

Trumpeter (1990)

ISSN: 0832-6193

WILD ANIMALS AND HUMAN LIFE: SAVAGE DIN,  
SOFT LYRE AND THE CALL OF WILD NATURES

Karen Davis  
University of Maryland

About the Author: *Karen Davis* is a professor of English at University of Maryland, College Park. In addition to literary essays on English literature, her articles on animal rights have appeared in *Animals' Agenda*, *Between the Species*, and *Bulletin of the National Anti-Vivisection Society*. She pioneered a course on the role of animals in the Western literary tradition and is currently writing a book on philosophic vegetarianism in 19th-century England.

The wild mountaintops shake with running feet. The alarm of cymbal, pipe, flute and drum echoes throughout. The chase is on. The huntsmen roar by, animal-masked to resemble the beasts who fly helter-skelter before them, the beasts of primeval sacrifice — tiger, lynx, panther, roebuck, wolf, boar, and bull. With these men are the Maenads, the Raving Women who, entwined with snakes, and clad in fawnskins, had earlier suckled at their own breasts the young of the frantic creatures they now harry down the mountainsides. The hunt ends with the pursuers tearing to pieces the living prey, devouring them in mouthfuls on the spot. This is the primordial Feast of Raw Flesh, in honour of the god Dionysus, the "eater of raw meat."

On Mount Pangaion not far away, music fills the air, enchanting the woods and streams. No savage din makes the wild beasts' hearts pound or sends them fleeing in all direction. Instead the soft lyre, accompanied by a singing voice, emits a music so pure and sweet that hearing it, the birds, beasts, snakes and even fishes converge irresistibly towards the musician. They do not dread to be part of the charmed circle that surrounds him. For they know, this is no blood-stained hunter or wild mountain-god luring them to destruction. It is Orpheus, mystic healer, poet and teacher, whose custom each morning is to greet the sun, whose vision embraces the earth and sky. Orpheus rejects the blood sacrifice and the Feast of Flesh (raw or cooked). He and his followers take only a gentle nourishment and cultivate the arts of peace.

Thousands of years have gone by since the heyday of Orpheus and Dionysus. In the classical age of Greece, between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C., these contrasting figures of myth and legend inspired the formation of mystery cults and philosophical schools which challenged the prevailing culture of the Greek city-states. Despite their differences, the Orphic and Dionysian traditions have a common stock. Historically and psychologically, both are rooted in a time, remote from the classical as from the modern world outlook, when people viewed Nature as charged with the grandeur of gods. Nature-worshipping ceremonies commemorated this perception with rituals designed to intensify in adherents the sense of primordial oneness with the animals, plants and landscape features all around them.

It is from this inspired soil that the god Dionysus emerged as the unifying

symbol of the many-natured progeny of earth. In contrast to the "civilized" gods of Greek Olympus, Dionysus summoned forth the wild contagion of mystic participation identified with the earth divinities of the earlier era. When intoxicated with wine, the chase, or the raw feast, his followers felt, momentarily, that Dionysus was not only outside but inside them, and that they were themselves divine. As they tore apart and devoured the living prey, they felt they were eating the body and blood of a god, incorporating as part of their nutriment his wisdom, power, and other virtues.

Orpheus was not a god but a mortal "hero," revered for the god-like, peace-bringing power of his music. His singing and playing soothed the angry spirits of seafaring warriors and drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek in the underworld. His song had universal attraction. The poet Ovid tells how In the deep woods upon the Thracian mountains Orpheus with his singing lyre led the trees, Led the wild beasts of the wilderness.

A favourite subject of early Christian art, Orpheus is shown on wall-paintings sitting playing his lyre, surrounded by wild and tame creatures charmed by his melodies. The Greek dramatist Aeschylus says that the voice of Orpheus "led all things after him bewitched with joy."

Orpheus was adopted as the founder and teacher of religious cults that resembled those of Dionysus in their belief that the Soul is one and all life is akin. However, for the Orphics this insight formed the basis of a whole different piety and lifestyles. For if humans and animals shared the same soul, making them members of one another, then the blood sacrifice was not sanctity but sacrilege — murder. The raw feast was not an act of consecration. It was cannibalism.

In *Dionysos Slain* (1979), Marcel Detienne says that for the Orphics of the sixth century B.C., to eschew murder was "essentially to refuse the blood sacrifice and the meat diet inseparable from it." In this they differed from not only the Dionysians but the Greek official culture, which did not cherish the time-honoured spirit of relation between human and nonhuman life, glorifying instead human sovereignty based on humanity's "god-like" power of reason. As Aristotle explains, "In none but man is there intellect." Therefore, "the other animals exist for the sake of man, the tame for use and food, the wild for food, clothing, and various instruments."

