Dionysus’ Revenge: 
*Cultural Hybris, Violence, and Suffering*

By

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*Is it some frustrated longing that makes […] man mad?*
—Wittgenstein

Abstract

This paper considers two instances of present-day violence and suffering -- that of the Venezuelan revolution and the violence of the Twin Towers attack of September 2001-- from an archetypal perspective, which seeks insight into its psychic dynamics and patterns of meaning in the light provided by the images in the Greek myths. In particular, we consider the myths of Dionysus, especially as they are represented in Euripides’ *The Bacchae*. Dionysus' revenge can help us better understand the forces at play in these and other similar present-day scenarios of human suffering.

Prelude

Let me begin at an unlikely place. I have been reading a book about the Kogi, presumably the last and most complete surviving high civilization of pre-Columbian America. Secluded high in the Colombian Andes and rooted in their archaic past, this small ancient community has remained intact and distant from the civilized world for almost 500 years.¹ But about ten years ago they chose to speak to us through the author of this book whom they invited into their cloistered city. As he explains:

The Elder Brothers [as the Kogi call themselves] believe that they are guardians of life on earth. They see the world as a single living being which they have to look after and care for. Their whole way of life is dedicated to nurturing the flora and

¹ The Kogi […] are a nation whose fields have been continuously cultivated and towns continuously occupied for more than a thousand years. […] The Kogi alone survive as a proto-state, maintaining the authority of their own theocratic institutions, exerting the power of their ancient laws, living in a universe which they perceive in an utterly different way from us. […] When the Spaniards first landed, they encountered a civilization here which they called 'Tairona'. […] The unique achievement of the Taironas was that, by a combination of their own inner strengths and their extraordinary geographic position, they were able to survive the encounter [with the Spanish]. But the culture was very nearly destroyed, and Kogi society was created as the Tairona’s response to this catastrophic crisis.” (Alan Ereira, *The Heart of the World*, London: Johnathan Cape, 1990, p. 8)
fauna of the world; they are, in short, an ecological community whose morality is wholly concerned with the health of the planet. Now, the elder brothers have seen the changes start which mark the end of life. The world is beginning to die. They know that we are killing.\(^2\)

I begin with this story because we are going to be reflecting about suffering in terms of the suffering we are witnessing in the world today. And this story provides me with what is almost a dream-image of the first natural signs of that suffering; it allows me to suggest as well, a continuum between the destructive blindness responsible for the ecological imbalance denounced by the Kogi and what now hides behind the masks of religion and politics—a continuum from which, I believe, we need to consider the events in the world today if we are to come to terms with the suffering they are causing. I also begin with this story because it places us in South America, where at this moment we are living a traumatic social event, the Venezuelan Revolution, and I want to start my reflections with that phenomenon here since I believe that it obeys a similar psychic dynamic as that which underlies the phenomenon of terrorism. It thus provides us with the elements with which to begin to diagnose the social and cultural disease that is growing in the planet.

Since they are a unique surviving specimen of the culture and form of life that was taken over by the European World five centuries ago, the Kogi call to mind the event of the Spanish Conquest of South America. And I want to recount or reconceive the story of dismemberment that marked the birth of the New World in terms of the archetypal struggle between Dionysus and the Titans. Since the Spanish Conquest grounds the social Revolution on which I base my reflection on terrorism, this reading will provide a foundation for what I will want to say today about our topics of politics, religion and suffering. Moreover, Dionysian imagery connects us to the dark and irrational forces of the human psyche, which I believe is where we need to situate ourselves in order to come to terms with the traumatic events happening in the world today.

1. **Dionysian Coordinates**

According to the Orphic hymn,

> By Persephone, the queen of the lower world, Zeus had a son, Dionysos-Zagreus. Zeus intended the child to have dominion over the world, but the Titans lured it to them with toys, fell upon it, tore it to pieces, and devoured its limbs. [... So t]he

Titans were [then] struck by Zeus’ avenging lightning, which burned them to ashes. From these ashes the human race was formed, and man therefore contains within himself something of the divine, coming from Dionysos, and something of the opposite, coming from his enemies, the Titans.³

I want to underscore two of the images in this story at this stage: The first is that of Dionysus dismembered by the Titans, for it calls to mind the pillaging and plundering of the native cultures of South America by their conquerors, the Spanish “Conquistadores”. The second is the image of the emergence of the human race from the ashes of the thunder-struck Titans and the dismembered body of Dionysus. Again, it brings to mind the fact that the Latin American people also come from such a fatal mixture: the ashes of the titanic Conquistadores and the dismembered Inca (and the Aztec and Mayan) Empire(s). The extant chronicles of the Spanish colony⁴ are a rich testament of the genesis of this problematic hybrid, and they provide a detailed catalogue of the psychological complexes that burden the history of the South American soul.⁵ It is not difficult, then, even if at this point only rudimentarily, to resituate this story of the origins of the New World—and specifically that of the Spanish Conquest of Latin America—, within these archetypal coordinates.

Since what interests me about Dionysus is his darker side, I want to add a third image before continuing with our beginning reflection. It tells us of his vengefulness which is always savage and extreme. Whenever he is repressed Dionysus comes back and splits his enemies within, setting them against themselves blindly and in madness. Lycurgus, for instance, was made to lose his mind as a punishment for his offense against Dionysus so that in his delusion while he believed that he was chopping off and exterminating a vine, he actually hacked his own son’s legs. And in The Bacchae we find this most graphic image of Dionysian horror, where Agave with her sisters Ino and Autonoë, frenzied to the hunt by the god, ends up dismembering her own beloved child:

[…] Pentheus, […]
Must have known
How near he was to death. His mother first,
[…] began the kill,
and rushed at him. Off from the wig he tore


⁴ I am limiting myself to the Spanish conquest of South America, and deliberately bracketing the Portuguese which has, in some respects, significantly different characteristics.

⁵ An illuminating narrative on this particular aspect of the colonial legacy in the Latin American psyche is found in: Fietta Jarque, Yo me perdono, Madrid: Alfaguara, 2000.
the turban, so that recognizing him
Agave might not, to her sorrow, kill.
Caressing her cheek he said, “Mother, it’s I,
Pentheus, your own child, I whom you bore
to Echion. Oh Mother, take pity on me—
do not, for the wrongs I’ve done, kill your own child”
But she, spitting foam, rolling her eyes convulsed,
gone out of her right mind, was in the grip
of ecstasy, not listening to him.
She took hold of his left arm by the hand,
and, her foot braced upon the poor man’s ribs,
wrenched out the shoulder, not by her own strength,
but on her hands the god conferred such ease. Ino was finishing off the other side,
breaking his flesh, and Autonoë; the whole pack of Bacchae were at him. A general
howl arose,
he groaning as long as there was breath in him
and the women yelling victory, as one carried off an arm, another carried his feet still
in their boots. His ribs were laid quite bare in the dismemberment.⁶

Euripides has Dionysus himself tell us the reasons behind this terrible revenge:

Here, in this land of Greece, I have made Thebes
the first to ring with cries to me, […]
because my mother’s own sisters have blasphemed,
who should have been the last to do so, saying
that Dionysus was not bred from Zeus,
that Semele, had by some mortal man,
put off on Zeus the error of her bed […]
Now I have driven them raving from the house
by spurs of madness. Stricken out of their minds […]
For Thebes must learn, whether she will or not,
in what crude ignorance of my mysteries
she has denied, on the ground of Semele,
my mother, a mortal, that I am god
revealed to mortals, born by her to Zeus.⁷

