classify the novel's major protagonists:

According to this portrait, the Dionysian is a universal 'tendency' in human life: the tendency to move and act in accordance with irrational forces, especially the force of erotic desire (it is closely modelled on Schopenhauer's *Wille*.) This drive seeks the transgressing [...] of distinct boundaries; it seeks, as well, the obliteration of the individuality of the subject, in a merging oneness with nature. Intoxication is a frequent symptom and concomitant of Dionysian experience; its characteristic artistic expression is in the fluid movement of the dance. Opposed to the Dionysian is the 'Apollinian' tendency, the propensity to approach the world with cool reason [...]. Whereas the Apollinian person is static and contemplative, the person under the sway of Dionysus is always on the move and makes contact with the world through movement and touch, rather than through thought. One is pure reason, the other a dancing body.³¹

In *Frenzy*, the opposing Dionysian–Apollonian tendencies are embodied on the one hand in the female followers of Dionysos, who eat raw meat and, succumbing to the rhythm of the god's instrument, the drum, dance themselves into a frenzy, and on the other hand the men in power, who “approach the world with cool reason” and whose hands, as Dionysos claims, “are numb from the counting of money” (19).³² Observing the maenad Sibyl, with whom he has fallen in love, Vlepo understands that dancing is an expression of life itself: “I realized how so much of her beauty was her movement, how much of her beauty was her life” (132). Kadmos's daughter Agave accuses men of being afraid of what they conceive as a threatening counterforce to their own rational way of life that is exclusively based on the principle of economy and the exertion of power: “How we thrive away from those rodents called men! [...] This dancing scares them, these strings of movement mock their stillness, and they say, ‘come back here, you

³¹ Nussbaum, “Introduction”, xxv–xxvi.

³² In their article on developments in the U.S. publishing industry since the 1980s, Sinykin and Roland use *Frenzy* as a case study. The model by which they try to distinguish between conglomerate and nonprofit publishers is based on semantic fields. Interestingly, their brief analysis of *Frenzy* reveals juxtapositions, for example, “rhythm” versus “reason,” that, apart from the difference of focus, result in an interpretation very similar to mine: “Everett has staged a struggle between city and wilderness, patriarchy and feminism, form and frenzy, wealth and embodiment, conglomerate and nonprofit.” “Against Conglomeration”, 90.

women; come back, you property'" (44).³³ In contrast, she maintains, "Bromius sees us in our oppression" (37).

Kadmos, the abdicated king and clandestine ruler of Thebes, is the epitome of unscrupulously exercised power, who fully adheres to its logic: "*Power kills where power is and knows no love except for itself*" (25); "*Power is the thing in itself. Only power can satisfy itself*" (75). While in *The Bacchae* it is Dionysus who indirectly causes the death of Pentheus by persuading him to spy on the women, whereupon he is killed by Agave, in *Frenzy* it is Kadmos who gruesomely murders his grandson with his own hands. Driven by an unconditional 'will to power,' he proudly identifies himself as "*a tyrant, a powerful, beautiful, unashamed tyrant. A despot!*" (157) In ancient mythic versions, the gods Apollo and Dionysus are commonly associated with the polar opposites of city and nature, civilization and wilderness. Likewise, Kadmos justifies reason as a necessary foundation of the realm of civilization: "*Reason is required for the derivation of actions from laws. Out there in that weald, away from my city, where our women frolic and make sick love, reason has no residence, the rabble move irrationally*" (125). Significantly, Everett adds the sphere of economy to the equation. Thus Kadmos complains to Pentheus about the state of Thebes: "There is no production, grandson" (50). And he challenges Pentheus by saying: "So, King, [...] are you going out to collect our women and get the city running again?" (50) Justifying the murder to himself, he argues: "*I must keep this city breathing, [...] these people working, it all moving, moving, moving*" (139). Obviously, breathing and moving for Kadmos does not suggest Dionysiac dancing, but on the contrary forcing his subordinates to keep working. Clearly, Everett reinterprets the Apollonian "pure reason" as an essential attribute of patriarchal rule that is based on economic exploitation, especially of women. "Pure reason" is associated here with instrumental rationality grounded in the systemic subjugation of workers in capitalism.³⁴

The episode of the three daughters of Minyas presents a significant variation of the critique of patriarchal exploitation. In vain, Dionysos tries to convince the young women, who are "weaving at elaborate looms" (39), their fingers "crooked from endless work," to consider "time away from these looms, this labor" (40). When instead they stay loyal to their father, who demands of them the toil of weaving tapestries,³⁵ the god compels them to work machine-like, ever faster and harder, but without making any progress.

