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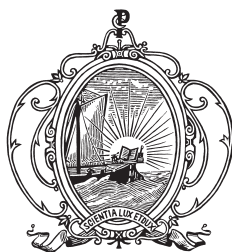
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NONNUS OF PANOPOLIS IN CONTEXT IV

Poetry at the Crossroads

edited by

BERENICE VERHELST



PEETERS

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IV. THE MIRACLE BABY. ZAGREUS AND THE POETICS OF MUTATION

Emma GREENSMITH

1. Introduction

In Book 6 of the *Dionysiaca*, Dionysus, not yet born, appears in proto-form in the figure of Zagreus. This baby ascends to Zeus' throne, brandishes his weapons, but is torn to pieces by the Titans, transforming into a kaleidoscopic range of figures as he attempts to escape (*Dion.* 6.155-205). This is not, however, the end of Zagreus' story. Nonnus tells us at the end of this episode that he will soon begin again, finding new life as Dionysus (6.175).

The episode takes up fifty lines of poetry. In less than a fifth of the book, a story smaller than an epyllion, this tiny section of Nonnus' gargantuan epic is over. Although Zagreus 'finds new life' as Dionysus, it seems that in his own existence he is rather *minunthadios*. He is mentioned again only in passing in the poem, for instance, as various characters recall his challenge to Zeus (Hermes at *Dion.* 38.209-210; Deriades at 39.70-71) and his violent death (Hera at 31.47-48; Gaia at 48.41-43) or summon and honour him in prayer (48.962-978). As a result, the figure has attracted scant attention from scholars concerned with the *Dionysiaca* as a whole. In the most extensive recent discussion, Rob Shorrock has suggested that Zagreus, like the monstrous usurper Typhoeus, should be read as a foil for Nonnus' own early ambitions as a poet. Just as Typhoeus steals Zeus' weapons and stages a book-long attempt to reign over the cosmos (*Dion.* 1), before he is ultimately defeated by the lyric power of Cadmus, so too can Zagreus' momentary power and rapid demise represent an image of the prior failed attempts of Nonnus to assert his literary authority: his arrogance and errors, his anxious grappling to surpass his own poetic 'father' Homer,¹ before he grows to poetic maturity, confident in his own status and abilities, instantiated in the later figure of the 'real' Dionysus:²

This [Zagreus] episode might refer to poetic juvenilia, lacking not in talent but in experience, which have been cut down to size by Titan critics.

¹ SHORROCK 2001, *The Challenge of Epic*, pp. 116-121. A key part of Shorrock's reading is to map Nonnus' Bloomian relationship to Homer, named as 'father' at *Dion.* 25.265, onto Dionysus' competitive emulation of his father Zeus.

² SHORROCK 2001, *The Challenge of Epic*, pp. 127-129 (both quotations at p. 129).

What is more, Shorrock goes on to suggest, this infantile first stab at epic glory may have a specific analogue in Nonnus' *œuvre*:

One imagines, perhaps, an earlier unsuccessful version of the *Dionysiaca*, or perhaps even the paraphrase of St John's Gospel, a work generally regarded as being anterior to the *Dionysiaca*. As Dionysus is born out of the dying Zagreus, it is possible to imagine the *Dionysiaca* itself rising up out of the 'ashes' of the epic paraphrase.

A precursor and a prototype, Zagreus is thus largely written out, or written over, in Nonnus' poetic story.

In this contribution, however, I focus centrally on this miniature episode, and on this 'marginal', mysterious baby. In this choice of focus, I may seem to be subscribing to a particular trend in Nonnian scholarship, and since this volume aims to prompt reflection on our own positions as critics of this epic – our methods of constructing the 'roads' of inquiry into Nonnus' work – I shall begin by considering this trend. My 'episodic' focus (i.e. my focus *on* an episode) may seem to reflect the critical tendency, when faced with the hyperbolically vast, disparate, *poikilos* poetics of the *Dionysiaca*, or the 'Janus-esque' character of Nonnus' two disparate poems,³ to bifurcate into one of two routes: either the macrocosmic or the microcosmic – to roam broadly or to zoom in intensely. As the titles of recent bibliography and the contributions within this volume readily illustrate, recent writers on Nonnus either take on a large, overarching theme and select evidence from across the whole text(s) to analyze it (in itself, perhaps, a self-conscious marker of *paideia*; demonstrating the far from inconsiderable feat of mastering this exceptionally expansive author) or else focus on one, carefully selected character, episode, or passage, and read it closely. To take just two contrastive examples, output on the *Dionysiaca* in the past five years alone has included a study of direct speech across the whole of the poem, and a thirty-page article focusing on just sixty lines from Book 35.⁴ The same pattern is evident in scholarship on the *Paraphrase*, which has been the subject of increasing scholarly attention in recent years,⁵ but very rarely in

³ For this phrase, see ACCORINTI 2016, *The Poet from Panopolis*, p. 37.

⁴ Respectively, VERHELST 2017, *Direct Speech* and GOLDHILL 2015, *Preposterous Poetics*. I have selected these two examples from the copious bibliographical output on the poem in the twenty first century because of the closeness of their publication date and the highly contrastive nature of their approaches. For further examples of this contrast, see the contents of the recent ACCORINTI 2016, *Brill's Companion to Nonnus* which displays the penchant for both of these methodologies for the *Dionysiaca* (compare, e.g. the surveying approach of Hadjittofi's chapter, HADJITTOFI 2016, *Major Themes*, pp. 125-151, versus the case-study-based specificity of Fitzgerald Johnson's chapter, FITZGERALD JOHNSON 2016, *Nonnus' Paraphrastic technique*, pp. 267-288) and whose contributions shift from focusing on the *Dionysiaca* and the *Paraphrase*, with too few authors examining in detail both.

⁵ Editions and commentaries have been prepared on, thus far, eight books of the *Paraphrase* (the most recent is SPANOUDAKIS 2014, *Nonnus, Paraphrasis XI*).

active dialogue with studies of Nonnus' earlier(?), 'pagan', (post)-classical poem.⁶ Ironically, the poet who programmatically refuses to be contained – who evokes Proteus the Odyssean shapeshifter *par excellence* as the emblem for his slippery and polymorphous texture; and begins his *metabole* with the word ἄχρονος, tearing open and refusing to close John's foundational 'beginning' –⁷ is approached with moves of dissection: opposing methodologies of reading which are not only more pronounced for Nonnus than for other areas of ancient literature, but also more mutually suspicious.⁸

My suggestion, however, and the central claim of this contribution, is that this dichotomy between the episode and the entity is a *false* dichotomy in Nonnian discourse; and that Zagreus – the miniature episode, the tiny baby – offers a crucial indicator as to why. Zagreus, I shall argue, represents a major locus for the ways in which the episodic and the hollistic collide, combine, and reflect one another in Nonnus' adamantly alternating poetics. I shall start by close reading the 'episode' in a different way, focusing on its competing intertextual strands, and showing how Nonnus encourages a programmatic reading of this baby, as a vehicle for these multiple fabrics woven together in his poem, and – more deeply and ambivalently – as an image of a poet critically aware of the complexities and *dangers* of his task in composing it. I shall then suggest the ways in which this emblematic figure exerts a continuous presence in and beyond the *Dionysiaca*: Zagreus' 'new life' extends beyond the shady, literal reincarnation into Dionysus – he is reincarnated into Nonnus' poetics too. Zagreus, we shall see, thus functions as a programmatic image not for the poet's earlier 'failed' ambitions, but for the tensional aspirations which continue to drive *both* of his works. Zagreus, like the Nonnian corpus itself, requires a reading which insists on the confrontation of contradiction, the conceit of self-reflection, and the multiplicity of temporality, all embodied in the paradoxical miracle of 'beginning again'.

⁶ On the direction of influence between the two works, an open question to which we shall return from a different perspective in what follows, see the summary of positions in ACCORINTI 2016, *The Poet from Panopolis*, pp. 37-46. My own stance in this contribution will be not to venture into the probably unanswerable issue of anteriority, but rather to consider the interpretative and literary-cultural imperative to treat the texts as simultaneous, mutually interacting.