The repression of Dionysus is not, however, a feature unique to the Spanish
conquest. Indeed, Rafael López-Pedraza, the renowned Jungian therapist, claims that
he is the most repressed god of the whole of Western culture. We can see this
repression in the way in which the Christian tradition, for example, has displaced the

⁷ *The Bacchae*, p. 4.
paganism we inherit from the Greeks to our collective unconsciousness\(^8\); or the way in which dogmatic orthodoxies of every stripe have suppressed the imagination from Western religion\(^9\); or even in the way that Western philosophy has banished the body, and hence feeling and emotion, from its considered universe for two thousand years\(^10\). I am suggesting, therefore, that it is this same human titanism that grounds the emergence of the New World, as if the Conquistadores had simply enacted the dynamic of repression already active in their souls, impressing it on the native cultures and leavening the mixture of the contemporary Latin American psyche. Indeed, the original repression of the native cultures has determined the repetitive patterns of its generally calamitous 500-year-old history. The image of the oppressors and the oppressed is one that continues to propel and justify periodic irruptions of this same dionysian dynamic. Hugo Chávez, the leader of the ongoing revolutionary moment in Venezuela, has placed that polarized image at the very foundation of his movement. As one commentator explains:

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\text{[his revolution starts from what is seen as Christopher Columbus'] invasive action of 1492, which marks and divides the process of this society into two great periods. The space-time prior to 1492, constituted by a millenary land, inhabited by fraternal and solidarious societies that developed, humanized and organized it. And the space-time [after the Discovery of America, which] is marked by dispossession, appropriation and extermination, and upon which begins the new class-society with its violence and exploitation. Society is thus divided into proprietary minorities, owners of power and command, and a dispossessed, expropriated and violated majority that is identified as inferior. […] According to the prevalent conception, the history of this continent begins with Columbus, the lord of this magnificent civilizing and christianizing crusade […] But Chávez believes that [his historical vision ignores […] the fact that this enterprise prospered at the wake of the extermination of over twenty million human beings, and that it marks the course of a history [that] fosters models of exploitation that sustain and perpetuate the worst kind of social violence. […]].}^{11}
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The Chávez revolution, then, explicitly conceives itself as a reaction against the repression inaugurated in this Continent by the Spaniards and inherited in the very structure of Latin American society and its troubled history. The fundamental division between possessors and dispossessed prevails in what is conceived as an

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\(^8\) This issue is the subject of Rafael López-Pedraza’s essay “Cultural Anxiety”, in Cultural Anxiety, Einsiedeln: Daemon Verlag, 1990.

\(^9\) For instance in the battles of iconoclasm and the puritanical revolt against imagery during the Reformation.

\(^10\) I have developed this claim in “Descending into Primeval Chaos: Philosophy, the Body and the Pygmalion Impulse”, Mythos and Logos: Regaining the Love of Wisdom, eds. Hicks, A. Anderson, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi Editions, 2002.

ongoing process of subjugation and plundering, where Chávez is seen as a savior from this violent oppression, and as the incarnation of a popular ideal of a people that has struggled between hopelessness and resignation, on the one hand, and the illusion of a different future on the other. But it is not just the genesis of this revolution that may be seen through these dionysian lenses, but also its present form—which—with its messianic sectarianism—has managed to savagely divide the Venezuelan nation against itself and to place it on the verge of a civil war. Insofar as its rhetoric has gradually become one of violence and confrontation, and its animus one of blind fanaticism, the Chávez revolution enacts the same dynamic of dismemberment in the cycle of revenge that we have witnessed in The Baachae. Behind the tragic events in Venezuela these days, one can almost hear Dionysus’ vengeful rage: “I have driven them raving from the house by spurs of madness. Stricken out of their minds, for [they] must learn, whether [they] will or not, in what crude ignorance [they have] denied [me].”

2. Toward a Symbolic Vision

The Kogi’s decision in the late eighties to break their centuries-long silence was motivated by their concern for the survival of the planet, which their ecological awareness had warned them was being threatened by the titanism of the “Younger Brothers”, as they call us civilized men. Notwithstanding the fact that the Kogi’s is an ecological and the Bolivarian Revolution’s primarily a social and political perspective, one might hear in both their calls a denunciation of a particular mindlessness in our culture—its boundless consumption and possessiveness, its violent and abusive use of power, its self-centeredness, short-sightedness and blind impulsiveness—a titanism, in other words, that has made us radically insensitive to the ethical dimension of our actions. But it would be mistaken to take the common root of their reactions as sign of a spiritual or attitudinal affinity.

In the name of social sensitivity the Chávez revolution calls for a war against the other; it polarizes and excludes “the oligarchic elite”, “the spoiled and abusive rich”, “the fascists and coup-mongers and saboteurs”—as Chávez lately has been wont to call any opposition to his government. If there is to be a war, for the Kogi it is one that will have to be fought against our own selves, against the titan that seeks to destroy us from within. Contrary to Chávez, they see the problem as internal to the

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12 “I say it once again, I have been repeating it for three years and now, after I have been raised again after the April 11th Coup d’état by the fascists and totalitarians of Venezuela and their international allies, the powerful; I come to say it with more vigor and strength, let us do it truly, let us save the world, we can do it, but only with a powerful political will and a single new political and social morality that invades the spaces of this new century” (Hugo Chávez, in his address to the World Summit in Johannesburg, September 2, 2002).
13 The officialist chorus actually sings in the streets of Caracas: (“Chávez has driven them made”).
world as a whole and not as a matter of some external threat against which it makes sense to call for the elimination of some other—be it the conquerors, the oppressors, the exploiters, or whomever. Instead of assuming the problem of oppression and poverty in the world as a matter for reflection and inner transformation, Chávez adopts a confrontational stance and imposes interpretations that simply point fingers seeking retribution and so repeat the blind and destructive dynamic of revenge, where the repressed itself returns equally blinded to the other, where the god himself becomes titanic, radically regressing into violence, destructiveness and madness. What the Kogi are urging is, on the contrary, a transformation in *our attitude* and a new awareness of the world “in which greed and selfishness are tempered by awe and by a sensitivity to the earth as a living totality.”¹⁴ In this sense their call is typically Dionysian: a call to introversion, emotional awareness and reflection, and Chávez’ is a titanic reflex that simply repeats, blindly, the same cycle of repression and revenge which the Kogi are, in their own way, directing us to overcome.

The phenomenon of the Venezuelan revolution *per se*, considered not from the intentionality or ideology of the movement but as part of the contingency of events in history, is analyzable in terms of a dionysian dynamic that is therapeutic, as a madness that seeks not just destruction but to provide, through suffering, the conditions for a change of consciousness. From the “bourgeois” perspective that characterizes our usual way of understanding these matters in the world, we remain trapped, however, within the bounds of projection and identification, in a human pathology that evidences a blind spot, a *lacuna* in our consciousness, where it is impossible to find the kind of cohesive or integrative power necessary for a more holistic appreciation of the phenomena.¹⁵ The point of this archetypal reading is to avoid approaching these historical events as we are accustomed, in terms of polarized and polarizing explanations but instead in terms of a single psychic dynamic of which they are recognized as complementary manifestations. I am proposing a reading, in other words, from which we can consider these events not in terms of the explicit intentions and ideologies involved—which I think block a clear vision and cloud our understanding of them—but instead against a broader horizon, in terms of the unconscious complexes of our history.