³³ All interior monologues in the novel are set in italics.

³⁴ The description of this type of reason is reminiscent of the theory of the Frankfurt School; cf. Max Horkheimer's famous critique of "instrumental reason."

³⁵ On further aspects of the metaphor of weaving in *Frenzy* as central to "a rather postmodern *Ars Poetica*", see Feith, "Black Bacchus?", here quoted from the online edition <https://books.openedition.org/pufr/5452>, paragraphs 34–37.

Given “the emptiness of their activity,” they “weaved their way to madness” (42). In contrast to ancient versions, according to which Dionysus’s magic spell successfully turns the three reluctant women into fervent maenads, Everett’s rewriting emphasizes the insanity of forced labor and the suppression of women.³⁶

The quest for knowledge

In his view of Dionysos as a god who is not only feeling detached but melancholy, Everett again seems to draw on Nietzsche. The philosopher stresses that there are two Dionysiac states of being: “In the consciousness that follows his awakening from intoxication he [the Greek] sees the terrible and absurd aspects of human existence wherever he looks; it disgusts him. Now he understands the wisdom of the wood-god.”³⁷ While the element of Apollo is the “*beautiful dream*,” the Dionysiac way of life offers “the *intoxication of suffering*.”³⁸ Melancholy is then the reaction to having “gazed into the true essence of things”³⁹ and having “*acquired knowledge*.”⁴⁰ This kind of profound knowledge ultimately “kills action”⁴¹; in fact, by claiming that “the fruit of those states is an ascetic, will-negating mood,” Nietzsche refers here explicitly to Schopenhauer’s concept of the denial to the will-to-live.⁴² What in Nietzsche affects “Dionysiac man,”⁴³ Everett attributes to the god himself, who in the novel undergoes a steady development from a *vita activa* to a *vita contemplativa*, ultimately denying the will-to-live.

In his quest for deep knowledge, Everett’s Dionysos explores the connection between love and seeing, love and knowledge, and, as a consequence, the connection between knowledge and death, as told in two famous love stories of Greek myth: Zeus and Semele and Orpheus and Eurydice. Semele, misled by Zeus’s jealous wife Hera, demands of her lover to show himself in his “complete magnificence”: “I want to see you absolutely, so that I may love you without limit” (16). Granting her wish as promised and appearing in his blinding splendor, Zeus causes Semele’s death by

³⁶ This incident of mechanical weaving is juxtaposed to weaving as a metaphor for writing. Yet, as Vlepo claims, the story of Dionysos does not provide an apt model for a tapestry: “My Bakkhos would have made a terrible weaver. What I had thought was a tapestry of his time and space was a pile of threads, [...] subject to no rule or logic.” (73) We may take this for Everett’s tongue-in-cheek reference to the fragmentary, loose, and ultimately open structure of his novel.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Dionysiac World View,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Trans. Ronald Speirs. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 117–138; 130.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 126 (emphasis in original).

³⁹ Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Trans. Ronald Speirs. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 1–116; 40.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

incineration. In Everett's version, Dionysos's mother Semele is not naïve, but reflects the fatal consequences of her insatiable desire for truth: "*I know what will happen when you show me your beauty – I know the finality of such truth, but have it I must. I must possess, if only for a flash of a moment in time, the complete knowledge of my true love [...] I must and will know how my love loves [...], and I will finally love him completely*" (98). Dionysos is puzzled by his mother's decision: "Sees it [her end] and accepts it. And why?" (99) In contrast, Vlepo appreciates "the quality and depth of her love and experience" (99).

