

'Brilliant . . . a study of young arrogance, a thriller, a comedy of campus manners, and an oblique Greek primer. It is a well written and compulsive read' *Evening Standard*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Secret History

DONNA TARTT



PENGUIN BOOKS

'Good morning,' he said. 'You've met our new student?'

'Yes,' said Francis in what I thought a bored tone, as he held out Camilla's chair and then slid into his own.

'Wonderful. Charles, would you put on water for tea?'

Charles went into a little anteroom, no bigger than a closet, and I heard the sound of running water. (I never did know exactly what was in that anteroom or how Julian, upon occasion, was miraculously able to convey four-course meals out of it.) Then he came out, closing the door behind him, and sat down.

'All right,' said Julian, looking around the table. 'I hope we're all ready to leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime?'

He was a marvelous talker, a magical talker, and I wish I were able to give a better idea what he said, but it is impossible for a mediocre intellect to render the speech of a superior one – especially after so many years – without losing a good deal in the translation. The discussion that day was about loss of self, about Plato's four divine madresses, about madness of all sorts; he began by talking about what he called the burden of the self, and why people want to lose the self in the first place.

'Why does that obstinate little voice in our heads torment us so?' he said, looking round the table. 'Could it be because it reminds us that we are alive, of our mortality, of our individual souls – which, after all, we are too afraid to surrender but yet make us feel more miserable than any other thing? But isn't it also pain that often makes us most aware of self? It is a terrible thing to learn as a child that one is a being separate from all the world, that no one and no *thing* hurts along with one's burned tongues and skinned knees, that one's aches and pains are all one's own. Even more terrible, as we grow older, to learn that no person, no matter how beloved, can ever truly understand us. Our own selves make us most unhappy, and that's why we're so anxious to lose them, don't you think? Remember the Erinyes?'

'The Furies,' said Bunny, his eyes dazzled and lost beneath the bang of hair.

'Exactly. And how did they drive people mad? They turned up the volume of the inner monologue, magnified qualities already present to great excess, made people so much *themselves* that they couldn't stand it.

'And how can we lose this maddening self, lose it entirely? Love? Yes, but as old Cephalus once heard Sophocles say, the least of us know that love is a cruel and terrible master. One loses oneself for the sake of the other, but in doing so becomes enslaved and miserable to the most capricious of all the gods. War? One can lose oneself in the joy of battle, in fighting for a glorious cause, but there are not a great many glorious causes for which to fight these days.' He laughed. 'Though after all your Xenophon and Thucydides I dare say there are not many young people better versed in military tactics. I'm sure, if you wanted to, you'd be quite capable of marching on Hampden town and taking it over by yourselves.'

Henry laughed. 'We could do it this afternoon, with six men,' he said.

'How?' said everyone at once.

'One person to cut the phone and power lines, one at the bridge over the Battenkill, one at the main road out, to the north. The rest of us could advance from the south and west. There aren't many of us, but if we scattered we'd be able to close off all other points of entry' – here he held out his hand, fingers spread wide – 'and advance to the center from all points.' The fingers closed into a fist. 'Of course, we'd have the advantage of surprise,' he said, and I felt an unexpected thrill at the coldness of his voice.

Julian laughed. 'And how many years has it been since the gods have intervened in human wars? I expect Apollo and Athena Nike would come down to fight at your side, "invited or uninvited," as the oracle at Delphi said to the Spartans. Imagine what heroes you'd be.'

'Demigods,' said Francis, laughing. 'We could sit on thrones in the town square.'

'While the local merchants paid you tribute.'

'Gold. Peacocks and ivory.'

'Cheddar cheese and common crackers more like it,' Bunny said.

'Bloodshed is a terrible thing,' said Julian hastily – the remark about the common crackers had displeased him – 'but the bloodiest parts of Homer and Aeschylus are often the most magnificent – for example, that glorious speech of Klytemnestra's in the *Agamemnon* that I love so much – Camilla, you were our Klytemnestra when we did the *Oresteia*; do you remember any of it?'

The light from the window was streaming directly into her face; in such strong light most people look somewhat washed out, but her clear, fine features were only illuminated until it was a shock to look at her, at her pale and radiant eyes with their sooty lashes, at the gold glimmer at her temple that blended gradually into her glossy hair, warm as honey. 'I remember a little,' she said.