Of course, the adoption of this perspective is a true challenge to our times, for we are used to thinking extrovertedly, conceiving the situation always intellectually in terms of blame and culpability, from a moralistic stance that refuses to see the


¹⁵ The inability to adopt this synthetic vision may be a result of a lack of *Eros*, a condition Adolf Guggenbuhl Craig identifies with psychopathy, and which seems prevalent in our present culture. (See *Eros in Crutches*, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1980).
phenomena as also internal to ourselves.\textsuperscript{16} We are used, in other words, to seeing things from an ego perspective. The prevalence of this stance not only confirms the claim that Dionysus, as the god that connects us to human emotion and limitation, is the most repressed god of the West, but it shows us also the degree to which we have become dominated by the titanism in us and unable to judge any significant world event from a more balanced and deeper perspective. We find plenty of evidence of this imbalance, for example, in any random sampling of the public responses to the terrorist attacks of the World Trade Center on 911.

Felipe González in Spain, for instance, places them immediately in the framework of an external confrontation and so speaks of the need to “improve security […] against terrorism, the worst, the most evident and dangerous enemy.”\textsuperscript{17} Even Susan Sontag, despite her otherwise poignant criticism of the Bush Administration’s superficial and short-sighted response to the terrorist attacks, falls into the same pattern when she observes that “a lot of thinking needs to be done, and perhaps is being done in Washington and elsewhere, about the ineptitude of American intelligence and counter-intelligence, about options available to American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and about what constitutes a smart program of military defense.”\textsuperscript{18} Intelligent commentators thus ignore the psychological dimension of these events, deflecting our attention away from their meaning to the fear of their consequences and distracting us with their focus on defense and military confrontation. It is in this same vein that Mario Vargas Llosa, the celebrated Peruvian author, forecasts that

The XXIst Century will be the century of the confrontation between the terrorism of fanatic movements (nationalist or religious) and all free societies, just as the XXth Century was the century of the war to death between these latter and fascist and communist totalitarianisms.\textsuperscript{19}

The confrontational framework that guides these remarks and the moral judgment of Good and Evil implicit in all of them reflect, to my mind, the degree to which our objectification of the internal dynamics that rule these events makes us incapable of recognizing the irreducible mixture in the constitution of human

\textsuperscript{16} This, by the way, seems to me the reason why in our time Democracy can well serve the ascent into power of so many corrupt and destructive leaders in the world, who in other times might have only had a chance on the basis of raw force and violence.


\textsuperscript{18} Le Monde, September 17, 2001.

\textsuperscript{19} Mario Vargas Llosa, “La lucha final”, El mundo después del 11 de septiembre de 2001, p. 53.
phenomena of both conscious and deliberate actions, on the one hand, and autonomous unconscious complexes on the other. But it also makes evident the urgent need to factor this mixture into any evaluation of the events in the world these days, if we are to be able to make any sense of them. As Jean Baudrillard provocatively observes, talking of the attack on the Twin Towers:

In the end, it was they who did it, but we who wished it. If we do not take this fact into account, the event loses all symbolic dimension; it becomes a purely arbitrary act, the murderous phantasmagoria of a few fanatics that we need only repress.20

But, of course, we tend to approach the events in the world without any sense for their symbolic texture. Speaking of the 911 events, for example, Noam Chomsky claims that they are the logical outcome of the abuses that a globalizing and imperialistic attitude perpetrates against the less developed nations. The world is thus split into two factions, the good and the bad, and it becomes virtually impossible to move beyond that perception. The forces at play are radically segregated and completely alienated from one another, polar opposites that must be confronted instead of integrated.21 As Baudrillard rightly observes:

We naively believe in the progress of Good, that its ascendancy in all domains (science, technology, democracy, human rights) corresponds to the defeat of Evil. No one seems to have understood that Good and Evil increase in power at the same time and in the same way. The triumph of one does not result in the obliteration of the other; to the contrary […] Good does not reduce Evil, or vice versa; they are at once irreducible, the one and the other, and inextricably linked.22

The split of Good from Evil is a consequence of our incapacity to comprehend and integrate the conflicting needs and impulses within us that divide and drive us to irrational and often destructive actions. If we hope to understand anything we will need to overcome the Enlightenment mentality that still dominates our collective

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21 George McGovern articulates a much more psychologically sensitive position when he comments that “President Bush has said repeatedly that the terrorists hate us because of our freedom. I don’t believe that, the world’s people have always admired our freedom. What they don’t like is the arrogance and indifference to world opinion inherent in so much of our international policy. Plenty of my fellow citizens don’t like that either [they are not against something we possess and they want: they are against an attitude, a particular form of life that they find offensive]. I am not alone in my dislike of the way our government is waging the so called war against terrorism, in my opposition to a war with Iraq and calling Iraq, Iran, and Northern Korea the “axis of evil”. And I intend to press these points as long as I believe my convictions are grounded in common sense, patriotism and veneration of life” (“The Case for Liberalism: A Defense of the Future against the Past”, Harper’s Magazine, Dec. 2002, p. 40). He thus places the acts in the level of the psyche instead of the level of the ego, and conceive the matter not as one for arguments but one for conversion, for a change of attitude and a transformation of consciousness.

22 “L’Esprit du terrorisme”, p. 15.
consciousness—a mentality, which, oblivious to the depths of the psyche, leads us to think through the problem in terms of a rational logic and a causal history or to adopt a moralistic attitude that renders us impotent to resist entering that repetitive dynamic represented in the story of Dionysus and the Titans and replayed a thousand times before in human history. As Baudrillard puts it, we will need to move “beyond Good and Evil”, or else we will continue to search for historical, political, and cultural causes, mindlessly reducing what is a deep psychological dynamic into a deliberate ideological confrontation. In attempting to articulate these phenomena rationally we are failing to see that the causes behind these events do not fit into our usual explanatory frameworks, that there is a fundamental irrationality behind them; and that the real issue is to be found in the human tragedy being played out in them, beyond the religious and political creeds and ideologies. “Beyond Good and Evil” becomes in this context a maxim of clarity or psychic lucidity that refers us to the basic psychoanalytic principle that the unconscious is real and unavoidable, something we cannot do away with and which, in the increasing light of consciousness, is inevitably projected as an equally growing shadow.