Dionysos and Vlepo also discuss Orpheus's urge to reassure himself of the presence of his beloved Eurydice, whom he is permitted to lead from the underworld back to earth on the condition of not turning around. Walking ahead of her, Orpheus is thinking: "*Let me know that you are with me. Let me know that you are real [...]. I must turn, I must see you [...]. I do not want to turn around, but I am turning, turning, because [...] I cannot be without knowledge of you*" (67–68). Again, Vlepo discovers beauty in the love of Orpheus, whereas Dionysos voices critique: "He sacrificed his love for his need to know" (69).

In Everett's retelling, both lovers make a conscious choice risking destruction for the sake of forbidden knowledge that they hope will bring them even closer to their beloved. For the artist Orpheus, making love is inextricably connected with playing the Apollonian lyre. In his passionate grief for Eurydice, he does not succumb to Dionysiac frenzy, which to him is but a sign of "confusing passion with frenetic movements" (71), and he angers the Bakkhai by doubting Dionysos's wisdom: "What do you and your god know of love?" (71) Dionysos and Vlepo offer opposing perspectives on the two stories. The unempathetic view of the god is juxtaposed to Vlepo's humane sympathy. Everett supports the latter by introducing a revision that brings the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to an end. When Orpheus, having been stoned to death by the enraged maenads, enters the underworld, Eurydice is waiting for him saying: "'My sweet, it is all right to look on me now. No one can separate us again.' Orpheus opened his eyes, and Eurydice remained" (72).

The denial of desire

As a god, Dionysos is not capable of sleeping; yet, the greater is his yearning for the sleep granted to mortals and, ultimately, death. There are then two interdependent sides of Dionysiac frenzy: abandonment to the forces of life versus disillusionment. While emphasizing the life-affirming effects of Dionysiac frenzy in the god's female followers, Everett highlights its sobering consequences in Dionysos himself, who becomes a critic of the very gift of Dionysiac desire he offers.

Transposed into the body of a woman, Vlepo, after having participated in a Bakkhanal, reports that the sexual orgy left his host disappointed after all: “She wanted more” (19). Dionysos sees a parallel to himself: “You make it sound so empty. Is that what I, too, am feeling, Vlepo? [...] Wanting more. That is why the frenzy gains so many tenants” (19). This motif of unfulfilled desire is taken up repeatedly. Watching two maenads making love, Dionysos wonders: “What are they doing?” Vlepo answers: “They are trying to give you what you want. [...] They are seeking pleasure, as you would have them” (78). Yet Dionysos seems at a loss: “Maybe the dancing fills in the hollow places, maybe it satisfies the longings that it itself is responsible for arousing. I don’t know, Vlepo” (78). In the subsequent conversation between Vlepo and Tiresias, Vlepo admits to feeling the very same emptiness and desire: “I often feel lost and empty, wanting more” (81).

Wanting ever more is also true of Ariadne: “She wants,” Dionysos claims. “Wants what?” (94) asks Vlepo, a question the god seemingly ignores but answers indirectly by sending him to record the thoughts of Orpheus, who making love to his beloved Eurydice, finds “deep, sweat love” to a degree of self-abandonment that is even frightening to himself (95). Ariadne is longing for such an abandonment in love, “*to love in that way, about which so much is written, to love without these twisting, mechanical thoughts*” (92–93). But her wanting turns into desire for its own sake, so that when Theseus – the man she has decided to love and hopes to seduce, although he is in love with her sister Phaedra – makes love to her, Ariadne’s “*deep, cold heart weeps*” (102).

At the center of the myth of Ariadne, there is Ariadne’s half-brother, the bull-headed monster Minotaur, who is the offspring of his mother’s unsatiable sexual desire. Whereas the story is usually told from the perspective of the hero Theseus, who kills the Minotaur and owing to Ariadne’s thread finds the way out of the labyrinth, Everett focuses on the suffering of the monster. Confronted with Theseus’s sword, the Minotaur desires nothing more than the end of desire: “*Ah, sweat death, come to me and make the suffering stop. Cure me of my appetite, let me lie dormant with all this guilt, let the pulsing, the pulsing, the pulsing stop, the wanting [...]*” (107).

