Homeric Hymn (7) to Dionysus
Translated by Gregory Nagy

1 About Dionysus son of most glorious Semele, my mind will connect, how it was that he made an appearance [phainesthai] by the shore of the barren sea, on a prominent headland, looking like a young man at the beginning of adolescence. Beautiful were the locks of hair as they waved in the breeze surrounding him. [5] They were the color of deep blue. And a cloak he wore over his strong shoulders, color of purple.

Then, all of a sudden, men seen from a ship with fine benches,—men who were pirates—came into view, as they were sailing over the wine-colored [oinops] sea [pontos]. They were Etruscans. And they were being driven along by a destiny that was bad for them. The moment they saw him [= Dionysus], they gave each other a knowing nod, and the very next thing, they were ashore, jumping out of the ship. Quickly they seized him and [10] sat him down inside their ship, happy in their hearts because they thought that he was the son of a line of kings nurtured by the sky god. That is what they thought he was. And they wanted to tie him up in harsh bondage, but the ties of the bonds could not hold him, and the cords made of willow fell off him, all over the place, falling right off his hands and feet. And he just sat there, smiling, [15] looking on with his deep blue eyes.

Meanwhile the steersman [kubernētēs] took note [noeîn], right away, and he called out to his comrades [hetairoi] and said to them: “What kind of superhuman force [daimōn] has possessed you all! What kind of god [theos] is this that you have seized and tried to tie up, powerful as he is? Why, he is too much for the well-built ship to make room for. You see, he must be either Zeus or Apollo, the one with the silver quiver, or Poseidon. I tell you, he is not like mortal humans, he is not like [eikelos] them at all. Rather, he is like the gods who have their dwellings in Olympus. So come on, we should let him go, leaving him on the dark earth of the mainland. Let us do it right away. Do not manhandle him. What if he gets angry and stirs up winds that will make hardship, and a huge whirlwind?” That is how he [= the steersman] spoke.

But the leader of the men reviled him [= the steersman], speaking with hateful words [mūthos]: “No, [not we but] you are the one who is possessed by some kind of superhuman force [daimōn]. Just [do your work and] watch for the wind [to start blowing from behind, and, once it starts blowing], you start hoisting the sail of the ship and hold on to all the ropes. As for this one [= the unrecognized Dionysus], he will be the concern [melein] of my men. I expect he will arrive [with us] in Egypt or maybe in Cyprus or maybe even in the land of the Hyperboreans or beyond. Wherever. In the end, he will tell all: he will come around to saying who are his near and dear ones [philoi] and what are all the possessions he has and he will tell about his siblings. And that is because a superhuman force [daimōn] has put him in our pathway.”

Having said this, he [= the leader himself] started hoisting the sail of the ship.
Now a wind came and blew right into the middle of the sail, and the ropes that held it at both ends got all stretched to the limit. Then, right away, there appeared to them things that would make anyone marvel.

Wine. That is what happened first of all. It was all alongside the swift black ship. Sweet to drink, it was splashing around [the ship as if it were inside a cup], smelling good, and the fragrance that rose up was something immortalizing. The sailors were seized with amazement, all of them, at the sight. And then, all of a sudden, next to the top of the sail on both sides, there reached out a vine—here, and here too—and hanging from it were many clusters of grapes. Around the mast, dark ivy was winding around, teeming with blossoms. And—a thing of beauty and pleasure—the berry sprang forth [from the ivy]. The benches for rowing now had garlands all over them.

Once they saw all this, they started shouting at the steersman, urging him to sail the ship back to land.

Meanwhile, he turned into a lion for them, right there in the ship, looking horrific, at the prow. It roared a mighty roar. Then, in the middle of the ship, he made a bear, with a shaggy neck. Thus he made his signals appear. It reared up, raging, while the lion, at the top of the deck, glaring at them with its horrific looks. The men, terrified, were fleeing toward the stern of the ship, crowding around the steersman, the one who had a heart that is moderate. They just stood there, astounded.

Then it all of a sudden leapt up and took hold of the leader of the men, while they were trying to get out, rushing away from the bad destiny that was theirs. They all together at the same time leapt out, once they saw what they saw, into the gleaming salt sea. They became dolphins.

As for the steersman—he [Dionysus] took pity on him, holding him back [from leaping overboard]. He caused it to happen that he became the most blessed of all men, and he spoke for the record this set of words: “Have courage, you radiant man, reached by a force that works from far away. You have achieved beauty and pleasure for my heart. I am Dionysus, the one with the great thundering sound. The mother who bore me was Semele, daughter of Kadmos, and Zeus made love to her.”

Hail and take pleasure, child of Semele with the beautiful looks. There is no way I could have my mind disconnect from you as I put together the beautiful cosmic order of my song.