⁷ John 1.1: ἐν ἀρχῇ. Cf. *Paraphrase* 1.1: ἄχρονος ἦν ἀκίχητος ἐν ἀρρήτῳ λόγος ἀρχῇ. On this opening line of the paraphrase, see GOLDHILL 2020, *Preposterous Poetics*, chapter 4, which offers a lucid account of Nonnus' transformative moves therein (still, however, not fully embedded with discussions of the *Dionysiaca*, which the same book also analyses, but in a separate part).

⁸ I discuss and illustrate this sense of suspicion in GREENSMITH 2018, *Brill's Companion to Nonnus (Rev.)*, pp. 269-270.

2. Source Collisions

Let us first turn directly and in detail to Nonnus' story of Zagreus. Considered in full, the passage (*Dion.* 6.155-205) reveals an intensely intricate texture, comprised of multiple, competing strands:

παρθένε Περσεφόχεια, σὺ δ' οὐ γάμον εὗρες ἀλύξαι, (155)
 ἀλλὰ δρακοντείοισιν ἐνυμφεύθης ὕμεναίοις,
 Ζεὺς ὅτε πουλῆλικτος ἀμειβομένοιο προσώπου
 νυμφίος ἱμερόεντι δράκων κυκλούμενος ὄλκῳ
 εἰς μυχὸν ὄρφναίοιο διέστιχε παρθενεῶνος,
 σείων δαυλὰ γένεια· παρισταμένων δὲ θυρέτρῳ (160)
 εὕνασεν ἰσοτύπων πεφοβημένον ὄμμα δρακόντων
 καὶ γαμίαις γενύεσσι δέμας λιχμάζετο κούρης
 μείλιχος. αἰθερίων δὲ δρακοντείων ὕμεναίων (164)
 Περσεφόνης γονόεντι τόκῳ κυμαίνετο γαστήρ, (163)
 Ζαγρέα γειναμένη, κερόεν βρέφος, ὃς Διὸς ἔδρης (165)
 μούνος ἐπουρανίης ἐπεβήσατο, χειρὶ δὲ βαιῆ
 ἄστεροπὴν ἐλέλιξε· νηγεγέος δὲ φορῆος
 νηπιάχοις παλάμησιν ἐλαφρίζοντο κεραυνοί.
 οὐδὲ Διὸς θρόνον εἶχεν ἐπὶ χρόνον· ἀλλὰ ἔ γύψω
 κερδαλέῃ χρυσθέντες ἐπικλοπα κύκλα προσώπου (170)
 δαίμονος ἀστόργοιο χόλω βαρυμήνιος Ἥρης
 Ταρταρίῃ Τιτῆνες ἐδηλήσαντο μαχαίρῃ
 ἀντιτύπῳ νόθον εἶδος ὀπιπεύοντα κατόπτρῳ.
 ἔνθα διχαζομένων μελέων Τιτῆνι σιδήρῳ
 τέρμα βίου Διόνυσος ἔχων παλινάγρετον ἀρχὴν (175)
 ἄλλοφυῆς μορφοῦτο πολυσπερὲς εἶδος ἀμείβων,
 πῆ μὲν ἄτε Κρονίδης δόλιος νέος αἰγίδα σείων,
 πῆ δὲ γέρων βαρύγουνος ἄτε Κρόνος ὄμβρον ἰάλλων·
 ἄλλοτε ποικιλόμορφον ἔην βρέφος, ἄλλοτε κούρῳ
 εἵκελος οἰστρηθέντι, νέον δὲ οἱ ἄνθος ἰούλων (180)
 ἀκροκελαινώοντα κατέγραφε κύκλα προσώπου·
 πῆ δὲ χόλω δασπλήτη λέων μιμηλὸς ἰάλλων
 φρικαλέον βρύχημα σεσηρότι μαίνεται λαιμῷ,
 ὀρθώσας πυκινῆσι κατάσκιον ἀχένα χαίταις,
 ἀμφελελιζομένη λασιότριχος ὑπόθι νότου (185)
 αὐτομάτῃ μᾶστιγι περιστίζων δέμας οὐρῆ.
 ἔνθα λεοντείοιο λιπὼν Ἰνδαλμα προσώπου
 ὑψιλόφῳ χρεμετισμὸν ὁμοίον ἔβρεμεν ἵππῳ
 ἄζυγι, γαῦρον ὀδόντα μετοχμάζοντι χαλινοῦ,
 καὶ πολὺ λεύκαινε περιτρίβων γένυν ἀφρῶ· (190)
 ἄλλοτε ροιζήεντα χέων συριγμὸν ὑπήνης
 ἀμφιλαφῆς φολίδεσσι δράκων ἐλέλικτο κεράστης,
 γλώσσαν ἔχων προβλήτα κεχηνότος ἀνθερεῶνος,
 καὶ βλοσυρῷ Τιτῆνος ἐπεσκίρτησε καρῆνῳ
 ὄρμον ἐχιδνήεντα περίπλοκον ἀχένη δήσας· (195)
 καὶ δέμας ἐρπηστῆρος ἀειδίνητον ἑάσας
 τίγρις ἔην, στίζας δέμας αἰόλον· ἄλλοτε ταῦρῳ
 ἰσοφυῆς, στομάτων δὲ νόθον μυκηθμὸν ἰάλλων

θηγαλέη Τιτῆνας ἀνεστουφέλιξε κεραίη.
 καὶ ψυχῆς προμάχιζεν, ἕως ζηλήμονι λαιμῶ (200)
 τρηχαλέον μύκημα δι' ἠέρος ἔβρεμεν Ἥρη,
 μητρυιὴ βαρύμηνης, ἰσοφθόγγῳ δὲ θεαίνῃ
 αἰθέριον κελάδημα πύλαι κανάχιζον Ὀλύμπου,
 καὶ θρασὺς ὄκλασε ταῦρος· ἀμοιβαίῃ δὲ φονῆες
 ταυροφυῆ Διόνυσον ἐμιστύλλοντο μαχαίρῃ. (205)

Ah, maiden* Persephone! You could not find how to escape your mating! No, a dragon was your mate, when Zeus changed his face and came, rolling in many a loving coil through the dark to the corner of the maiden's chamber, and shaking his hairy chaps: he lulled to sleep as he crept the eyes of those creatures of his own shape who guarded the door. He licked the girl's form gently with wooing lips. By this marriage with the heavenly dragon, the womb of Persephone swelled with living fruit, and she bore Zagreus the horned baby, who by himself climbed upon the heavenly throne of Zeus and brandished lightning in his little hand, and newly born, lifted and carried thunderbolts in his tender fingers. But he did not hold the throne of Zeus for long. By the fierce resentment of implacable Hera, the Titans cunningly smeared their round faces with disguising chalk, and while he contemplated his changeling countenance reflected in a mirror they destroyed him with an infernal knife. There where his limbs had been cut piecemeal by the Titan steel, the end of his life was the beginning of a new life as Dionysus. He appeared in another shape, and changed into many forms: now young like crafty Cronides shaking the aegis-cape, now as ancient Cronos heavy-kneed, pouring rain. Sometimes he was a curiously formed baby, sometimes like a mad youth with the flower of the first down marking his rounded chin with black. Again, a mimic lion he uttered a horrible roar in furious rage from a wild snarling throat, as he lifted a neck shadowed by a thick mane, marking his body on both sides with the self-striking whip of a tail which flickered about over his hairy back. Next, he left the shape of a lion's looks and let out a ringing neigh, now like an unbroken horse that lifts his neck on high to shake out the imperious tooth from the bit, and, smearing his cheek, whitened it with horary foam. Sometimes he poured out a whistling hiss from his mouth, a curling horned serpent covered with scales, darting out his tongue from his gaping throat, and leaping upon the grim Titan encircled his neck in snaky spiral coils. Then he left the shape of the restless crawler and became a tiger, his body tattooed with stripes; or again like a bull emitting a counterfeit roar from his mouth, he butted the Titans with a sharp horn. So he fought for his life, until Hera with jealous throat bellowed harshly through the air – that heavy-resentful stepmother! and the gates of Olympus rattled in echo to her jealous throat from high heaven. Then the bold bull collapsed: the murderers each eager for his turn with the knife chopped piecemeal the bull-shaped Dionysus.⁹