When we ignore the unconscious level and our own affective involvement in the events we enact the repression of the dionysian. We have seen that this dynamic is not just the somber legacy to South America of the Spanish conquest, but also part of the very constitution of Western culture. So it should not surprise us that Chávez, still unable to extricate himself from its power, sees the battle he is fighting at home with the Venezuelan revolution as no different than that fought in the world against “the evils of globalization”. Indeed, in his address to the World Summit at Johannesburg, in September 2002—significantly just days-short of the anniversary of

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24 Chávez understands Venezuela’s Revolution as an awakening to the evils of globalization, and this a decade earlier than it’s happening in the world at large: “Ignacio Simonet, of Le Monde Diplomatique, […] divides globalization in three stages. The first begun in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Soviet Union in ’91; this is the stage of understanding the phenomenon of globalization. It took the world one whole decade, from 1989 to 1999 to come to grips with the phenomenon, to understand its evil, above all its evil; the poison and the threat that it involves. In 1999 the events in Seattle above all and then in Geneva mark the beginning of the second stage of globalization, the protest: the stage of world protest. And then [Simonet] says will come a third stage when it is necessary to start looking at and working for an alternative proposal to globalization. […] Let me add some new elements [to this account]. When in 1989 the Berlin Wall falls, no wall falls in Venezuela: the people rise, on February 27, 1989. It is a popular rebellion against neoliberalism. In other words, Venezuela already entered Ramonet’s protest phase. While the world was in the stage of understanding, Venezuela started already with the protest. In 1991 the Soviet Union falls and the West sings its victory song: The New World Order without any other option but neoliberalism. A few months later, in Venezuela there is a military uprising against neoliberalism [Chávez’ failed coup attempt] on February 4, 1992. And so when Ramonet says the world is beginning its phase of protest, Venezuela has already gone beyond that stage and is moving towards the stage of alternative proposals. I am talking about this revolutionary project, which is anti-neoliberal and the cause of the furious reaction on the part of the neoliberal elites, both economic and political. […] I am very optimistic. I believe we will continue to amass support not just in America but worldwide. These forces will give life and strength to an alternative path to neoliberalism. […] We are not alone. […] Today Venezuela has a strategic alliance with China and Russia and with countries in the European Community such as France. We have a really strategic alliance with Brazil, the giant of the South. So we are optimistic. I believe there will be forces in this first and second decades of the century to grow and strengthen. (Interview with Hugo Chávez)
the 911 attacks—, Chávez revealed an important psychological link between his revolutionary project and Islamic terrorism, when he remarked that “those of our countries that assume in truth the paths of human development, have to fight the elites that have destroyed a good part of the world. […] Neo-liberalism is guilty of the disasters of the world, so let us fight against the cause; let us not pretend to fight the fire while still respecting the incendiaries”. And it should not be surprising either that Chomsky, on the other side, hold that the United States has provided people all over the world with both the incentive and instructions for terrorists acts, and that the political and military atrocities all over the world that were the direct or indirect effect of American policy and agency are the “root cause” of the current terror, for apart from accurately articulating the reasons behind the not-too-dissimulated sympathy Chávez feels for the Muslim cause, he is also exhibiting the same psychic or symbolic blindness.

If there is a task for the XXIst Century, I believe it is to move away from these polarized visions, to become a time for a transformation of human consciousness instead of a renewed confrontation—particularly in this century “between the terrorism of fanatic movements (nationalist or religious) and all free societies”, as Vargas Llosa imagines it. We should seek to integrate the very conditions which have engendered the fanatic movements of the world and their terrorism. And this does not seem to me to be a matter any more of who has the truth or about who is on the morally good side, but about how we can all broaden our vision and our understanding of things in order to bring the world back into balance.

25 The links to the Muslim cause as well as to the guerrilla in Colombia are made explicit in the various pamphlets being distributed wholesale by the chavista revolutionaries in Venezuela these days, urging the so-called patriots to fight against the common enemy of American Imperialism.

26 Chomsky has been accused of “rationalizing terror” and being “soft on crime and soft on fascism” (Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Symbolic Terror,” Critical Inquiry, 29 (Winter 2002). It is false that he is “soft on crime and soft on fascism”. As he himself points out, he is hard on both, it’s just that he is calling things by their name: America is no less terrorist than Al Qaeda. But it is true that he rationalizes and in so doing he seems to ignore the irrationality behind the attacks. This, it seems to me, is the way of fanaticism and terror on both sides.

3. The Masks of Dionysus

[the demonic] is in every being that exists, the possibility of not-being that silently calls for our help [...].
Evil is only [...] our fearful retreat from it
In order to exercise some power of being.
—Giorgio Agamben

The vertiginous proliferation of worldviews and alternative lifestyles, the moral nihilism with its materialism and spiritual obliviousness that seem inseparable from this globalized age, cannot but threaten our monotheistic consciousness and so heighten and intensify the tension, exacerbating the radical conflict, with the polytheistic paganism still present in our collective psyche. In this psychological emergency, it is not surprising that we observe the appearance of totalitarian attempts at containment, since one way in which the psyche at the verge of collapse protects itself from this anxiety is by the adoption of rigid rules and forms that may protect it from its inner confusion.

By exacerbating the inner collective tensions and reactivating the complexes that burden Western culture, the fact itself of globalization may have provided the perfect environment for the proliferation of sectarianism and fanaticism of all kinds. But then the confrontation between Islam and America—I mean, the movement towards economic hegemony in the world, no less than the Islamic attempt to destroy “the corruption of the West”—may be better understood in this light not any more as primarily ideological confrontations or cultural clashes but, more psychologically, as symptoms of this anxiety, as attempts on the part of our cultural psyche to alleviate it by containing its internal turmoil, and repressing its vital plurality. We may be able then to recognize that the transformation of the world into a virtual village may have exacerbated the conditions that feed the repression of the Dionysian.

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29 Rafael López-Pedraza identified this conflict as the cause of what he calls the cultural anxiety of the West in an early essay, “Cultural Anxiety” (see above, note #8); and he has recently elaborated on it in “La psicología del sectarismo en tiempos de ansiedad”, Ansiedad cultural, segunda edición, Caracas: Festina Lente, 2000.

30 “The psychology of sectarianism […] almost immediately catches and contains the psyche on the verge of collapse” (“La psicología del sectarismo en tiempos de ansiedad”, Ansiedad cultural, p. 146).

31 Is not the compulsive and vertiginous growth of technology and global communications what fuels the repressive single-vision against which a Dionysian reaction is inevitable? (Technological hubris as the second head in the hydra of [economic] globalization.)
The neoliberal imposition of a single economic vision—which in America has acquired religious overtones of a crusade mentality—stands, from this perspective, on the same footing as the Islamic Jihad. They are both part and parcel of the “titanic struggle against the powers of Evil”, as George W. Bush has characterized the “War against terrorism”—a characterization which, symptomatically, applies equally, from the other side, to the terrorist acts of 911. This should not surprise us, however, for, as we know, in the dionysian dynamic the inevitable and equally totalitarian reaction to repression is revenge. And both these events are, psychologically, nothing other than reciprocal shadow-projections on the other, mirror images of the same totalitarian attempts at sealing-off the threat that pluralism or individuality poses to a monotheistic collective consciousness. There is here, as Baudrillard is right to point out, “a fundamental antagonism at work [that] transcends the phantom of America […], as well as the phantom of Islam […]. [What we are witnessing] is the clash of triumphant globalization at war with itself. […] what’s at stake is globalization itself […] [for t]he globe itself is resistant to [it].”

Insofar as we can see the globalization movement (or the imperialistic mentality that it embodies) as not just a modern-day version of the same repressive deed enacted by the Conquistadores against South America but also, and more deeply, as a reenactment of the archetypal struggle between the Titans and Dionysus, it is mistaken to see it literally, as Chomsky and Chávez do, as an enemy we need to destroy. Globalization may be seen as the cause of the current suffering in the world, but the relevant sense of “cause” here requires what, echoing Baudrillard, we could call a “symbolic” appreciation of the events. As long as we see it as an extraneous invasion against which we must protect ourselves, we adopt an objectifying and mechanistic attitude that ignores the symbolic dimension of thesis phenomenon and aggravates the organic condition of which the events in the world are a symptom. We

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33 Heidegger talking about gigantism tells us that the tendency in our culture towards the quantitative, and then eventually towards excessive size, paradoxically turns around or inverts itself back to a qualitative mode. And Baudrillard identifies the same dynamic in his examination of the ecstasy of images. (I have developed these remarks in Del alma y el arte, Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1998.)