Looking at a spot on the wall above my head, she began to recite the lines. I stared at her. Did she have a boyfriend, Francis maybe? He and she were fairly chummy, but Francis didn't look like the sort who would be too interested in girls. Not that I stood much of a chance, surrounded as she was by all these clever rich boys in dark suits; me, with my clumsy hands and suburban ways.

Her voice in Greek was harsh and low and lovely.

Thus he died, and all the life struggled out of him;
and as he died he spattered me with the dark red
and violent-driven rain of bitter-savored blood
to make me glad, as gardens stand among the showers
of God in glory at the birthtime of the buds.

There was a brief silence after she had finished; rather to my surprise, Henry winked solemnly at her from across the table.

Julian smiled. 'What a beautiful passage,' he said. 'I never tire of it. But how is it that such a ghastly thing, a queen stabbing her husband in his bath, is so lovely to us?'

'It's the meter,' said Francis. 'Iambic trimeter. Those really hideous parts of *Inferno*, for instance, Pier de Medicina with his nose hacked off and talking through a bloody slit in his windpipe –'

'I can think of worse than that,' Charles said.

'So can I. But that passage is lovely and it's because of the *terza rima*. The music of it. The trimeter tolls through that speech of Klytemnestra's like a bell.'

'But iambic trimeter is fairly common in Greek lyric, isn't it?' said Julian. 'Why is that particular section so breathtaking? Why do we not find ourselves attracted to some calmer or more pleasing one?'

'Aristotle says in the *Poetics*,' said Henry, 'that objects such as corpses, painful to view in themselves, can become delightful to contemplate in a work of art.'

'And I believe Aristotle is correct. After all, what are the scenes in poetry graven on our memories, the ones that we love the most? Precisely these. The murder of Agamemnon and the wrath of Achilles. Dido on the funeral pyre. The daggers of the traitors and Caesar's blood – remember how Suetonius describes his body being borne away on the litter, with one arm hanging down?'

'Death is the mother of beauty,' said Henry.

'And what is beauty?'

'Terror.'

'Well said,' said Julian. 'Beauty is rarely soft or consolatory. Quite the contrary. Genuine beauty is always quite alarming.'

I looked at Camilla, her face bright in the sun, and thought of that line from the *Iliad* I love so much, about Pallas Athene and the terrible eyes shining.

'And if beauty is terror,' said Julian, 'then what is desire? We think we have many desires, but in fact we have only one. What is it?'

'To live,' said Camilla.

'To live forever,' said Bunny, chin cupped in palm.

The teakettle began to whistle.

Once the cups were set out, and Henry had poured the tea, somber as a mandarin, we began to talk about the madnesses induced by the gods: poetic, prophetic, and, finally, Dionysian.

'Which is by far the most mysterious,' said Julian. 'We have been accustomed to thinking of religious ecstasy as a thing found only in primitive societies, though it frequently occurs in the most cultivated peoples. The Greeks, you know, really weren't very different from us. They were a very formal people, extraordinarily civilized, rather repressed. And yet they were frequently swept away *en masse* by the wildest enthusiasms – dancing, frenzies, slaughter, visions – which for us, I suppose, would seem clinical madness, irreversible. Yet the Greeks – some of them, anyway – could go in and out of it as they pleased. We cannot dismiss these accounts entirely as myth. They are quite well documented, though ancient commentators were as mystified by them as we are. Some say they were the results of prayer and fasting, others that they were brought about by drink. Certainly the group nature of the hysteria had something to do with it as well. Even so, it is hard to account for the extremism of the phenomenon. The revelers were apparently hurled back into a non-rational, pre-intellectual state, where the personality was replaced by something completely different – and by "different" I mean something to all appearances not mortal. Inhuman.'

I thought of the *Bacchae*, a play whose violence and savagery made me uneasy, as did the sadism of its bloodthirsty god. Compared to the other tragedies, which were dominated by

recognizable principles of justice no matter how harsh, it was a triumph of barbarism over reason: dark, chaotic, inexplicable.