The myth of Zagreus, or the dismembering of the first Dionysus, is considered a central tenet of Orphism, where it is used to explain the origin of humanity

⁹ All translations of the *Dionysiaca* are adapted from ROUSE 1940, *Nonnus, Dionysiaca*.
 *I include an asterisk here to indicate how, as we shall see, this specific part of the translation can be strongly challenged.

whilst also implicating a series of ritual needs for the lifestyle of the initiate.¹⁰ The presence of Zagreus in the *Dionysiaca*, therefore, is often heralded as a firm piece of evidence for Nonnus' engagement with Orphic theogonies in his poem (the other two such divinities present are Rhea and Phanes); a reflection, perhaps, of the prominence of and accelerated interest in the Orphic 'movement' during the imperial Period.¹¹ Nonnus particularly appears to follow the Neoplatonic recycling of the myth; for instance, his choice to focus on the central role of Hera in Zagreus' destruction aligns this version with Olympiodorus' commentary which cites the goddess as the central instigator of the crime (*In Phd.* 1.3).¹² He also, however, notably diverges from a number of aspects of the so-called Orphic Zagreus. He removes all anthropogenic repercussions from the story: there is no trace here of the idea that the human race was itself born from the Titans. He is also pointedly reticent about the dismembering event itself. And whereas multiple sources attest to a keen interest in what happened to this murdered baby's flesh (according to one popular version, once he was dismembered, his limbs were put in a cauldron and given to his brother, who kept them near a tripod; commemorated with a tomb in Delphi)¹³ on this topic too our usually-boisterous poet is uncharacteristically silent. Such deviations have led most scholars to conclude that Zagreus, as with all the Orphic narratives in the text, does not indicate any strong or coherent adherence to Orphic discourse on Nonnus' part, but is rather used "solely for poetic purposes" – whatever exactly we take that to mean.¹⁴

However, within this ambivalently Orphic framework, Nonnus also includes a number of competing voices in Zagreus' brief birth, life and death. We may first note the suggestively – or at least suspiciously – Christian nodes with which the passage is laced. In the opening of the story, the lead up to Zagreus' birth, Nonnus addresses Persephone in an apostrophe, as *παρθένη* (6.155). Nonnus addresses his own characters a mere seven times in the whole of his sprawling epic: far less frequently than Homer (there are nineteen such addresses in the *Iliad* and fifteen in the *Odyssey*) – the poet who doubles Homer's canon shrinks his use of apostrophe – and less even than Apollonius,

¹⁰ On Orphism see BERNABÉ – CASSADÉUS 2008, *Orfeo*; EDMONDS 2013, *Redefining Ancient Orphism*; and HERRERO ET AL. 2011, *Tracing Orpheus*, with further comprehensive bibliography in BERNABÉ 2014, *Orpheus and Orphism*. Discussion of Orphic themes in the *Dionysiaca* in BERNABÉ – GARCÍA-GASCO 2016, *Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic Religion*, by whose observations this section's analysis has been much informed.

¹¹ Full references in in BERNABÉ – GARCÍA-GASCO 2016, *Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic Religion*, pp. 98-102.

¹² Proclus (*In Tim.* 1), by contrast simply cites 'envy' as the reason for the murder.

¹³ *Sch. in Lycoph.* 207, Callim. fr. 643 Pf. (on which see discussion below); Philochorus *FGrHist* 392 F 7. See BURKERT 1983, *Homo Necans*, p. 225, n. 43 and BERNABÉ ET AL. 2013, *Redefining Dionysos*, pp. 109-116.

¹⁴ Cf. BERNABÉ – GARCÍA-GASCO 2016, *Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic Religion*, p. 99: "[this] leads us to affirm that [Orphic] names and episodes are used solely for poetic interests."

who calls to his characters eight times. However, as Camille Geisz has shown, what makes Nonnus' use of the device so brazen, despite its brevity, is the type of characters to whom he speaks:¹⁵ unlike Homer and Apollonius, Nonnian apostrophes are almost always addressed to the main character Dionysus, and in stark contrast to Homer in particular (and his compassionate calls to 'victims' like Eumaeus and Patroclus), Nonnus does not just use apostrophe to elicit pity, but also to evoke more varied and even critical emotions: he addresses Dionysus "to encourage the narratee to share not only in his compassion for [his hero], but also in his admiration, and even amusement."¹⁶

The use of the vocative for Persephone, therefore, is marked in multiple ways as peculiar: she is one of the few characters in the *Dionysiaca* to receive the device,¹⁷ other than Dionysus himself (*she*, in this sense, is Dionysus 'first-called'); she is summoned into the narrative using a technique characterised in the poem by ambiguity; and, what is more, this is the only time in the entire epic (and, with one exception, in all surviving epic)¹⁸ that the word *παρθένος* occurs in the vocative in the narrator's voice.¹⁹ This striking singularity may point to a deep potential ambivalence in this apostrophe too: the poet calls, and thus calls *attention*, to Persephone as definable by this pivotal term. Now, when and whether *παρθένος* should be rendered 'maiden' in a straightforward sense of young woman (as Rouse translates it here) and when it carries more loaded connotations of virginity, chastity and unweddedness can be slippery and difficult to locate.²⁰ There is on the one hand no such difficulty in this passage. In Nonnus' story, the imminent, violent sexualization of Persephone is clearly the dominant theme: as the very next words in this line make clear, the poet "calls her *παρθένε* just as she is about to be a virgin no more"²¹ (*παρθένε Περσεφόνηα, σὺ δ' οὐ γάμον εὔρες ἀλύξαι, Dion. 6.155*). As the two inescapable 'unions' of rape and marriage are combined and syntactically

¹⁵ GEISZ 2018, *A Study of the Narrator*, pp. 231-246.

¹⁶ GEISZ 2018, *A Study of the Narrator*, p. 225.

¹⁷ The other characters who receive an apostrophe from the narrator are Iolaos, as part of the synchronism of Book 25 (25.211); Beroe at 41.143-54 and Actaeon, called Ἀκταίων βαρύποτμε at 5.3.10. Geisz herself reads Actaeon and Persephone (the only two characters who share the honour of narrative-text apostrophe from the poet's voice) as early foils for Dionysus.

¹⁸ A single other occurrence of this vocative is found in epic, in Triphiodorus, in a speech of Priam to Cassandra (433) (cf. GEISZ 2018, *A Study of the Narrator*, p. 239 n. 30); a mythological virgin who refuses sex with a god and gets raped by a human; whose *parthenos* status, therefore, carries comparably complex connotations.

¹⁹ Its other uses, all spoken by characters and about characters, are: Harmonia, *Dion. 4.92, Dion. 4.114 and Dion. 4.119*; Nicaia, *Dion. 15.264, Dion. 15.277 and Dion. 15.343, Dion. 16.145, Dion. 16.296, Dion. 16.298-299*; Chalcomede, *Dion. 34.334*; Beroe, *Dion. 42.114, Dion. 42.297, Dion. 42.363, Dion. 42.369 and Dion. 42.468*; Ariadne, *Dion. 47.428*; Pallene, *Dion. 48.205-206*; Aura, *Dion. 48.765, Dion. 48.832 and Dion. 48.859*. See GEISZ 2018, *A Study of the Narrator*, p. 239.

²⁰ See *LSJ* s.v. *παρθένος* 1-3. For specifically *op. virgin*, *opp. γυνή*, cf. e.g. *Soph. Tr. 148, Theoc. 27.65*.