34 Martha Nussbaums’ reading of Antigone, in particular her analysis of the positions assumed by Creon and Antigone as “a collision between two sorts of narcissism”, helps to show how we can see both the terrorists and Bush as two sides of the same coin, and how we can see the attitude of the Chávez regime and the Bush administration equally as two instances of the same polarized blindness. In her reading, “Antigone resembles Creon just to the extent that she is obsessive and singleminded—perhaps, one could say, metaphysical—in her reduction of life to a single project. […] She opposes Creon, but she is just as much a control freak as he is. Other people have no more place in her system than in his; or, rather, they will either be appropriated by her project, or they will have no meaning or reality”. (Gerry Burns, Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy. Language, Literature, and Ethical Theory, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 114.)

thus perpetuate our inability to see the other, and increase the chances that fanaticism will further constellate around these actions.

In the end these attempts at protection or containment involve oblivion—as in the sectarian dissolution of the individual into mass-consciousness—and even extinction—as in the case of fanatic self-immolations. Behind these attempts at psychic containment there hides, in other words, a self-destructive instinct, for sectarianism and fanaticism are nothing other than titanic symptoms, reflexes of control against the vital energy of life. As López-Pedraz points out,

[sectarianism] puts an end to the inner adventure of the psyche by referring and interpreting anything that takes place within the soul in a fundamental way according to the sect’s own conception. All the multiple possibilities, the diverse ways of having a relation to the events of [...] life [...] are blocked by the sectarian psychology.

The struggle between the Titans and Dionysus, then, is nothing other than the perennial struggle between the inner beckoning to life with its salutary, transformational call, and our resistance to change and transformation, specially to the suffering in each small death involved in inner growth. The phenomenon of fanaticism, as much as the corresponding blindness that it evokes in response to it, results from an unconscious and systematic denial of human limitation, which cannot but produce the return of the repressed. These political and religious events in the world together with the suffering they cause are then nothing but the masks of this vengeful god.

“The galvanic entrance of the god and his inescapable presence” writes Walter Otto in his seminal book on Dionysus, “have found their expression in [the symbol of the mask...] an image out of which the perplexing riddle of his twofold nature stares—and with it, madness”:

36 The phenomenon I am alluding to here is another instance of what I have elsewhere called “the pygmalionic impulse”, in particular the attempt to control the vitality of the living image by annulling it while pretending to preserve it in a technical replica—sculpting it in stone as in the case of Pygmalion (see: “Descending to Primaeval Chaos: Philosophy, the Body and the Pygmalionic Impulse”), or ideologizing it by means of the “etereal” words of the sect, words the vitality of which has been arrested in conceptual cages.

37 “La psicología del sectarismo en tiempos de ansiedad”, Ansiedad cultural, p. 144.

38 Fanaticism represses by sticking to the literal meaning of words meant for and spoken from a collective consciousness, and so prevents, the acknowledgement of those inner needs that still lack any known referents, those needs that would require an individual inner working-out. Insofar as fanaticism works in this way or has this secret agenda, it blinds itself to the very motivations of its actions and thus to their true significance. In the same way, insofar as we fall into the ideological game we too are victims of this blindness that prevents us from appreciating the psychic significance, the depth and inner demands of these phenomena.

The mask [...] has no reverse side [...] It has nothing which might transcend this mighty moment of confrontation. [...] It is the symbol and the manifestation of that which is simultaneously there and not there: that which is excruciatingly near, that which is completely absent—both in one reality [...] The final secrets of existence and non existence transfix mankind with monstrous eyes. [...] it is the spirit of a wild being [whose] coming brings madness.  

The escalation of violence and the increasing polarization of the world into a schizophrenic mania is part of this Dionysian madness, which simply accelerates its destruction. Our fear to face our own responsibility and inner suffering renders us unable to reflect the horror it wreaks, wherein hides a psyche, active and in transformation, in its perpetual battle between being and nothingness, between eros and thanatos.

It is imperative that we begin to question our unreflective division of the world into the Good and the Bad, a division that simply perpetuates the conditions which foster the phenomena of fanaticism and terrorism. We need to ask again what it may mean to “defeat” terrorism; or what “reinforcing the civic values destined to put an end to terror” really amounts to; or how we might be able to “eliminate the objective reasons that favor the conversion of a young person into a kamikaze fanatic” without its involving us again in the same vicious circle that triggers our own psychic mechanisms, transforming us into disguised terrorists ourselves, protected by the labels of democracy and the moral sense of superiority that we justify on the basis of our alleged commitment to liberty and justice. What is needed in the world today is truly a revolution. Not, however, a political or economic revolution—much less an armed confrontation—but an ethical conversion: a turn “around the axis of our real need.”

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40 Dionysus, Myth and Cult, p. 90-1.
4. Intolerable Images

The Muse then struck her Deepest string
&S Sympathy Came forth\(^43\)

It is told that Psyche was saved from killing herself by Pan and Echo, whom she met as she was wandering the forests in a suicidal mood—as if to say that the last resort of a languishing soul is to be found in the horror and panic of [Pan’s] nightmare with the reflection and inner brooding made possible by Echo. Suffering is thus shown as the *materia in extremis* to overcome psychic paralysis and existential fear. Dionysus’ punishment is, consistently with that mythical image, meant to be not only traumatic but also therapeutic. This is dramatically illustrated in the following scene from the *Bacchae*, where Cadmus is trying to bring his daughter Agave back from her maenadic madness so that she can reflect, and come to terms, with the horror of her deed:

CADMUS: Ah! No! My daughters!—when you realize what you have done, how unendurable
The pains you must endure! […]
AGAVE: What’s wrong with this? What reason have we for grief?
CADMUS: First, turn your gaze away up toward the sky.
AGAVE: There. Why did you propose I look up there?
CADMUS: Is it the same? Or do you see some change?
AGAVE: It seems more brilliant than before, more clear.
CADMUS: Is that volatility still about your soul?
AGAVE: I don’t know what you mean—But I become somehow collected. My mind is not the same.
CADMUS: Now, could you listen, and answer, lucidly?
[…] what face are you holding in your arms?
AGAVE: A lion’s—or—so said the huntresses.
CADMUS: Now look at it straight. It won’t take long to look.
AGAVE: Ah! What do I see? What’s this I’m carrying?
CADMUS: Stare at it closely, till it’s clear to you.
AGAVE: I see more agony than I can bear!
CADMUS: Now does it look at all like a lion’s head?
AGAVE: No. It is Pentheus’ head—alas!—I hold […] Dionysus has destroyed us. Now I know
CADMUS: You offended him. You said he was no god.\(^44\)


\(^{44}\) *The Bacchae*, pp. 60-62.
Dionysus’ logic is implacable. Agave must come to see what she has done under the power of the vengeful god, and her suffering will allow her to acknowledge the divinity she has repressed and against which she has blasphemed. Madness and suffering, therefore, are imaged as essential elements in the god’s demand for transformation.