The Greeks held the human exploitation of animals to be a just law of Nature. Humans, mirroring Nature as a whole, act justly in conformity with reason, whereas Nature's nonhuman progeny, "fish, beasts, winged birds, devour each other since there is no justice among them." Further proof of these creatures' innate depravity lay in the fact that they ate one another, as well as plants, raw; whereas "it is natural to man to eat flesh, but contrary to his nature to eat it raw." To the Greeks, cooked food signified civility, the antithesis of bestiality. Not Orpheus or Dionysus but Prometheus "the fire-giver" was hailed as humanity's chief benefactor. By inventing the sacrificial fire that roasted the

animal victim's flesh, Prometheus assured the human position between beasts, who could be propitiated without humans having to sacrifice themselves in the process. Thus, in the eyes of the city-state, society had made a positive advance from the Age of Savagery, with Prometheus serving as symbolic mediator.

The Orphics and the Dionysians demurred this optimistic outlook, though for different reasons. For the Orphics, the growth of civilization, grounded in fire-craft, signified decay from an original state of harmony linking humanity, Nature, and the gods, known as the Golden Age. In the sixth century B.C., the Orphic philosopher Pythagoras established a vegetarian community in Magna Graecia, or modern Italy, designed to replicate the time when "Happy in fruits and herbs, no men tainted their lips with blood, and birds flew safely through air, and no little fish was ever hooked by its own credulity." This was the Age, reflecting the metaphysical perception that all Nature is one, when humans and animals spoke the same language. Like Orpheus, Pythagoras was friendly with animals. Legends describe his peaceful parlances with creatures such as an eagle, an ox, and a bear. Pythagoras preached amity with other creatures, particularly those who are harmless and helpful to us. To do this, one had to be a vegetarian. The Orphic-Pythagorean doctrine urges adherents to "purify your bodies and eat no dead thing that has looked with living eyes on the light of Heaven." For "they are miserably deceived who expect joy or justice, yet restrain not their hands from blood and death."

Judged by Golden Age standards, the Promethean carnivores of the city who devoured sacrificial animal victims were savages twice over, by engorging their fellow creatures and by making the gods partners in the abomination, claiming they loved the blood of bulls in Heaven. Barbarism, far from being relegated to raw-food forbears and the antipodes, was at the heart of "civilized" society.

Pythagoreanism extends the Orphic spiritual outlook into the realm of philosophy. In a somewhat similar way, the Dionysian tradition finds a logical extension in the fourth-century B.C. school of thought known as Cynicism. Like the Pythagoreans, the Cynics rejected the Promethean city-state with its materialism, divorce from Nature, and decadent lifestyle epitomized by the sacrifice of a domesticated animal followed by the eating of its roasted flesh. They, too, taught "back to nature," but with this difference, that the paradise they yearned to restore was the very Age of Savagery nixed by both the Pythagoreans and the Prometheans. To the Cynics, going back to Nature meant not only drinking spring water and gathering acorns like the "first men" true to their bestial origins, but scrapping the incest taboo in conformity with "roosters, dogs, and donkey" and "wolfing down" raw the meat of a wild creature lured by a human predator. In true Dionysian fashion, Cynicism strips down ultimately to human cannibalism, which Detienne calls "the consummation of the savage state Dionysism strives to attain." There is a difference, though.

Viewed as a religious rite, Dionysian cannibalism can be seen as a way of allowing the faithful more direct contact with the wild mountain-god they strive

simultaneously to possess and to imitate, however briefly. In myth, Dionysus is the eater of men as well as animals, whose voracity can be traced to his having been himself entrapped, dismembered and eaten by his Titan kin, from whose ashes the human race sprang. Thus viewed, the cannibal feast reenacts the agony and ecstasy of a human-like god who, conceived as both victim and victimizer, as the sufferer and perpetrator of cruelty and crime, symbolizes the ever-recurring cycles of universal tragedy in Nature.

In contrast, the Cynics do not invoke a god to justify their savagery. Satirically rejecting all manner of society as false, they desanctify Nature as well. Their overall perspective on the natural world is actually much closer to that of their Promethean antagonists than to that of the Dionysian affiliates. In both viewpoints, animals, lacking the "god-like" virtues devour each other like cannibals. Only, the Cynics find this raw rapport inviting. Hence, their way of transcending the Promethean culture they despise is through "descent" to the rock-bottom paradise "once shared by men and beast."

The Orphic-Pythagorean way of transcendence is prone to err in the opposite direction. In its abiding concern with purity of soul in conformity with the nature of the gods, Orphism nourishes a tendency in adherents to seek fulfilment in "upward" transcendence of the natural world regarded as the prisonhouse of the souls. Philosophically, the aspirant forsakes this earthly abode and its occupants for ascent to a "higher" life. Yet division of the Orphic and Dionysian modes of cultural transcendence into hierarchies of "upward" and "downward" conflicts with the pantheistic essence of both. Ironically, it unites them full-circle in the disenchantment of Nature and its creatures.

Moreover, it reflects a mainly externalized outlook, even while complying with the archetypal image of the Dionysians streaming down the mountainside on one hand versus that of Orpheus greeting the rising sun on the other. More important may be that, together, these images form another set of contrasts reflecting the fact that where Dionysism epitomizes dismemberment as the basic truth of experience, Orphism epitomizes concord as basic. Characteristically, the Dionysian scene at the beginning of this essay depicts the centrifugal flight of creatures asunder, while that of Orpheus shows creatures converging centripetally towards a common center. They both express the wisdom that unity with the natural world is somehow to be achieved by blending with other natures. In Orphism, however, the crude idea of obtaining union with divine nature through the physical dismemberment and absorption of another creature's flesh is replaced with the idea of union obtained through purity of life.