²¹ GEISZ 2018, *A Study of the Narrator*, p. 239.

juxtaposed, the macabre interplay of *παρθένε*, *γάμον* and *εἶρες* works to stress Persephone's double status as unwedded and unbedded.²²

Rouse's translation is, therefore, clearly unnecessarily reticent. However, on the other hand, this exceptional use of the term by the Nonnian narrator, in the context of a virgin not yet married, and to narrate a wayward birth from a divine father, of a child who is innocent yet powerful, destined to rise again, may open up another powerful web of associations. One of the driving features of Gospel teaching is that Mary gives birth to Christ while still retaining her status as a "virgin" (*παρθένος*). This phenomenon of the virgin mother can be traced back to the Septuagint: the Hebrew word *almah* ("young woman") used at Isa. 7.14 folded into Greek as *παρθένος*. Via a famous move of typology, "the words of Isaiah were subsequently reinterpreted as a prophecy that finds fulfilment in the *παρθένος* Mary."²³ And, of course, for all of the range of meanings attested for the term in Greek, it is the specific reading of *παρθένος* as "virgin" that has dominated New Testament exegesis. As Shorrock well summarizes, Mary's dazed question to the angel Gabriel after he has informed her that she is to give birth to a child, "How shall this be seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1.34) provides a neat encapsulation of how "Mary is to be understood not simply as young, nor unmarried, but above all a virgin – lacking intimate knowledge of her betrothed."²⁴

Now, scholars converted to the possibility of a Christian reading of Nonnus' 'pagan' poem (as arbitrary and unhelpful as such short-hands always are) have been quick to note the heavy emphasis on the *παρθένος* in the wider narrative of the *Dionysiaca*: how Nonnus seems to go 'out of his way'²⁵ to draw attention to a succession of *παρθένοι* throughout the poem, many of whom who are raped either by Dionysus or his father Zeus; and how his frequent use of the term itself is a marked deviation from the preceding epic tradition (where the word barely features at all, in the vocative or otherwise).²⁶ This emphasis has been read as reflective of Nonnus' engagement both with 'the *parthenos* debate' at the heart of the miracle of the Nativity, and with wider contestations surrounding the body and sexuality within the late antique world. Virginity, in

²² Euripides, a key model for Nonnus as part of his wide reaching tragic inheritance, also uses the term for Persephone during the choral ode in *Helen*, where the chorus ventriloquise the speech of Zeus in his attempts to placate the wrath of Demeter (βῆτε, σεμναὶ Χάριτες, ἴτε, τῆ περι παρθένῳ | Διοῖ θυμωσαμένα | λύπαν ἐξαλλάξαι' ἀλαλῆ, Eur. *Hel.* 1342-1345) Nonnus here provides his own redrafting of the links between Zeus, Persephone, virginity and motherhood, this time moving one branch further down the mythological family tree.

²³ SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, pp. 93.

²⁴ SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, pp. 92-93.

²⁵ SHORROCK 2011, *Myth of Paganism*, p. 93.

²⁶ Cf. SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 94: "Though ... statistics are prone to mislead as often as they illuminate, it may be of interest to note that 276 out of a total of 383 citations of the word *παρθένος* (and associated words with the same stem) from the epic canon on the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae database come from Nonnus."

other words, is taken as one of the manifold connections between the myths of Dionysus and Christ which Nonnus expands and exploits.²⁷ Particular attention has been paid in this vein to the rape of Aura, the huntress who prized her virginity above all else before it is taken from her by Dionysus in the final book of the epic. Liebeschuetz has highlighted verbal connections between the episode and discussions of Christ's paradoxical birth in Gregory Nazianzus and John Chrysostom;²⁸ and Shorrock has suggested a knowing irony in Artemis' mocking of Aura's childlessness (*Dion.* 48.834, οὐκ ἴδον, οὐ πυθόμην, ὅτι παρθένος νῆα λοχεύει, "I have neither seen nor heard that a virgin bears a child") – "since the story of Christ is precisely about the revelation of a virgin who does give birth to a son. Aura behaves like a Classical heroine, ironically unaware that she is playing out her role before a late antique audience in a post-Classical world."²⁹ Virtually no mention, however, in any such discussions is made of Persephone, who is bestowed not only with the loaded term *parthenos*, but in the almost-unique vocative, in tidings from the poet's own voice. The role of the Zagreus episode in this Christian-inflected discourse in the *Dionysiaca* remains bafflingly under-considered.

We shall shortly return centrally to the role of Zagreus in the Christian resonances of the poem. But my first point here is a simple one. Given the 'Christian context' of Nonnus' world, broadly conceived, such story structures, verbal cues and narrative themes always already have double significance. In *this* telling of *this* story, our poet makes Zagreus a crucial early contender for this sort of typological overlapping. In the carefully duplicitous language of this description, the Orphic story of Zagreus is redrafted through a capaciously Christian lens, just as the Christian potentiality of the story is refracted through its Orphic inheritance. These alternative modes and traditions are made to fuse rather than compete, entwined like the tendrils of a vine.

This fusion continues and intensifies, as running alongside such Orphic and Christian currents are intertextual moments drawn from the classical world. To even the casual reader of this passage (if such a reader exists for the *Dionysiaca*...), the prevalence of Homeric language is obvious: Homeric lexica, divine appellations (patronymics such as *Kronides*, 6.177) and morphology (pronouns and uncontracted forms). In all respects, Nonnus' engagement with the Homeric idiolect, here as in the whole of the *Dionysiaca*, is a resounding feature of his diction.³⁰

²⁷ Other such themes include birth, the vine, illuminations, verbal salutations, and, of course, and a topic to which we shall soon centrally return, resurrection.

²⁸ LIEBESCHUETZ 1995, *Pagan Mythology*, p. 206.

²⁹ SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 94.

³⁰ On Nonnus and Homeric language see the syntheses in HOPKINSON 1994, *Nonnus and Homer* and BANNERT – KRÖLL 2016, *Nonnus and the Homeric Poems*, pp. 484-487, each with further bibliography.

However, within this broad Homeric texture, the scene also exhibits some characteristic verbal innovations, and competing intertextual quotations. In *Dion.* 6.180-181, Nonnus gives the image of Zagreus as a teenager, “with the flower of youth first marking his rounded chin with black”. This phrase displays two key strategies of Nonnian self-differentiation: one lexical and the other literary. In terms of vocabulary, the adjective ἀκροκελαινιόωντα, a complex, compound participle, is found only once in Homer (*Il.* 21.249, to describe a river), and is used three times by Nonnus (also at the *Dionysiaca*, *Dion.* 18.156 and *Dion.* 38.377), demonstrating our poet’s penchant for playing with Homeric hapaxes: “the repetition of rare but exquisitely positioned words to stimulate flashback literary recollection is [one of his] favourite means of literary zest.”³¹ On a poetic level, this whole description is highly suggestive of Callimachean programmatics. Youth and childhood have long been recognized as running themes in the *Aetia*; and when the old poet falls asleep, his young counterpart meets the Muses in a dream, where, a scholion relates, he is ἀρτιγένειος, “sprouting his first beard” (fr. 2d = Σ Flor. 15-20). The epithet enjoyed a long literary afterlife and inspired many subsequent imitations; and as Alan Cameron and Annette Harder have convincingly argued, may well have its basis in the text of Callimachus itself.³² This chain of imagery has often been thematically connected to Callimachus’ innovating intentions in *his* poetry – his aim to create something fresh and new. On an initial reading, therefore, Nonnus is appropriating this Callimachean symbol of novelty in order to assert his own agenda of originality.

But a further node in Nonnus’ passage affects the tone of this Callimachean appropriation. At 165 Persephone is described as Ζαγρέα γειναμένη. This phrase contains a very different allusion to Callimachus. It appears word-for-word in a surviving hymnic fragment of his *œuvre* (Callim. fr. 643 Pf):

Υἷα Διόνυσον Ζαγρέα γειναμένη.

In this fragment, Callimachus himself is discussing Dionysus’ early life as Zagreus. His version seems to adhere rigorously to Orphic aspects of the myth: the verse stands as our first identifiable reference to the dismemberment strand of the story, and its location at Delphi – strands which, as we have seen, Nonnus pointedly ignores. By using this identical phrase to describe his own reimagining of Persephone, Nonnus thus combines Callimachean poetological themes (the *Aetia*’s appeals to youth as innovation) with Alexandrian ‘literary’ Orphism. In other words, he points to Callimachus as an ‘Orphic’ source and

³¹ BANNERT – KRÖLL 2016, *Nonnus and the Homeric Poems*, p. 485. A full study of hapaxes in Nonnus has yet to be undertaken.