Seeing the current events with Dionysian eyes, we need to ask about the nature of our madness and the point of our suffering, so that we may learn to transform or mature Dionysus’ revenge into actual healing. The Kogi, in their age-old awareness, noticed a change in the world’s ecology during the last decades and recognized them as symptoms of collective, global, world-danger. But today the signs of destruction are transmogrified, no longer simple ecological but cultural signs of disturbance. Human actions themselves, deliberately destructive and suicidal, embody the human willfulness behind the blind symptoms of an advancing world disease. If the images of famine and floods caused by global warming and the “greenhouse” effect did not move us, then perhaps images like those of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York—those intolerable images, multiplied and replayed incessantly around the globe in a macabre dance of virtuality—, may be the only way left for us to return to our senses.

When I call the image of the Twin Towers Burning “intolerable”, I am using a label introduced by Niel Micklem, a member of the first generation of Jungian thinkers, that will help us explore further our Dionysian madness. “Intolerable”, however, doesn’t just mean, here, something that we disapprove of—an irritable image that we refuse to endure—but something that may be too much to bear; as Micklem puts it, a “torture that goes beyond the endurance of consciousness [and] compels some change in the state of being”. Everyone agrees that since the 911 attacks, the world has drastically altered, yet nobody knows for sure just how. We seem to remain fixed in that contentless knowledge, witnessing an avalanche of undesirable and extreme after-effects without knowing quite how to respond. This experience of intolerability and psychic arrest is pictured archetypally in the head of Medusa, whose terror no one can meet directly without being transformed into stone.

The body-lessness of this fearsome head also provides an illuminating diagnosis, for it tells us that it is a disconnection from the emotional that is responsible for the opacity of what is seen and the psychic paralysis that it produces.

for which the Medusa effect provides a mythological representation.\(^\text{46}\) “The head of Medusa”, writes Micklem, “tells us that the image of no reflection is the intolerable image for psyche”; and where we find “no light of reflection, [and come upon] the petrified images of men and beasts […]\(^\text{47}\), then imagination is distorted, and the psyche’s movement is arrested. Petrified, we find ourselves at the farthest borders of earthly experience, in the realm of delusion, where the mind works lucidly, but on its own, divorced from the emotions that give the ideas their concreteness.\(^\text{48}\) The intolerable image is thus a symptom of psychosis, that state of mind where there is consistency in our system of beliefs but a distorted interpretation (or perception\(^\text{49}\)) of reality. It is not a matter of mistaken ideas or false beliefs. Lycurgus was not mistaken in thinking that he would exterminate the vine by chopping it off, he could not see that he was hacking his own son’s legs. And Agave simply did not see that the animal she was hunting was her own son.

The obliviousness of their actions attest to the inability to see things for what they are, to their sense of error being blocked or fixed with an incorrigibility that is central to this petrified state. It is this insanity that has taken over the world, where the psyche has become unable to evolve, and systems of delusion are being enacted collectively in actions that follow a deceptive logic that can only be accurately comprehended and disarmed once their psychic foundations are uncovered.

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46 In our Dionysian context it is not surprising that, apart from bodiless, Medusa is also related to the Erinyes and the Graiai, spirits of anger and revenge.


48 This split clearly echoes the dualistic mindframe from which we tend to conceive of ourselves in our psychologically shallow age. Hence the importance of adopting a non dualistic, psychosomatic perspective in Micklem’s sense, to come to grips with the illness spreading in the world today. “For depth psychology”, writes Micklem, “the word some and psyche […] refer not so much to body and mind as to views of the soul conceived as a psychosomatic area bounded by the matter of flesh on the one side and movement of spirit on the other. […] Within a psychosomatic field, what is intolerable to psyche is also intolerable to some, and this means that the field of psychosomatic medicine probably extends further than is at present appreciated” (“The Intolerable Image”, p. 3).

49 I mean to signal here to the fact that where we are placing the issue is precisely at that point where the difference between interpretation and perception becomes void, in the realm of what Wittgenstein explores as the phenomenon of “seeing aspects”. The phenomenology of psychosis allows us to more clearly appreciate that there is an inseparable link between what we see and what we see it as: “[…] Meaning is […] perceived directly with the senses. […] In perception there is not only a mechanical “cause and effect” response to sense stimuli. There is also the perception of meaning when physical stimulus encounters psyche and is transformed into the psychic image. […] Delusion […] is analogous to the seeing of meaning and […] it is an archetypically affective state conditioned by image and memory that transforms reception, so that the awareness of meaning, and so of reality, becomes deluded. (“The Intolerable Image”, p. 4). The distinction between truth and falsity, when it comes to matters of psychic depth, matter little. “Delusion […] affects the psyche in its depth irrespective of such categories of true and false.” What matters is meaning for it is what affects the soul directly and so determines both our perception, attitudes and actions. Micklem thus writes that “delusion as itself a primary phenomenon experiencing a situation as real […] In practice this reality is met as an interpretation, a meaning; thus if meaning is grasped, reality has established its presence.” In Blake’s words we could say that “everything possible to believe is an image of truth”.\(^\text{49}\)
The myth of Perseus provides us with further insight into the ways to deal with this condition. Perseus is given a shield and a sickle-sword by Athene, so that both in defense and in attack, he can look at the Medusa’s head in the reflection of the metal shield and the half moon sword, and thus avoid being turned into stone. We can only come to see through the psychosis, the myth is telling us, if we learn to look at it indirectly. The healing under the guidance of Athene, this warrior Goddess, who is also expert in the arts of peace, is her prudent intelligence. It is, as Micklem also remarks, a fight in reflection that is of central importance in dealing with the psychopathology of psychosis. The myth of Medusa and Perseus, then, points us again in the direction of Echo’s indirection, as a necessary complement to the intolerable image’s suffering, and as a compensation for psychic paralysis.

But Ralph Waldo Emerson too, an American transcendentalist, spoke of this indirection when he wrote that “Nature does not like to be observed ... Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents.” Stanley Cavell elaborates the thought in the following way:

Glancing is a way of observing, an oblique way, one in which you do not see a thing coming, cannot predict it; a casual way, meaning, as Emerson characteristically means the word, a way of casualty, of fateful accident, meaning that no glancing hit is in itself essential. Such a picture of getting to know makes it indirect, negates the direction in which we take knowledge to come, […] it requires what he calls, at the close of his text, “Patience, patience.”

This appeal to indirection is then nothing other than a call for a change in attitude for the sake of psychic incubation and brooding; an abandonment of our present-day hyper-culture, always on the run, without any time for anything, or patience. And it brings us back to the Medusa myth, precisely because Athene’s wisdom is always walking hand in hand with Hermes, whose presence is found in those tools she gives Perseus for his journey: the kibisis, an hermetic container of the fearsome head, for “dealing with delusion means above all carrying it and living it”; and the sandals and the cap of invisibility, that allow Perseus to negotiate the existential borders he crosses with Medusa. But Carl Jung, Freud’s once hoped-for heir, gives us a further clue to the meaning of this reference when he describes Hermes as “Mercurius, the mysterious psychic substance … we call the unconscious psyche”, for then the kind of healing required by the intolerable image, and in particular by Dionysus’ contemporary madness, is an openness to the underground


movement of psyche and the randomness of fate. An openness, in other words, that hermetically counteracts our resistance to the Dionysian.