In fact, purity of life is a key concern for both types of consciousness rooted alike in the notion of a World Soul paradoxically divided into kindred spirits that prey on one another. Hence, both are haunted by the sense of bloodguiltiness demanding atonement. Here again, though, they differ. The Dionysian way of atonement is to ask the animal's "consent" to being destroyed and to purify the human predator in rites of apology and other cathartic rituals. Animals are seen

to submit willingly to good hunters, who as proof are able to lull their fears and lure them from hiding. The Maenads soothing the young of wild creatures, the better to tear them and their parents to pieces, exemplifies this primal spirit of seduction, aimed to placate consciences, perhaps, as much as the animals preyed upon.

The Dionysian way of atonement adapts ironically to Promethean culture's use of animals, both past and present. The Greeks were wont to lead the domestic victim to the sacrificial altar and gain her assent by, say, pouring barley in her ear, thus "persuading" her to nod her head yes. Similar ingenuity avails modern culture, as when animals used in vivisection are portrayed as "partners" and "collaborators" in research, and "food" animals like Charlie the tuna are "interpreted" as craving to be pulverized and consumed. Such parody underlies the Orphic insight that Dionysism is cynically ensconced in the cultural system it aims to transcend.

The Orphic way of atonement, by contrast, is to stop repeating behaviour that reduces human life to a circle of repetitiousness parodying the cyclic rhythms of Nature and binding us eternally to a wheel of bloodguilt and false catharsis prepared by distant forbears. "Dionysus destroys the kin he claims," wrote Euripides. His sacred mountain, "foul Cithaeron," proliferates a round of bloody betrayals perpetrated among human and animal kin. Named for the cruel king who murdered his father, and home of the vengeful Furies, it is where the hunter Actaeon was torn to pieces by his own dogs mistaking him for a stag, where the reckless Herakles ravaged a lion, and where a mother driven mad by Dionysus dismembered her son thinking him a ferocious beast. To the Orphic mind, this is all one calamity, the penalty of an ancient grief that caused the vegetarian philosopher Empedocles to exclaim, "Will ye not cease from killing?" See ye not that ye are devouring one another in your heedlessness?"

The Orphic "way out" of this dolesome circle is through striving to attain, individually and permanently, a bond with animals that Dionysian frenzy can produce only at intervals, at the expense of their lives and trust, and through the disintegration of clear consciousness into mass-mindedness, paralleling the panic flight of creatures in all directions. It is, as the poet Rilke says, "to prepare in the heart the way for those gentle, mysterious, trembling transformations from which alone the understandings and harmonies of a serener future will proceed." Orpheus playing his lyre, enchanting the denizens of the woods and streams, symbolizes this heart spreading conditions in which peace may occur, because it knows creatures differently than by "cutting them up." Significantly, Pythagoras saw "omens in the flights of birds, rather than in the ripping apart of their chests," as Daniel Dombrowski evokes the Orphic philosopher of the Harmony of the Spheres.

The difference is far reaching. The Orphic way of knowing animals takes the form of psychic adventure. It augments wisdom, not by engulfing their mortified viscera, or vivisectioning them in a fury of "free inquiry" breaking down all

grandeur, or other divulsive practices, but, as the poet William Cowper wrote, "With sight of animals enjoying life, feeling their happiness augment our own." This is the Orphic way of assimilating ourselves with other creatures, thereby ceasing to do endless battle with the very life of our own souls. This is the true meaning of the Golden Age, which is not a mere dream world, for it can act as an informing principle of existence, and as such be an experience of finally attained or recovered identity.

All searching of the past for prototypes is for the propagation of some plan or hope for the present and future. Along with scenes of Orpheus surrounded by creatures enjoying life are ones of him singing as a trunkless head following his violent dismemberment by raving Dionysiacs. Others show him playing his lyre in the world of the dead. His animal metamorphosis is the swan, making a recent *Washington Post* sports article serve as a kind of swan song to these reflections.

It reports the opening of hunting season on the tundra swan in North Carolina, with similar prospects sighted for Maryland and Virginia. The writer notes that when the swans are not hunted, they become less shy and show themselves more, but that under the gun they get wary, and, says the writer's shooting companion, augmented with the sight of animals not enjoying life, "I'm glad." So they blow their swan horns and wave their flags in a blind dug in a wheat field, amid the eerie "whoo-who" of the swans' distinctive cries. The great, long necks and snowy bodies of these gentle, graceful birds, who journey each year from the far North in thousands to winter in these parts, makes them unmistakable, and, the writer assures his readers, "superb to eat."

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#### Citation Format

Davis, Karen (1990) WILD ANIMALS AND HUMAN LIFE: SAVAGE DIN, SOFT LYRE AND THE CALL OF WILD NATURES *Trumpeter*: 7, 4.  
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