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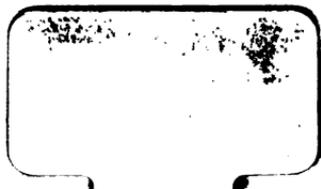


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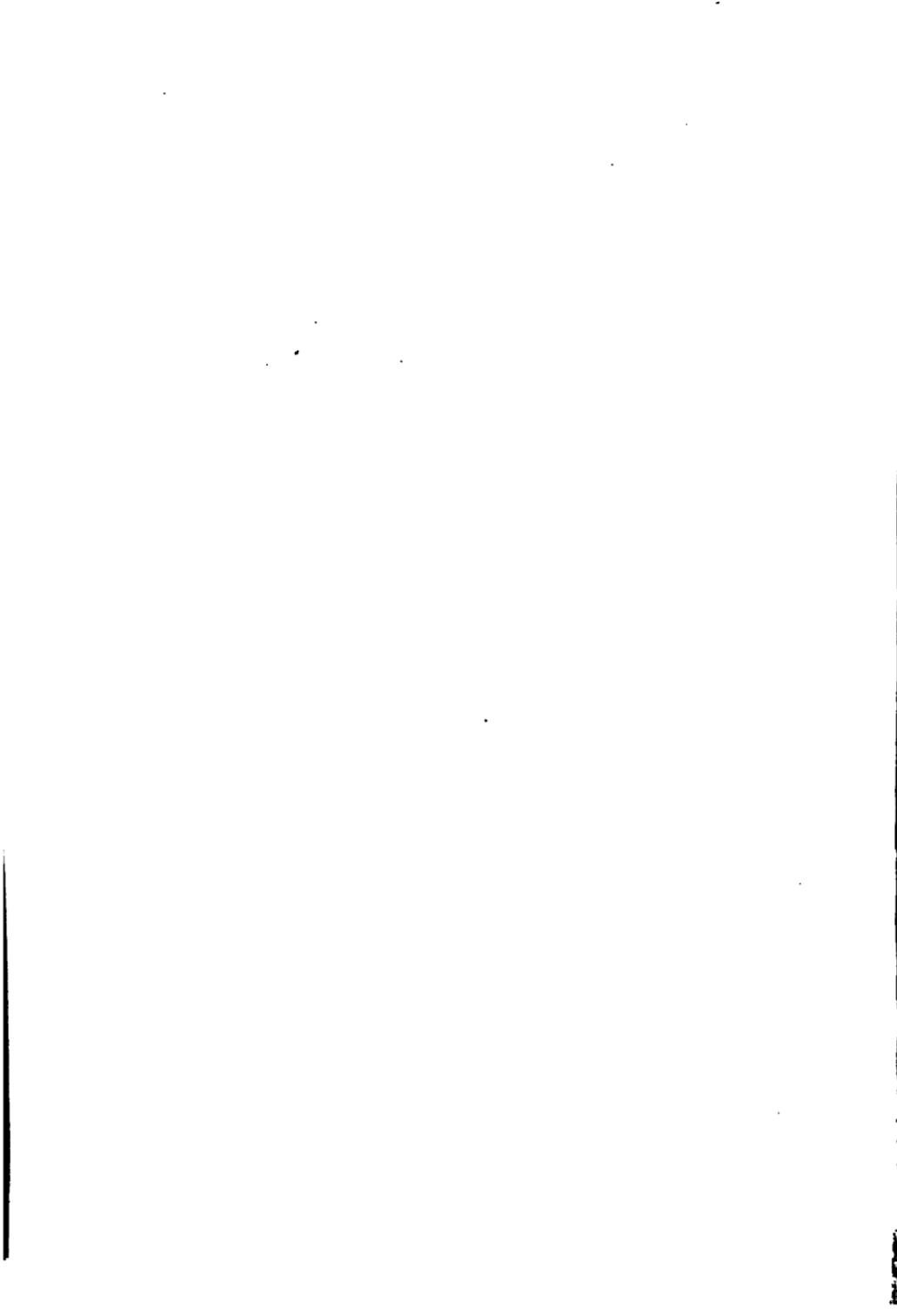
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THE BIRTH OF GOD

BY VERNER VON HEIDENSTAM

By Herner von Heidenstam

THE SOOTHSAYER

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

0

THE BIRTH OF GOD

(Guds Födelse)

BY

VERNER VON HEIDENSTAM

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION FROM THE SWEDISH BY

KAROLINE M. KNUDSEN



BOSTON

THE FOUR SEAS COMPANY

1920

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The Four Seas Press
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THE BIRTH OF GOD

PERSONS REPRESENTED

EGYPTIAN DEITIES:

OSIRIS, *the God of Judgment*

HORUS, *the God of the Sun*

THOTH, *the God of Wisdom*

ANUBIS, *the God of the Dead*

TYPHON-SETH, *the God of Evil*

HATHOR-SEKHMET, *the God of Love*

DYSKOLUS, *an Ancient*

STRANGER, *a Modern*

SCENE

Karnak, in The Street of the Sphinxes

TIME

The Present

THE BIRTH OF GOD

TEMPLE-RUIN IN KARNAK

[Moonlight is falling brightly upon the tumbled stone-blocks.

A tall column stands in their midst, topped with the head of great Osiris. All around it have grown up branches of parched tamarisk.

Ancient gods and goddesses, animal-idols, move around the column in a slow and majestic dance.]