6. Acceptance of Contingency

These blinks of an eyelid against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness [are] the cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices, speak in our lives
—J. Coetzee

The unprecedented human events that we are witnessing today are significant beyond their deliberate intentions, below or beyond the line of conscious awareness. The attacks on the World Trade Center are not just the rejection of the idea of capitalism or of globalization but a telluric, ground-shaking rejection of a whole form of human life—a reaction that comes from the bowels of our world. They demand receptiveness and not necessarily action or control, inner transformation and not intellectual understanding. They challenge us to new ways of seeing ourselves, our life and our world. These actions are to be seen perhaps as a new form of natural event, the power of which, like that of natural catastrophes, depends on our recognizing them as active beyond our conscious wills. Their deepest effect and significance, moreover, belong not so much in the realm of ideas but primarily in the realm of sensibility, in the sensuous or erotic dimension of our life.

the fathers lying in our depths
like fallen mountains; also the dried-up riverbeds
of ancient mothers—; also the whole
soundless landscape under the clouded or clear
sky of [our] destiny

The conception of the inner implied by Rilke’s words, however, manages to recover from the Cartesian confusion in which modernity has been steeped, a valid

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52 Quoted in “Contingency for Beginners”, On Flirtation, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 8. Adam Phillips comments about this passage, that it is “Perhaps […] not surprising that a novelist who grows up and writes under a totalitarian regime is alert to the voices of chance, the voices that cannot be coerced.”

53 The possibility of this new awareness relies not just on the incorporation of the unconscious as a dimension of human agency but also the rejection of psychoanalysis as a sort of science. “What psychoanalysis uncovers”, writes Jonathan Lear, “is not a new area of knowledge as much as something disturbing about ourselves” (Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life, p. 4).

54 If we can see the image of the woman in coma as the representation of the dire condition of our dionysian consciousness in the world today, then Almodóvar’s recent film “Hable con ella” may be seen as an extraordinary essay on the appropriate cultural response to that condition.

55 Rainer Maria Rilke, The Duino Elegies, 2.
sense of inwardness that depends neither on the possession of representational content nor on the postulation of private mental knowledge. It moves away from the conception of subjectivity as a matter of preformed inner contents that are awaiting to surface, and begins to see the self as a matter of potentialities that are awaiting an accident\textsuperscript{56}, a contentless awareness of new possibilities ready to develop upon the appearance of unforeseen connections into something entirely unprecedented. The Freudian way of seeing things obscures the deeper sense in which the subject and even the unconscious obeys forces that are beyond and outside the self as we conceive it. It regards potentiality itself, which, as Giorgio Agamben notes, “is the most proper mode of human existence, as a fault that must always be repressed.”\textsuperscript{57}

In this light, interpreting and understanding the other is not to be seen simply instrumentally, as a way to find some common understanding in order to communicate, but \textit{aesthetically}, as a way to commune and resonate so as to decipher and discover oneself, as part of a project to give form to our formlessness.\textsuperscript{58} Christopher Bollas, a member of the latest generation of Freudians, gives content to this intuition when he suggests that we see objects and persons, and so in general events, as catalysts of the self, occasions that activate from within us psychic structures that remain unknown but are still able to generate new forms of consciousness.\textsuperscript{59} As he explains:

\begin{quote}
\ldots the work that characterizes the unconscious ego is the non-representational unconscious, that selects and uses objects in order to disseminate the self into experiencings that articulate it and enrich it. The aim here is not to create meanings
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} The insight expressed here is contained in phenomenological philosophy. For instance, in Merleau-Ponty: “Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing Truth, but, like Art, the act of bringing truth into being”, Preface to \textit{Phenomenologie de la Perception}. And even in Husserl: “it is this as yet dumb experience … which we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its own meaning”, \textit{Meditations Cartesiennes}.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{The Coming Community}, p. 43.

\textsuperscript{58} Walter Benjamin’s messianic conception of universal history, and his idea of redemption as the transformation of language, seems to me to point in this direction. Particularly, his rejection of a bourgeois conception of language, but also the kind of communication presupposed by this conception of interpretation and understanding, involves the opening of an intermediate realm wherein the interlocutors may undergo a spiritual transformation, where rationality is not a presupposition but an end. It is not a matter of discovering whether the other is or not rational, or intelligible to me (the skeptical stance), as much as achieving contact with the other beyond our presuppositions, thus opening a space for self discovery and surprise. (Cf. Winnicott: “We do not discover unconscious contents but constitute them through their articulation in actual speaking”.) This introduces a conception of individual human destiny that differs radically from the ego psychological ideal of progressive adaptation. As Christopher Bollas puts it, the subject does not evolve unconsciously but rather \textit{is} unconsciousness, an internal and particular presence, vectored or directed solidly by the form by which it expresses itself (Christopher Bollas, \textit{Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience}, New York: Hill and Wange, 1992, pp. 50-51).

\textsuperscript{59} I have developed these ideas in terms of the issue of relativism and interpretation in “Interpretando al otro: Imperialismo conceptual y relativismo como síntomas”, \textit{Racionalidad y Relativismo}, L.E. Hoyos & J.J. Botero (eds.), Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2003 (forthcoming).
or to interpret reality as such, but to negotiate with reality in order to gain experience of objects that release the self into being.\textsuperscript{60}

There is here an appeal to a dimension of awareness that is already active in us as well as origin of all knowledge. J.D. Lichtenberg has aptly described it as “the shadow” of experiences that we preserve without codifying symbolically in our words and project on the future.\textsuperscript{61} But the project is not to figure out the unconscious in order to explain or control. The wish that we find a way to probe the unconscious depths of these phenomena by becoming conscious of them is an idle wish, for, as Jonathan Lear rightly points out, “the unconscious is too disruptive to be contained in any straightforward account.”\textsuperscript{62} Rather, the task is to learn to live without knowing, or only knowing that we cannot control; learning, in other words, to acknowledge the radical fragility from which we are never free, and accept the fact that we are confronted with irrationality at every step. But this involves an acceptance of limitation, an attitude of reception and a consciousness of tragedy. Nothing less for us than a changed relationship to suffering and death. As Micklem puts it, reflecting again about the myth of Perseus and Medusa:

Athene tells us that the nature of illness in psychosis—its origins in the intolerable image, in Medusa—is similar to dealings in death. And as with death, we have naturally very little say in the time of its appearance or in the expectations for its cure. In other words, psychosis, and hence its terror, has less to do with illness and more to do with death.\textsuperscript{63}

Of course, we are dominated by a particular conception of the self that is fueled by a particular instinctive resistance to accepting the reality of death and of suffering and pain, where control and volition are determinant of our relationship to the world. But we need to start conceiving our options from a rather more extended perspective that we are used to, from what we might call, with Adam Phillips, an “acknowledgement of contingency”, which he writes,

\begin{quote}
\text{can be called luck, fortune, accident, coincidence, and is sometimes experienced and described as a kind of non-intentional or random agency. There is actually nothing behind it making it happen—though we can personalize it by projection—and its presence, in and of itself, says nothing about our power. It neither diminishes or}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{60} Being a Character, p. 42.


