

A New Translation of *Dionysiaca*, Book One

Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* is an Ancient Greek language epic from Late Antiquity (circa 500 AD) which attempts to filter the whole of Greek mythology through the narrative exploits and ancestry of the god Dionysus. It is a baroque, erotic, vivid and -- due to the sheer density of its classical literary references -- sometimes maddening text. The 1940 Loeb Classical Library translation of the *Dionysiaca* is currently the only available English language version of Nonnus' Late Antique epic. Needless to say, the poem does not occupy a prominent place in contemporary classical studies. Thus, this new translation of the *Dionysiaca's* first book is simply an attempt to help restore a broader awareness of one Late Antiquity's baroque masterpieces.

Although the entire poem is composed in the fairly tidy form of dactylic hexameters (just like Homer and Virgil), it manages to squeeze in a large amount of description via a liberal use of adjectives and adjectival constructions. This pervasive stylistic trait of Nonnus' is readily apparent in the first book of the *Dionysiaca*. One of my goals is to keep that descriptive richness while at the same time preserving something of the swift readability that comes with the hexameter line. I also wish to echo something of the form and rhythm of the more prominent modern English translations of Homer, Virgil and Ovid, so my translation will register as 'epic' with readers before they move on to digesting the *Dionysiaca's* unfamiliar narrative and descriptive content. I imagine Nonnus' intended Late Antique audience (who would have been fluent in all of Ancient Greek literature as well as the epic tradition of the classical world) would have had a similar reading experience.

Translation Sample:

Book One

In which Cronion seizes the nymph in a radiance and the hands of Typhon pound the firmament.

Speak Goddess,
of Cronodios' luminous herald,
the thunder rolling amid coital sparks
and the lightning flash,
bridegroom of Semele.

Speak of the line
of twice-born Bacchus,
a child half-formed
and delivered without midwife,
whom Zeus raised from the flames
dripping wet
and carried within his male womb
as father and sacred mother,
when he cut open his own thigh
with flinching hands
and vividly recalled another birth:
his brow was swollen
and his temples throbbed
with an immaculate
yet adulterous pain
before he launched forth Athene,
her armor glinting in the light.

Muses,

bring me the fennel stalk,

clash the cymbals

and place in my hand

the thyrsus of Dionysus

infused with song.

For my partner in the cyclic dance,

summon quicksilver Proteus

from the nearby island of Pharos.

May he appear in myriad shapes

as I weave an intricate mercurial hymn.