'We don't like to admit it,' said Julian, 'but the idea of losing control is one that fascinates controlled people such as ourselves more than almost anything. All truly civilized people – the ancients no less than us – have civilized themselves through the willful repression of the old, animal self. Are we, in this room, really very different from the Greeks or the Romans? Obsessed with duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice? All those things which are to modern tastes so chilling?'

I looked around the table at the six faces. To modern tastes they were somewhat chilling. I imagine any other teacher would've been on the phone to Psychological Counseling in about five minutes had he heard what Henry said about arming the Greek class and marching into Hampden town.

'And it's a temptation for any intelligent person, and especially for perfectionists such as the ancients and ourselves, to try to murder the primitive, emotive, appetitive self. But that is a mistake.'

'Why?' said Francis, leaning slightly forward.

Julian arched an eyebrow; his long, wise nose gave his profile a forward tilt, like an Etruscan in a bas-relief. 'Because it is dangerous to ignore the existence of the irrational. The more cultivated a person is, the more intelligent, the more repressed, then the more he needs some method of channeling the primitive impulses he's worked so hard to subdue. Otherwise those powerful old forces will mass and strengthen until they are violent enough to break free, more violent for the delay, often strong enough to sweep the will away entirely. For a warning of what happens in the absence of such a pressure valve, we have the example of the Romans. The emperors. Think, for example, of Tiberius, the ugly stepson, trying to live up to the command of his stepfather Augustus. Think of the tremendous, impossible strain he must have undergone, following in the footsteps of a

savior, a god. The people hated him. No matter how hard he tried he was never good enough, could never be rid of the hateful self, and finally the floodgates broke. He was swept away on his perversions and he died, old and mad, lost in the pleasure gardens of Capri: not even happy there, as one might hope, but miserable. Before he died he wrote a letter home to the Senate. "May all the Gods and Goddesses visit me with more utter destruction than I feel I am daily suffering." Think of those who came after him. Caligula. Nero.'

He paused. 'The Roman genius, and perhaps the Roman flaw,' he said, 'was an obsession with order. One sees it in their architecture, their literature, their laws – this fierce denial of darkness, unreason, chaos.' He laughed. 'Easy to see why the Romans, usually so tolerant of foreign religions, persecuted the Christians mercilessly – how absurd to think a common criminal had risen from the dead, how appalling that his followers celebrated him by drinking his blood. The illogic of it frightened them and they did everything they could to crush it. In fact, I think the reason they took such drastic steps was because they were not only frightened but also terribly attracted to it. Pragmatists are often strangely superstitious. For all their logic, who lived in more abject terror of the supernatural than the Romans?

'The Greeks were different. They had a passion for order and symmetry, much like the Romans, but they knew how foolish it was to deny the unseen world, the old gods. Emotion, darkness, barbarism.' He looked at the ceiling for a moment, his face almost troubled. 'Do you remember what we were speaking of earlier, of how bloody, terrible things are sometimes the most beautiful?' he said. 'It's a very Greek idea, and a very profound one. Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely? To throw off the chains of being for an instant, to shatter the accident of our mortal selves? Euripides speaks of the Maenads: head thrown

back, throat to the stars, "more like deer than human being." To be absolutely free! One is quite capable, of course, of working out these destructive passions in more vulgar and less efficient ways. But how glorious to release them in a single burst! To sing, to scream, to dance barefoot in the woods in the dead of night, with no more awareness of mortality than an animal! These are powerful mysteries. The bellowing of bulls. Springs of honey bubbling from the ground. If we are strong enough in our souls we can rip away the veil and look that naked, terrible beauty right in the face; let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn.'

We were all leaning forward, motionless. My mouth had fallen open; I was aware of every breath I took.

'And that, to me, is the terrible seduction of Dionysiac ritual. Hard for us to imagine. That fire of pure being.'

After class, I wandered downstairs in a dream, my head spinning, but acutely, achingly conscious that I was alive and young on a beautiful day; the sky a deep deep painful blue, wind scattering the red and yellow leaves in a whirlwind of confetti.

Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it.

That night I wrote in my journal: 'Trees are schizophrenic now and beginning to lose control, enraged with the shock of their fiery new colors. Someone – was it van Gogh? – said that orange is the color of insanity. *Beauty is terror*. We want to be devoured by it, to hide ourselves in that fire which refines us.'