Like the Minotaur, Dionysos has the desire to ending all desire. Everett underlines this by significantly changing the story of Ariadne and Dionysus. Traditionally, Dionysus rescues Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos. In *Frenzy*, Dionysos appears on the scene not to save her, but to comfort her as she is dying in childbed: “Dionysos held Ariadne’s head, stroked her cheek gently [...]” (121). According to Vlepo, “My master regarded her condition jealously, attempting to close his own eyes” (121). In order to emphasize the god’s longing for death, Everett creates a parallel scene immediately before Dionysos’s encounter with Ariadne, in which he lastly reaches

sleep, the preliminary step of death: “I held the head of my master in my lap, his divine life spent, his finally having found the sleep of mortals he so fiercely desired” (120).

Once genuine sleep is within his reach, Dionysos prepares for the next step, eternal rest. Looking at “the Maenads running around the fire” and “at the head of Actaeon, seated on the pole” (154), he confesses: “I tire of them” (154). In view of the maenads’s heightened exultation over the gruesome result of Kadmos’s cold-blooded plan to send his dim-witted grandson Actaeon out into the woods to be killed by the women, Dionysos – to put it in Nietzschean terms – “sees the terrible and absurd aspects of human existence wherever he looks; it disgusts him.”⁴⁴ When Vlepo asks whether he “desire[s] anything in particular from them,” the god denies, but instead demands that after having “achieved sleep, real sleep,” Vlepo should kill him with the sharp knife he presents to him. When Vlepo protests, he could not possibly kill him, Dionysos contradicts: “You can, Vlepo. You cannot *defy* me, but you can kill me.” (154) In fact, the last scene of the novel describes in horrific detail how Vlepo drives the knife through the flesh of his master’s body. Killing his master means fulfilling his master’s death wish. At the same time, there is a reversal of roles. Instead of being constantly transformed by the god, Vlepo, in the end, becomes the transforming agent.

Frenzy as tragicomedy

While the novel repeatedly exposes us to graphic descriptions of physical violence, it also offers plenty of comic relief. Its poetics then partakes in the Dionysiac world view as analyzed by Nietzsche:

What mattered above all was to transform those repulsive thoughts about the terrible and absurd aspects of existence into representations with which it was possible to live; these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical*, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means.⁴⁵

According to Nietzsche, the Olympian gods “now split into two groups, [...] deities who were sometimes sublime and at other times comical. Above all, Dionysos himself was given this divided character.”⁴⁶

Everett’s transformation of the tragic legend of Ikarios into a tragic-comic episode emphasizes what Nietzsche designated as the taming of the terrible by the comical.

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, “Birth of Tragedy”, 40.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, “Dionysiac World View”, 130 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

The myth tells how Dionysus introduced viticulture in Greece, when the god, rewarding Ikarios's generous hospitality, teaches him how to cultivate wine. Ikarios spreads the knowledge among his neighbors, but intoxicated by having consumed too much wine, they believe themselves to be poisoned and kill Ikarios, whereupon his daughter Erigone commits suicide by hanging.

Everett's version is paradigmatic of his work on myth and the comic techniques he employs. First, he creates a humorous tone by a detailed description of Ikarios that borders on caricature. Thus Ikarios is presented as a man whose "fat legs half-folded in front of him, his chubby fingers playing together atop his belly" (127). Another source of the comic derives from using a kind of slapstick humor associated with the tasks Dionysos assigns to Vlepo. After the god's visit to Ikarios, when Dionysos changes the water from his host's well into wine, the god banishes his servant into a piece of rope, which to Vlepo's growing discomfort fulfils three different functions and literally connects consecutive stages of the unfolding tragedy. At first: "I was the cord of braided hemp with which the pail was pulled up from the heart of the well." Then: "I was ripped from the bucket and pole suspended over the well and used to lash together the corpulent wrists of their target as the inebriated mob trounced poor Ikarios." Finally: "Erigone manipulating me, forming me into a loop [...], she let herself swing" from a tree (128–129). Vlepo is denied control over his actions. Handled violently himself, he is forced to act as an instrument of violence. At the mercy of his master, Vlepo is reduced to a mere physical object, while as a feeling subject he experiences both vulnerability and discomfort, a discrepancy that turns into a source of the comic.