³² CAMERON 1995, *Callimachus and his Critics*, p. 131 and HARDER 2012, *Callimachus’ Aetia* (vol. 2), p. 144.

model too; a model which he follows closely intertextually but whose story-book he fearlessly casts aside. The passage thus draws attention to the numerous lines of inheritance which inform and lie behind it: just as Orphism and Christianity are linked via the hinge of Persephone's 'virginal' status, so too is Orphism twinned with Callimacheanism through alternative verbal echoes. The different models for the scene are made to speak directly to one another, in a polyphony of ventriloquized voices.

3. Shape Shifting Poetics and Nonnian Self-Reflection

What these examples begin to show is how in the description of this monstrous baby, Nonnus creates a 'hybrid of hybrids'. Dubious Orphism and elicit Christianity, Homeric lexis and Callimachean allusion: Zagreus contains within him multiple different parts. Now, this claim could of course be made for almost any passage of the *Dionysiaca*. Part of what makes this poem so remarkable is precisely its enlarged and elaborate mixture of elements – cultural, generic and literary. However, I now want to consider how Zagreus represents not just an *example* of Nonnian hybridity, but an *image* for it: a guide for how to read the multiplex poetics of the *Dionysiaca* as a whole.

Key to this image is a major element of this episode, which I have deferred from discussing until this point, and which dominates and even derails all of the more subtle Orphic, Christian and classical echoes, is the remarkable shape-shifting that Zagreus undertakes (*Dion.* 6.176-199): first into gods (his father Zeus and grandfather Cronus), then into humans (a baby and adolescent) – which together represent the four stages of human life – and then into animals: a lion, a horse, a serpent, a tiger and a bull. And crucially, these transformations seem to be an innovation on Nonnus' part. A substitution for the usual facets of the Orphic story (the anthropogony, the *sparagmos*, the burial) this sequence forms a unique interjection in his take on the Zagreus myth.

The decision to turn Zagreus into a mutating figure clearly aligns him not only with the shape-shifting tendencies of his heir, the 'real' Dionysus, but also with the bendy, protean aesthetic of the *Dionysiaca*, heralded in the first proem, by the programmatic shape-shifter god Proteus, with whom the epic begins (*Dion.* 1.13-33):

ἀλλὰ χοροῦ ψαύοντα, Φάρω παρὰ γείτοσι νήσῳ,
 στήσατέ μοι Πρωτῆα πολύτροπον, ὄφρα φανείη
 ποικίλον εἶδος ἔχων, ὅτι ποικίλον ὕμνον ἀράσσω· (15)
 εἰ γὰρ ἐφερπύσσειε δράκων κυκλούμενος ὄλκῳ,
 μέλψω θεῖον ἄεθλον, ὅπως κισσώδεϊ θύρσῳ
 φρικτὰ δρακοντοκόμων ἐδαΐζετο φῦλα Γιγάντων·
 εἰ δὲ λέων φρίζειεν ἐπαυχενίην τρίχα σείων,
 Βάκχον ἀνευάζω βλοσυρῆς ἐπὶ πῆχει Ψείρης (20)
 μαζὸν ὑποκλέπτοντα λεοντοβότοιο θεαίνης·

εἰ δὲ θυελλήεντι μετάρσιος ἄλματι ταρσῶν
 πόρδαλις αἴξιη πολυδαίδαλον εἶδος ἀμείβων,
 ὑμνήσω Διὸς υἷα, πόθεν γένος ἔκτανεν Ἴνδῶν
 πορδαλίων ὀχέεσσι καθιπεύσας ἔλεφάντων· (25)
 εἰ δέμας ἰσάζοιτο τύφῳ σὺός, υἷα Θυώνης
 ἀείσω ποθέοντα συοκτόνον εὐγαμον Αὔρην,
 ὄψιγόνου τριτάτοιο Κυβηλίδα μητέρα Βάκχου·
 εἰ δὲ πέλοι μιμηλὸν ὕδωρ, Διόνυσον ἀείσω
 κόλπῳ ἄλῳς δύνοντα κορυσσομένοιο Λυκούργου· (30)
 εἰ φυτὸν αἰθύσσοιτο νόθον ψιθύρισμα τιταίνων,
 μνήσομαι Ἰκαρίοιο, πόθεν παρὰ θυιάδι ληνῶ
 βότρυς ἀμιλλητήρι ποδῶν ἐθλίβετο ταρσῶ.

But bring me a partner for your dance in the neighbouring island of Pharos, Proteus of many turns, that he may appear in all his manifold form, since I strike a manifold song. For if, as a serpent, he should glide along his winding trail, I will sing of that divine achievement, how with ivy-wreathed wand he destroyed the horrid swarms of serpent-haired Giants. If as a lion he shake his bristling mane, I will cry “Euoi” to Bacchus on the arm of burly Rhea, stealthily draining the breast of the lion-breeding goddess. If as a leopard he shoot up into the air with stormy leap from his paws, quickly changing his many-shaped form like a master craftsman, I will hymn the son of Zeus, how he slew the Indian people, riding down the elephants with his teams of leopards. If he makes his body into the shape of a boar, I will sing of Thyone’s son, love-sick for well-married Aurora, slayer of boars, mother of the third Bacchus, late-born. If he be mimic water, I will sing Dionysus diving into the bosom of the sea, when Lycurgus armed himself. If he becomes a quivering tree and tune a counterfeit whispering, I will tell of Icarus, how in the jubilant winepress his feet crushed the grape in rivalry.

Indeed, Zagreus’ series of shapes, each (apart from the horse) related to the cult of Dionysus, are also directly parallel to Proteus’ opening transformations. So, the ‘proto Dionysus’ also becomes a posterior Proteus, himself a programmatic emblem for the yet-to-be-born Dionysus. Here is a dramatic instance of Nonnus’ ‘preposterous’ use of analogy – “where one narrative [or character] always seems to have the capability of announcing another proleptically, as well as echoing another retrospectively.”³³

We may note also the repeated presence in this sequence of the word νόθος. Zagreus is attacked whilst looking at his νόθον εἶδος (*Dion.* 6.173), and during his metamorphosis he emits a roar which is νόθον (*Dion.* 6.198) – which intensifies the earlier description of his leonine cry as μιμηλός (*Dion.* 6.182). Now, νόθος – which means (and we shall come back to this translation) either “counterfeit” or “bastard” – is a term which recurs again and again throughout

³³ GOLDHILL 2015, *Preposterous Poetics*, p. 156. Goldhill gives a convincing account of Nonnus’ penchant for this sort of topsy-turvy echoing, which he terms ‘preposterous poetics’, and connects to typological strategies of Jewish and Christian exegesis. Different but related comments on this aspect of Nonnus’ style in SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 120; AGOSTI 2008, *Le Dionisiache e le arte figurative*, p. 2; HARDIE 2005, *Nonnus’ Typhon*, p. 123.

the poem. Thus, to take just the first book as a paradigmatic example, the proem's own shape-shifting series ends by imagining Proteus' "counterfeit whispering" (νόθον ψιθύρισμα, *Dion.* 1.31) – with ψιθύρισμα itself already a loaded programmatic term from the pastoral world: it occurs in the first line of Theocritus' first *Idyll* as he announces his own 'rebellious' venture in this new bucolic poetics –³⁴ and the concept is personified and magnified in the narrative through Typhon the usurper, who is described as a Ζεὺς νόθος (*Dion.* 1.295).³⁵ As a result of such applications, the term is often most tightly connected to the poem's sense of hybridity: part of a series of words related to imitation, appropriation and mimesis (μιμηλός, πολύτροπος, ποικίλος, all of which also star in the opening proem).³⁶ However, whilst this is undoubtedly an important aspect of the word's valence in the poem, νόθος exerts a stronger force than the other mimetic words in this group, because bastardy is also inherently connected to conditions of parentage and birth – and so νόθος connects polyformity of texture with deviance of *genealogy*. In this familial sense, the word also functions from the start of the poem as a tag not only for Dionysus' own dysfunctional birth, and anxious relationship with his distant father Zeus, but also for the text's own wayward relationship to its literary heritage – Nonnus as the 'bastard' child of his own errant poetic dad, 'father Homer.' This double aspect of νόθος is what makes the term particularly emblematic for Dionysus the character, and for Nonnus the Dionysiac poet. Its application to Zagreus – to refer, literally, to the 'counterfeit' aspects of his transformative performance, but also, more conceptually, as a nod to his wayward family lineage – brings *both* aspects of the term to the fore through him. Zagreus, like Dionysus, and like Nonnus himself, emerges as a figure who embodies both senses of νόθος, as a driving metaphor for the poem.