\textsuperscript{62} Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{63} “The Intolerable Image”, p. 9.
enlarges it, but we can use it to do both. Because it includes both the body and whatever is felt not to be the body, it is neither internal nor external.\textsuperscript{64}

According to Phillips, Freud reduced accidents to [unconscious] intentions, and thus circumscribed the realm of chance to the dominion of the subject, in particular subordinating it to its historical past. If we saw the past as Proust sees it, however, “as hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling”, we would understand unconscious actions and accidents \textit{not} as the expression of a repressed past and the manifestation of disowned intentions, but as arising from an intentionality that is neither inside us nor even governed by laws foreseeable or even intelligible to us.\textsuperscript{65} To the psychoanalytic conception of the self as instinct-ridden, then, we might do well, as Phillips suggests, to add a conception of the self as immersed in its contingency.

We might then be able to draw very different conclusions and prescriptions for action than we do now; we might be able to conceive of terrorism and fanaticism, for example, not just as the ego reaction to repression and injustice, which they also undoubtedly are, but as the outward means, or the aspect under which, something altogether deeper and more ancient emerges.\textsuperscript{66}

All this does not, of course, tell us how to respond to the actual perpetrators of terrorist attacks; it tries rather to tell us what each of us needs to do to avoid perpetuating the conditions for their happening again. It is an attempt at introversion, for it seems to me that the task is indeed primarily and most urgently an individual task of attitude or consciousness, and only subsequently one of action. It does not mean to replace the pragmatic response and immediate considerations; however, it means rather to complement it, to provide it depth. But our present cultural \textit{ethos}—compulsively scientistic and globalizing—exacerbated by the unbridled impulse

\textsuperscript{64} “Contingency for Beginners”, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{65} “Freudian interpretation aims to extend the realm of intention, and diminish the empire of contingency” (“Contingency for Beginners”, p. 15).

\textsuperscript{66} A certain metaphysics results from this perspective that is well articulated in Proust. From a Freudian point of view coincides like those observed between Proust’s madeleine and the memory of his childhood in Combray, for instance, involve “the kind of mystical animism that psychoanalysis pathologizes” (“Contingency for Beginners”, p. 17), the kind of explanation, in other words, that not only reduces intentionality to the self, but makes it something that breaks through from within, as a possibility that has been repressed or denied until now. There is no such thing a luck, in other words. Just a sequence of causal links that simply express a personal history. Personal history provides the necessary structure, like a solid scaffolding, where coincidences find their place as necessary or inwardly-caused events. The intention present in chance phenomena from this perspective is personal, genetically connected to the psychological code of the subject.
towards perfection symptomatically manifested in our technological and economic imagination, stubbornly resists this effort.

The terrorist attacks have called to our attention the world’s inequality and the way in which material prosperity is sought now at the expense of humanity. The monster of terrorism is matched by another no less formidable or awful monster in the economic machinery that is leading our world politics and the movement toward globalization. The titanism of globalization is correctly identified, but it is consistently mis-located and much more mistakenly confronted. The 911 attacks, when seen as simply terrorist acts perpetrated by fanatics feed our inclination to project Evil on their titanism, while denying it, of course, in ourselves. That path leads to an increasingly volatile cultural and global polarization and, not too much further along, as we are already seeing, to war and senseless destruction.

Conclusion: Philosophical Coda

I have searched through many books,
I have studied the speculations of astronomers,
I have pursued innumerable arguments:
Yet I have found nothing stronger than fate.
—Euripides

“While man’s empirical knowledge in our century has expanded at an exponential rate […] his sense of purpose or direction seems to have atrophied; although more knowledgeable about the world than any of his forebears, man today is more ignorant or at a loss as to what he and his accumulated knowledge are all about.” Our exacerbated titanism and its compulsive extroversion has made us

67 Lewis Laphan writes: “Who could doubt that Saddam must be destroyed? Not Citicorp or Exxon Mobil; not the New York Times, CBS, The Washington Post, NBC, The Wall Street Journal, Fox News, or USA today” (“Hail Caesar!”, Notebook, Harper’s Magazine, December 2002, p. 9). When Laphan asks and answers his rhetorical question he is telling us that the reasoning that dominates the US government’s actions belongs not to the level of individual decision but in the realm of corporate reflexes. It is “the corporate-management theory that informs the making of American foreign policy” (p. 10), and “our politicians speak more to our weaknesses and fears than to our courage and intelligence” (p. 11). The attitude that these corporations emblematize is now devoid of real human input, but is rather like a mechanical and autonomous ghost that has taken over the decisions of the people. Not even the representatives of the capitalist world recognize the reasonings behind the war initiative against Irak, for example. “People supported by incomes of $10 or $15 million a year not only mount a different style of living than those available to an income of $50,000 or even $150,000 a year, they acquire different habits of mind—reluctant to think for themselves, afraid of the future, careful to expatriate their profits in offshore tax havens, disinclined to trust a new hairdresser or a new idea, grateful for the security of gated residential protectorates, reassured by reactionary political theorists who say that history is at an end and that if events should threaten to prove otherwise (angry mobs rising in Third World slums to beg a chance at freedom or demand a piece of the action) America will send an army to exterminate the brutes” (p. 11).

68 Euripides, Alcestis.

unable to connect to modes of consciousness different than those regulated by the instinct to material survival and production. It has atrophied our dionysian consciousness. We have become more and more able to measure things, count and recount the world in terms of stock and trade interests, objectify it into commodities and energetic resources, and register deeds of power and military strength. But we have also remained miserably incapable of fathoming the meaning of events, or seeing the ethical consequences of our actions. “Man”—reflects Stanislav Lem’s protagonist, Kris, in his novel *Solaris*—“has gone out to explore other worlds and other civilizations without having explored his own labyrinth of dark passages and secret chambers, and without finding what lies behind doorways that he himself has sealed.”

In this state of affairs, philosophy, it seems to me, is called not to task of the poet, which according to Ernst Jünger is to illuminate things and events so that we can see them in the plenitude of their being, but to the humbler one of showing us their shadow, waking us up to the radical contingency of events and, ultimately, to the permanent proximity of death. But the task is individual, and it must come from within. This is the why Wittgenstein insists that the task of philosophy is like the task of architecture: a work on oneself; or why he says that the real revolutionary is he who revolutionizes himself; or why he claims, ultimately, that the only thing we can do to change the world is change ourselves. His is a philosophy that rejects all aspiration to (false) transcendence, all flight from the quotidian. It resists, in other words, our impulse to repress the dionysian by deliberately cultivating the acceptance of what we may more prosaically describe as “the grit and grind” of everyday bodily existence.

As Cavell observes, “philosophy (as descent) can be said to leave everything as it is because it is a refusal of, say disobedient to, (a false) ascent, or transcendence.” Everything remains the same, while, at the same, time, it is all transfigured. But, as Agamben notes, this “cannot refer simply to real circumstances, in the sense that the nose of the blessed one will become a little shorter, or that the cup on the table will be displaced exactly one-half centimeter, or that the dog outside will stop barking.” As in the hassidim parable recounted by Walter Benjamin, “everything will be as it is now, just a little different.” The tiny displacement implied here does not refer to the actual state of things, but to their sense and their limits. This change, adds Agamben,

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71 *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, p. 46.
does not take place in things, but at their periphery, in the space of ease between everything and itself. [...] This imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend [...] is the tiny displacement that everything must accomplish in [what Benjamin calls] the messianic world. Its beatitude is that of a potentiality that comes only after the act, of matter that does not remain beneath the form, but surrounds it with a halo.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} The Coming Community, pp. 53-55.