Throughout the novel, Dionysos brings Vlepo into situations in which, often downsized in shape, he has to fight the everyday malice of the object, helplessly exposed to greater forces, whether "transmogrified into a lowly louse atop his [Dionysos's] skull," where he has trouble to "holding fast to my perch" due to "the wind, along with Dionysos's penchant for mane-tossing" (20), or whether "as small as a louse, but no louse, instead a very small me standing in the sparse forest of the old man's [Kadmos's] hair," from which position "a roughly circular window gave me entry to his thought" (24). Evidently, these early scenes in *Frenzy* introduce the very strategy of seduction Everett applied in *The Trees*, where he uses humor as a tool to "get people to relax and then do anything you want to them", namely, confront them with the brutality of oppression.⁴⁷ Thus, the sequence of metamorphoses Vlepo undergoes in the course of the novel reflects the change from the comic to the ominous, from the harmless to the dangerous. Starting out as a louse or an "inchworm" (28), he later finds himself in a

⁴⁷ Interview with Anthony Cummins, see note 4.

“spider” (99), or a “hawk” (143). Then Dionysos transforms him into “the Labyrinth,” where the Minotaur resides, thereby causing Vlepo to participate in the suffering of others: “My veins held within them the fears, the crying, the screams of the youth given up to the monster,” an experience that together with the Minotaur’s dreadful howling makes him comprehend “my god’s search for the quiescent silence of sleep” (104). Moreover, the shapes that Vlepo inhabits tend to expand: “For a brief moment, I was that entire place [Nysa]” (130), “the river Stymon” (134), or “the night into which they [the Bakkhai] marched” (155). He also finds himself converted into deadly tools, from the rope in the story of Ikarios to “the blade of a saw” (156) in the hand of Kadmos, with which the latter brutally kills Pentheus, an act that is described in one long sentence and in gruesome anatomical detail from Vlepo’s perspective as the saw: “My teeth caught and ripped skin with the first hesitant pull,” etc. (156). His last transformation changes him into “the pole on which the head of Pentheus sat impaled,” from which location his capacity to see is greatly improved: finally, he “could see all around” (159). Starting out by amusing themselves about Vlepo, who in the shape of a helpless louse has no insight into, let alone any overview of the world, readers will let down their guard and trustingly follow him as he leads them towards more and more intense experiences of cruelty and an ever-more clearer view of the world as a ruthless place of domination.

What Vlepo witnesses from his gruesome outlook is the fatal scene of ultimate defeat of Agave and her Dionysiac female followers corresponding to the triumphant victory of Kadmos. In the classical sources, the antagonism runs between Dionysus and those who doubt his divinity. Thus, in *The Bacchae*, Dionysus punishes all members of the house of Kadmos. In *Frenzy*, where the lines of conflict run between the sexes, Dionysos is neither the punishing god nor the savior.⁴⁸ Having at first taken sides for the women trying to assist them in their battle against male domination, he eventually becomes a mere spectator. In the end, he only interferes through ironic commentary to indicate that he sees through Kadmos’s malicious scheming. Kadmos takes the life of Pentheus without remorse, and he does not have any scruples to deceive his daughter by making her feel ashamed over her alleged infanticide, thereby utterly quelching her opposition. With a paternalistic gesture par excellence, “Kadmos moved to Agave and put his arm around her, pulled her close, comforted her” (163). In the guise of love and care, Kadmos is in fact exerting power over her. He thus reaffirms the self-image to which he is committed: “*I am Kadmos. I am king. This is my realm and I rule. Love has no place. Love has no place*” (139). Presenting Kadmos as a guileful victorious murderer is

⁴⁸ For a discussion of a “modern fusion of Dionysiac myth and Christian sacramentalism,” see Henrichs, “He Has a God in Him,” 28–29. In *Frenzy*, Tiresias alludes to the analogy: “This god is the marked one, the one who will die, the one who promises to give life in spite of his death.” (47)

the most significant deviation from ancient versions of the myth. It not only suggests the reinstallation of Kadmos's individual domination, but demonstrates patriarchy's unmitigated victory.