Through these programmatic alignments, Zagreus can clearly function as a figure *for* Nonnus' transformative epic ambitions in the *Dionysiaca*. That is, he serves to visualize the literary-cultural hybridity of the passage, and, by extension, the poem: an emblem for this daring, multi-faceted epic undertaking. However, this straightforward metapoetic 'match up' (character as *mise en abyme* for poem) is not the end of the reflexive story. In the deeper recesses of the episode, there are more complex, and indeed more critical, aspects to Zagreus' depiction, which begin to suggest his more lasting impact on Nonnus' conception of his project.

³⁴ On Nonnus' engagement with pastoral poetry, particularly enshrined in the figure of Cadmus and the power of his song, see LASEK 2016, *Nonnus and the Play of Genres*, pp. 406-412, and ACOSTA-HUGHES 2016, *Composing the Masters*, each with further bibliography.

³⁵ The same description is applied to Brontes at *Dion.* 28.199.

³⁶ For example, Hadjittofi discusses the word in her discussion of 'hybridity', in her survey of the major themes and motifs in the poem (HADJITTOFI 2016, *Major Themes*, p. 141).

Nonnus' version of the Titans' attack also includes some pointed, and initially baffling, emphases. The Titans "disguise their faces with chalk" in order to ambush the baby (*ἀλλά ἔ γύψω κερδαλέη χρισθέντες ἐπίκλοπα κύκλα προσώπου*, *Dion.* 6.169-170). This on the one hand may be understood as part of the Orphic material in the scene: precedent for the Titans' 'chalk moment' is found a verse from the Hellenistic poet Euphorion (*πάντα δέ οἱ νεκυηδὸν ἐλευκαίνοντο πρόσωπα*, "they whitened themselves their entire faces, as if they were corpses")³⁷ which corresponds to the information provided in other sources, like the text of Harpocration, who also describes the Titans "smearing themselves with chalk, so as not to be recognized".³⁸ However, we have seen how happy is Nonnus to dispose of a number of 'obvious' Orphic manoeuvres in his version of the tale. So why retain this particular esoteric strand? The incident first creates a situation whereby the Titans themselves to take part in the process of disguise and mutation, later matched and outdone by the drama of Zagreus' own metamorphic spectacle. It also concentrates attention on faces, as the *loci* for this dress-up act. This emphasis is picked up by other references to the same feature. Zeus changes his 'face' in *Dion.* 6.157 (*προσώπου* again) as he becomes a serpent to rape Persephone. Zagreus the 'Callimachean youth' has the down first staining his *κύκλα προσώπου* (*Dion.* 6.181) – a direct repetition of the wording for the Titans' disguise. And even the horse (*Dion.* 6.190) is described as "smearing his cheek" (*περιτριβὼν γένυον*) to whiten it with foam. Also salient is the presence of reflective surfaces or metals: Zagreus is destroyed, as we have seen, whilst contemplating his *νόθον εἶδος* in a mirror (*Dion.* 6.173); he is cut down by the Titan steel (*Dion.* 6.174 *σιδήρω*) and, later, with their knife (*Dion.* 6.205).

This combination of faces and mirrors works together to create an insistent focus on *reflection*: and specifically, reflection on (and of) the self.³⁹ In a programmatic passage which 'reflects' the changeable poetics of the epic, *self-reflection* itself is also thematized. It is as if Nonnus is being self-conscious about being self-conscious: visualizing the sorts of metapoetic moves that the narrative of the episode displays. This is all the more significant because Zagreus (at least literally) *fails* in this story. He fails to take over Zeus' position, and to escape from the Titans; and transformation here disables, as well as enables, such acts of usurpation. Zeus' metamorphosis into a snake facilitates his rape of Persephone. But Zagreus' shape-shifting awesomeness does not help *him* at all – like Homer's Proteus, he is not able to slip his way out of capture. In this respect, the Zagreus story enables the Nonnian poet to 'close

³⁷ *Fr.* 29 DE CUENCA.

³⁸ Harpocration, *Lexicon* s.v. ἀπομάττων (36 Keyney = Bernabé *OF* 308 II). On these precedents, see GARCÍA-GASCO VILLARUBIA 2011, *Titans in Disguise*, pp. 113-116.

³⁹ On mirrors and the *mise en abyme*, see DALLENBACH 1989, *The Mirror in the text*, who would have surely loved this passage (and Nonnus).

read' critically his own *poikilos* persona: to consider what is at stake in this new kind of epic, what it will look like, and even what it will cost. Self-laudatory mutability is *not* always the key to easy superiority – and Zagreus can contain a warning, even a self-warning, against the smugness of excessive self-reflection.

4. Zagreus Lives: The Poem Which 'Begins Again'

Such a line of interpretation may seem to affirm, after all, Shorrock's negative reading of the scene. If he works as a vehicle for Nonnus' critical scrutiny, surely Zagreus indeed represents the poet's failed prototype; a catalogue of his former literary misfires? However, the end of the scene contains the twist to this Nonnian self-'close reading'. After Zagreus is torn apart, Nonnus tells us that his transformative usurpation is replaced by something else (*Dion.* 6.175):

τέρμα βίου Διόνυσος ἔχων παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν

The end of his life was the beginning of a new life as Dionysus.

We shall soon return in detail to the crucial paradoxes underscored by every word in this line. But for now, it must first be noted that as a narrative prolepsis, the statement primes the reader to look for Zagreus in the poem again. And this return comes in a number of different ways. The first, as directly cued by this prediction, is his 'rebirth' as Dionysus, who is born in full in the ninth book of the epic. And yet such a process is difficult, even discomforting, in its significations – as the grammar of this verse subtly foregrounds. It remains true, after all, that it is Dionysus, not Zagreus, who is really the subject of *Dion.* 6.175: the *τέρμα βίου* is *his*. Gods are not meant to die, but before he achieves a new beginning, this divinity 'has' a death.⁴⁰ So too is the narrative fulfilment of this rebirth equally murky, almost dark. For despite his frequent appellation (in the *Dionysiaca* and elsewhere) as Dionysus 'first born', the scene describing Dionysus' 'real' birth does not feature Zagreus directly at all: the emphasis instead is on Zeus' paradoxical status as child bearer – the proxy womb of his thigh – Hera's characteristic jealousy, and the attempts to hide the new-born with a series of surrogate carers: the river nymphs, then Io, then Rhea (*Dion.* 9).

However, as the poem continues, Zagreus 'reappears' more palpably in the words and memory of the characters. A number of the 'passing mentions' which we discussed at the beginning of this contribution in fact provide strong vocal reminders of Zagreus' inherent connection to the new star of the

⁴⁰ This uncomfortable – but crucial – fact that *Dion.* 6.175 makes Dionysus die and have a new beginning from Zagreus, not Zagreus dying and having a new beginning as Dionysus, is obscured by most of the existing translations of the line (as ROUSE's here, which I have once again retained in order to critique).

Dionysian show: neither Dionysus, nor his readers, are allowed to forget the existence of his earlier incarnation. He is used as rhetorical sniping tool for Dionysus' enemies, as a means of undermining his divine and heroic status. To buoy up his troops before the sea battle, the Indian leader Deriades recalls how Zeus once gave his throne to Zagreus, "the *more* ancient Dionysus" (*Dion.* 39.72, παλαιότερω Διονύσῳ), to deflate Dionysus' claims to divine parentage: and by retelling the story of Zagreus' usurpation as an act of willing benevolence from Zeus (*Dion.* 9.73, δῶκε γέρας Ζαγρῆι) Deriades also punctures Dionysus' connection to his heavenly father by establishing a jarring contrast: the baby got the lightning, Bacchus only the lowly vine (*Dion.* 39.73, ἀστεροπήν Ζαγρῆι καὶ ἄμπελον οἴνοπι Βάκχῳ). Likewise Gaia, who later incites the Giants against Dionysus, alludes to the death of Zagreus as an earlier instance of how she armed her 'slayers' against Dionysus, and won (*Dion.* 48.29-30, πρεσβυτέρους Τιτῆνας ἐπὶ προτέρῳ Διονύσῳ, ἰδρυότερους δὲ Γίγαντας ἐπ' ὀψιγόνῳ Διονύσῳ, "the older Titans against the former Dionysus, the younger Giants against Dionysus later born"). By terming both enemies 'Dionysus', Gaia exploits the potential vulnerability of the god who has died before. In the jibes of his opponents, therefore, Zagreus is not Dionysus' failed prototype, but his superior 'more ancient' rival, or palimpsestic entity, whose presence can continue to sting him. What better way to deflate the (ego)centricism of the epic hero than to remind him that he is always supplementary; his 'story' has happened before?

However, in the final book of the poem, the two figures are linked more positively. Once Dionysus is enthroned on Mount Olympus, the Athenians welcome his son Iacchus into the Temple of Athena. As they conduct their Bacchic ceremonies, they establish new sacrifices for a full cast of 'Dionysuses' (*Dion.* 48.962-968):

καὶ θεὸν ἰλάσκοντο μεθ' υἱέα Περσεφονείης,
καὶ Σεμέλης μετὰ παῖδα, θνηπολίας δὲ Λυαίῳ
ὀψιγόνῳ στήσαντο καὶ ἀρχεγόνῳ Διονύσῳ,
καὶ τριτάτῳ νέον ὕμνον ἐπεσμαράγησαν Ἰάκχῳ. (965)
καὶ τελεταῖς τρισσῆσιν ἐβακχεύθησαν Ἀθηναί·
καὶ χορὸν ὀπιτέλεστον ἀνεκρούσαντο πολῖται
Ζαγρέα κυδαίνοντες ἅμα Βρομίῳ καὶ Ἰάκχῳ.

They honoured him (Iacchus) as a god next after the son of Persephone, and after Semele's son; they established sacrifices for Dionysus late born and Dionysus first born and third they chanted a new hymn for Iacchus. In these three celebrations Athens held high revel; in the dance lately made, the Athenians beat the step in honour of Zagreus and Bromius and Iacchus altogether.

So, the epic ends its winding journey with Zagreus, who is placed at the heart of the Athenian ritual, the first of a Dionysian triptych. It is thus in the language and performance of worship that pre-, 'full' and post-Dionysus are experienced ἅμα: 'living' in the poem at the same time.

Zagreus therefore exerts a presence on the epic that goes beyond his opaque manifestation ‘in’ Dionysus, and his relationship with the poem’s protagonist is in many ways a dynamic co-existence: not a palimpsestic write-over. These verbal combinations pave the way for a final mode of recurrence for Zagreus, and it is here that his status in the poem achieves its most profound and lasting effect.

Zagreus ‘becomes’ Dionysus through *resurrection*: and the framing of that line *Dion.* 6.175 makes clear that his final transformation will be in this act: an ontological revivification, with ‘end’ (τέρμα) making way for a beginning (ἀρχήν). Zagreus’ life, death, and future life are all shaped by this concept of resurrection: it is his *re*-beginning that is underscored and emphasized; not, as we have seen, the more terrestrial destiny of his former body. It could be that in his selective use of Orphic tenets of the myth, Nonnus chose to do away with the description of what happened to his dismembered limbs or bones precisely so as to focus attention solely on this aspect of his afterlife. Now, the promise of Zagreus’ resurrection is of course the first example of a theme which frequently occurs throughout the poem. The *Dionysiaca* features many examples of physical as well as metaphorical resurrection. In the two most prominent cases, in a story depicted on the shield of Dionysus, Tylus is killed by a serpent but is miraculously resurrected by a life-giving herb (*Dion.* 25.451-552). And in Books 11-12 Dionysus’ lover Ampelus dies in an accident, but is brought back to life in form of the vine.⁴¹

This theme is, unsurprisingly, considered to be one of the most major vectors of connection between the *Dionysiaca* and Christian discourse: strengthened by the presence of ambivalent terms such as *parthenos*, such scenes can be read as intersecting intensely with a wider Christian concern with life after death – an example of the ‘explosion’ of interest in the literature of the imperial period (also observed readily in the prose romances) with resurrection, often in the original body.⁴² In the case of Tylus, such a case can be made with vehemence: Tylus is restored to life in his original form, thus providing, on the most Homeric of objects (a re-writing of the shield of Achilles) and most classical of literary forms (the tool of narrative *ekphrasis*) “an incontrovertible narrative of bodily resurrection”.⁴³ So much so, that for Spanoudakis, through the inclusion of such themes on the shield Nonnus offers “a universal history equal to

⁴¹ For further analysis of this theme in the poem, and these two episodes in particular, see SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, pp. 97-100 and BERNABÉ – GARCÍA-GASCO 2016, *Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic Religion*, pp. 104-107.

⁴² E.g. BOWERSOCK 1994, *Fiction as History*, p. 99: “Among the most conspicuous features of the fiction of the Roman empire, not only the prose romances but the mythological confections as well, is resurrection after death in the original body.” Further discussion of this quotation in this vein in SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 97.

⁴³ SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 97.

Christian salvation: from the creation of the world to the installation of the new world, prefigured, albeit not fulfilled, in Dionysus and Zeus.”⁴⁴

Ampelus, by contrast, does not return in the same bodily form as before, but rather gains new life through metamorphosis. And yet there remain ample parallel possibilities with Gospel narratives through his very name and status as the vine. Shorrock has shown how such parallels are supported by the correspondence and interaction between the *ampelos* in Nonnus’ *Paraphrase* 15 and the man-cum-vine in the *Dionysiaca*: “where Christ uses metaphor to describe his own similarity to a vine, the young satyr called Ampelus is actually transformed into the plant that bears his name; Christ the metaphorical vine will suffer death, but will be bodily resurrected and will then return to heaven; Ampelus, the satyr, will die, but will enjoy resurrection and new life as the vine.”⁴⁵ Through his twin embodiment of these two symbolic and suggestive themes – the vine and the resurrection – Ampelus thus cements his central status in the religious duplicity of the text.

These ‘Christian’ layers in the Dionysiac resurrections have been located most directly through a further, specific set of parallels: the striking overlap, both verbal and thematic, between these two episodes in the *Dionysiaca* and the story of Lazarus as retold by Nonnus in the *Paraphrase*.⁴⁶ In the case of the Tylus episode especially, the essential similarity of a man mourned by his friends and family who is resurrected from death in his original body is bolstered by a number of close intertextual parallels.⁴⁷ The most crucial of these connections is the striking compound *παλινάγρετον*. Meaning “taken back”, “recalled”, or “coming back again”, it is a rare piece of morphology: found just once in Homer, in the negative, as Zeus asserts his unbreakable promise to Thetis (*Il.* 1.526-527, οὐ γὰρ ἔμὸν παλινάγρετον οὐδ’ ἀπατηλὸν | οὐδ’ ἀτελεύτητον ὃ τί κεν κεφαλῇ κατανεύσω.), it otherwise appears only sparingly (usually on isolated occasions, once in a text) in a range of works from Theocritus to the Pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield*.⁴⁸ Unsurprisingly, given the lexical megalomania that we have discussed, Nonnus explodes and experiments with the term: it features twenty-two times in the *Dionysiaca* alone, and a further eight times in the *Paraphrase*, more uses than any other surviving author. On

⁴⁴ SPANOUDAKIS 2014, *The Shield*, pp. 370-371, as discussed in BERNABÉ – GARCÍA-GASCO 2016, *Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic Religion*, p. 107.