Conclusion

The novel ends with suspension points suggesting that the story continues, that Dionysos's death is not the end of his existence. "Twice-born Dithyrambos" (130) is fully aware of his immortality: "Death has no life for me [...]. And my death will offer no relief, for I must witness it over and over as I do all else" (9–10). Vlepo, however, who earlier was unsure of his "ontological status" (39), seems in the end to have come into his own as an independent individual, who is conscious of having become the novel's narrator: "But here I was put into myself, and finally, I assume, so that I might report the feelings witnessed" (159). Although he fulfils the command of his master when he kills him, he no longer does so in disguise or diminished in size but in his own body. While patriarchy is consolidated in the inside narrative, it is, by contrast, dissolved in the frame narrative. Throughout the novel, Vlepo, the "unfrenzied observer" (3), has accomplished the paradoxical task of simultaneously participating in the frenzied action and serving as a distant witness. According to Nietzsche, this split, or rather "co-existence," is what characterizes the disciples of the god: "Thus the attendant of Dionysos must be in a state of intoxication and at the same time he must lie in ambush, observing himself from behind. Dionysiac art manifests itself, not in the alternation of clear-mindedness and intoxication, but in their co-existence."⁴⁹

Such co-existence of opposites is indeed the main characteristic of the god Dionysus himself and the source of his transgressive energy. In *Frenzy*, this Dionysian principle provides the viewpoint from where the characters of the internal narrative are seen and assessed. On the one hand, it discloses the one-sidedness of the two major fractions of the conflict, and on the other hand, it sheds light on the more complex figures, the blind and clairvoyant prophet Tiresias and Pentheus, "unfettered by illusion" (115), who "lashed to his bed" claims: "Being constrained so has left me more humorous" (114). More importantly, however, the "violence of reversal" Everett employs in his rewriting of the Dionysus myth reveals the stark power dynamics at play in the fierce battle between the dominant and dominated. The women of Thebes revolt against a social order that condemns them to be socially domesticated and economically exploited. While they have a clear insight into their oppression, their uprising fails, because they are defenceless against the most potent weapon of patriarchy, namely the appeal to

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, "Dionysiac World View", 121.

such “*bodily emotions*” as shame or guilt, or such “*passions and sentiments*” as filial love.⁵⁰ As the women follow Agave, who is weeping “into her father’s shoulder” (163), their complete downfall is expressed by body language: they form “a morose, sullen procession back into the city, a parade of defeat, not a sound from one of them but a deafening resignation, their hands moving to shroud their breasts and pudenda” (164).

In sum, by radically transforming classical myth, Everett draws attention to its lasting significance. In his critical appropriation of the Dionysus myth, he turns Dionysian frenzy into an analytic tool for revealing the systemic structures of patriarchal domination in modern capitalist societies. While the internal narrative presents numerous examples of the exertion and abuse of power, the frame narrative offers a crucial level of reflection upon the action, for example, by stressing the importance of seeing as well as feeling as prerequisites for deep Dionysiac knowledge. Moreover, while the various retellings of myths are shaped by contrasting forces that stand in opposition to each other,⁵¹ the frame narrative, although depicting an essentially hierarchical relationship between a god and his creature, emphasizes the interdependency between Dionysos and Vlepo. Drawing on ancient conceptions of the god, Everett characterizes him as a highly ambiguous and versatile figure, who integrates the very opposites in himself that on the level of action relentlessly fight each other. With Vlepo as a complementary character by his side, Everett’s Dionysos in addition gains access to the one virtue he is lacking: empathy. Vlepo, the homodiegetic narrator, not only functions as a mediator between the divine and the human but also as an inconspicuous guide escorting the reader towards the novel’s Dionysian knowledge. He almost imperceptibly leads us towards facing the abyss of oppression that we might otherwise not be willing to acknowledge. Engaging in the playful “textual frenzy”⁵² of the novel, we simultaneously experience the tragic Dionysiac art that reveals the truth of suffering. But we do not share the resignation of the protagonist Dionysos, who as a consequence of this truth denies the will-to-live; instead, the novel’s humor not only enlightens us but also saves us from falling into despair.

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*. Trans. Richard Nice, Polity Press : Cambridge, UK, 2001, 38; emphasis in original.

⁵¹ See the following summary by Sinykin and Roland: “If the wilderness is a site of feminism, embodiment, and frenzy, then the city is the site of patriarchy, wealth, and absolute rule.” “Against Conglomeration”, 90.

⁵² Feith, “Black Bacchus? ”, <https://books.openedition.org/pufr/5452>, paragraph 38.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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