⁴⁵ SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 100.

⁴⁶ For the connections between the Lazarus story and the Ampelus episode, on which this argument will not focus, see especially SPANOUDAKIS 2013, *Resurrections*; SPANOUDAKIS 2014, *Nonnus, Paraphrasis (XI)*, and SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 100, with full references and potential correspondences.

⁴⁷ List at VIAN 1990, *Nonnos, Dionysiaques (XXV-XXIX)*, pp. 267-268, reprinted by SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 98. Vian contrary to Shorrock, prefers the anteriority of the *Dionysiaca* to the *Paraphrase*.

⁴⁸ See *LSJ* s.v. *παλινάγρετος*.

three such occasions, however, he pairs the adjective with ἀρχή.⁴⁹ Such a doublet creates a brazen temporal contradiction. A newness that is also a return, a start predicated by a recall; to begin, this phrase demands, you also have to go back. By coining this paradoxical formula,⁵⁰ Nonnus thus constructs and enacts that profound tension of competing motions – the linear versus the circular – that our own compound ‘re-surrection’ more latently conveys. It is therefore particularly resonant that this pairing occurs during the corporeal resurrections of Tylus and Lazarus; miracles which forcefully express exactly this doubleness of position in time (*Dion.* 25.545-549 and *Par.* 11.160-165):

καὶ νέκυς ἀμφιέπων βιοτῆς παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν (545)
 δεξιτεροῦ μὲν ἔπαλλε ποδὸς θέναρ, ἀμφὶ δὲ λαιὸν
 ὀρθώσας στατὸν ἴχνος ὄλω στηρίζετο ταρσῶ
 ἀνδρὸς ἔχων τύπον ἴσον, ὃς ἐν λεχέεσσιν ἰαύων
 ὄρθριον οἰγομένης ἀποσειέται ὕπνον ὀπωπῆς

The body, busy again with the beginning of life, moved the sole of the right foot, rose upon the left and stood firmly based on both feet, like a man lying in bed who shakes the sleep from his eyes in the morning.

ἄπνοον ἄνδρα κάλεσσε, καὶ ἔτρεχε νεκρὸς ὀδίτης (160)
 στείχων αὐτοκέλευθος ὀμοπλέκτῳ χθόνα ταρσῶ
 ἄπνοον ἄνδρα κάλεσσε, καὶ ἐν φθιμένοισιν ἀκούσας
 ἐξ Ἄϊδος νόστησε φυγὰς νέκυς ὄψιμον ἄλλην
 ἀθρήσας μετὰ τέρμα βίου παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν
 θαμβαλέην... (165)

He called the lifeless man; the corpse at once sat up, ran staggering along the ground on tangled feet. He called the lifeless man among the withered dead, who, hearing, ran from Hades, fleeing, seeing here a stunning new beginning after the end of life.

It is remarkable, however, that the third and only other use of the phrase – the first occurrence in the *Dionysiaca* (also, like the Lazarus line, with the phrase τέρμα βίου), much earlier in narrative time than Tylus, and far deeper in mythical-chronological history than Lazarus – has not been fully brought in to this picture.⁵¹ And yet the παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν of Zagreus is surely of vital

⁴⁹ Cf. relatedly, *Dion.* 10.49, χρονίην παλινάγρετον Ἰνώ.

⁵⁰ It is only in Nonnus' poems that the phrase παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν occurs anywhere in surviving Greek literature.

⁵¹ Scholars have used the phrase to link either the Tylus and Lazarus episodes (in addition to VIAN as discussed here, see also SPANOUDAKIS 2014, *The Shield*, pp. 370-371, whose argument about the shield of Dionysus and the Christian narrative of the cosmos are based in part on intertextual parallels between the Tylus panel and the Lazarus section of the *Paraphrase*) or the Tylus and Zagreus scenes (BERNABÉ – GARCÍA-GASCO 2016, *Nonnus and Dionysiac-Orphic Religion*, p. 105): no discussion has, in any depth or detail, joined the three passages together. In his discussion of Tylus and Lazarus, SHORROCK 2011, *The Myth of Paganism*, p. 98, notes in passing the recurrence of the phrase in the Zagreus episode, but it is baffling that neither he nor Vian includes παλινάγρετον ἀρχήν in their lists of parallels between the with Tylus and Lazarus episodes (in

importance to understanding the links between the phrase and Nonnian narratives of resurrection. Achieving a ‘new life’ which is both, like Tylus and Lazarus, ‘physical’ (he becomes Dionysus) and, like Ampelus, metamorphic and symbolic (connected to his series of previous shape-shiftings); a change which is both linear and (in the poetic memory of the characters) always already a return, Zagreus best embodies the multifaceted aspects of Dionysiac-Johannine resurrection. So, it is entirely fitting that he is given the loaded first instance of a phrase which Nonnus uses to capture the paradoxical power of this process. The intertext thus strengthens the connections between the Zagreus episode and the (so-called) ‘major’ expositions in Nonnus of life after death (Ampelus, Tylus, Lazarus, Christ), and affirms this baby’s central, epigonal, instigative role in the theme of resurrection as explored across the poet’s work.

5. Coda: The Nonnian Whole

‘Metapoetics’ is not a popular word in classical scholarship anymore. Matthew Leigh has deemed it “the dreariest of contemporary approaches to ancient verse”⁵² and Primit Chaudhuri warned against its “overfamiliarity” in modern readings of ancient poets, which “works against the thrill of [their] gambit”.⁵³ But Nonnus resists such critical resistance: the epic poet who, as we have seen, uses Proteus as the image for the protean, begins Gospel time by denying time itself, doubles up on proems, and glosses his own metaphors, actively revels in the programmatic, and explores new routes for literary self-consciousness which are surely anything but dreary. Zagreus, I have argued, needs to figure much more centrally in conversations about this highly reflective, hyper-reflexive poet’s voice.

As a figure in such conversations, it is now clear how the previous programmatic readings of Zagreus can be overturned, and even reversed. Via his literal, linguistic and literary resurrection, Zagreus cannot represent an earlier attempt at Nonnian poetics because he does not end or die: at 175 earliness and currentness collapse into themselves. Resurrection, it seems, allows Nonnus to formulate an antidote to the pitfalls of ostentatious mutation; to sidestep the idea that the only kind of succession is the replacement of one generational figure by the next. It is telling, in this light, that during his shape-shifting show, Zagreus appears at one time as Zeus and at another as Cronus: he can be son, and father, and son of the father at any given time. Dionysus, the god who dies, is split

the Tylus scene, both only cite only cite the *σπιριγμόν ... παλινάγρετον* of the serpent at *Dion.* 25.536, and ignore entirely the second use of the compound with *ἀρχήν*, a few lines later in the resurrection itself. Further noting of the Zagreus reference in SPANOUDAKIS 2014, *Nonnus, Paraphrasis (XI)*, p. 286 (‘Also significant’, but without extended discussion).

⁵² LEIGH 2006, *Statius*, p. 238.

⁵³ CHAUDHURI 2014, *The War with God*, p. 2.

apart (*sparagmos*) but keeps signifying *through* this process of multiplication, and has a lasting life which is a (series of) beginnings. The notion of continuation inherent to the process of reincarnation thus offers a counterbalance to the agonism and self-spectacle required for a poetics of shapeshifting. As the first example of this motif – transformation versus, and via, resurrection – Zagreus represents the first case of a theme which continues to characterize and connect the varied strands of Nonnus' *two* epics. In this way, Zagreus and his 'resurrection' across the Nonnian corpus suggest above all that to consider the *Dionysiaca* and *Paraphrase* as palimpsestic to one another – one 'anterior', first born, short-lived, and the other the fully formed, complete and central – is a mutation and a misreading. Like the Athenians' closing dance to the multiple Dionysuses, so must our driving approach to the poems, as to all of Nonnus' poetics, be dialogic, open-ended and self-consciously symbiotic: *κυδαίνοντες ἅμα*.

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