* * *

[A Stranger appears.

He has on a coat and a broad-brimmed hat of white felt.

His face is swarthy; his beard, raven-black, is closely cropped.

[7]

*Dyskolus comes forth from
the shadows.*

His beard is white.

*His hooded mantle of coarse
camel's-hair is wrapped about
him, and his feet are wound in
strips of rag.]*

* * *

STRANGER

This is a dream, a vision . . . But who are you? I am not sure any longer what language we can use to talk with one another.

DYSKOLUS

And thou . . . Who art thou, thyself?

STRANGER

A man, who has come to the wrong place, at the wrong time. I think I should have been a powerful pope or a cardinal.

DYSKOLUS

Dextrous in swinging the monstrance?

STRANGER

Dextrous in swinging both the monstrance and the sword. Throw over me the robe of a priest

[8]

and I shall appear natural and real, like my own true self. Look around you, here, in the East! Why do we consider it the source of reflection and knowledge? Because here so great a comprehension regulates life that man becomes unworldly—even in his clothes! Even that white turban, which the man of the East winds around his head, has its sacred significance, and shall, some day, be his shroud. But in my homeland, kings walk about the streets in winter-overcoats, and poets and seers sit in gilded tap-rooms and drink whiskey.

DYSKOLUS

That betokeneth that thy kings and thy sooth-sayers have forgotten their call. Priests, they were born. Priests—they should dedicate themselves, even from earliest childhood, both to be and to live as priests.

STRANGER

Whenever, back in my home, I put on my worldly, grey work-clothes, I seem to be living in a state of daily sham. I feel myself an actor who has wandered in upon a wretched masquerade, where he must act a part beneath himself, or be thrown, with oaths, out of the door . . . But, maybe, all this is but incidental, something

to be endured, for the sake of gaining an understanding of the things of this world . . . then take a leap out into something new.

[He moves aside a few steps as Dyskolus approaches, and glances uneasily at him and the dancing idols; but he musters up his courage and his voice takes on a sharper pitch.]

There, at home, Life goes on as it will, with no special meaning, and everything and every action likewise become meaningless. Laughing boisterously, men ride around in street cars and talk of money; either they kill time by reading worldly tales or by going to the theatre to see some skilfully-enacted play.

DYSKOLUS

Thou really oughtest to have seen the ancient play of Dionysius, in which the altar-fire burns and the sacred hymn is chanted behind the vine-clad hill. That was the naturally-human state, in which its divine destiny had not yet been forgotten. Humanity is no longer pure and undefiled.

STRANGER

This naturally-human . . . Do you mean simplicity?

DYSKOLUS

By the naturally-human, I mean the power to feel ecstasy.

STRANGER

[*He starts—stares at Dyskolus*]

You . . . over there! Why do you keep yourself in the shade?

DYSKOLUS

That I may better observe thee, standing in the light. Thou art a merchant.

STRANGER

Have been a merchant sitting in my warehouse reckoning telephone-orders. Then, I threw the keys to my son and went. How can you tell that I have been a merchant?

DYSKOLUS

Canst thou not see by Plato's writings that he was a merchant? A rich merchant, to be sure, who had gotten an abundance of leisure, washed his hands of work—particularly white

[II]

and well-kept hands, though possibly a bit too fat. My dear man: I have but to glance at the fine cloth in thy raiment, even though it be now neglected and threadbare. They who sell dear, can also buy dear.

*[The idols emit a deep moan.
Dyskolus and the Stranger
draw their wraps closely about
themselves.]*

STRANGER

Who are you?

DYSKOLUS

Thou art afraid.

STRANGER

Not of them . . .

[Points to the idols]

I came here because of them . . . but of you.

*[He pokes Dyskolus in the
ribs, grasps him by the hair un-
der the hood, and turns his
face to the light.]*

You are very old.

[12]

DYSKOLUS

How old I am, I myself know not. I called myself Dyskolus because I was melancholy and heavy at heart.

STRANGER

Why did you grieve?

DYSKOLUS

Because that great one to whom I, in my lowly estate, had devoted my service, left the world, dragged down by trickery and buried beneath misunderstanding and shame.

STRANGER

Were you blind, I should be quite sure that I was looking at Homer's ghost. Noble forehead, deeply-sunken eyes. You can wish no one ill.

[*Slaps him*]

The moonlight was so bright, and even from Luxor I heard the dancers' castanets. I felt that the time had come at last; so I landed from the ship.

DYSKOLUS

But, when thou camest upon the long street, amidst the sphinxes, thou didst wipe thy fore-

head, beaded with moisture, and I saw that thou didst waver. Wherefore didst thou tremble? Assuredly, the heads of the sphinxes were quite bowed . . . Then stepped I forward and offered thee my company.

STRANGER

I had rather have been left alone, because I knew that the time was at hand.

DYSKOLUS

The time?

STRANGER

I have stood among the pilgrims beside Jordan. I have gone from land to land, and asked and sought.

DYSKOLUS

What hast thou sought?

STRANGER

[*Silence*]

A god to worship!

DYSKOLUS

[*Ponderingly*]

Hast thou, then, thyself, no God?

[14]

STRANGER

None.

[*Silence*]

DYSKOLUS

Then shouldst thou have known my god.

STRANGER

Where does he rule?

DYSKOLUS

It must be now thousands of years ago. Of all, he was the most powerful. When he walked, he lifted the soles of his feet off the earth in an arc. I myself was only an attendant-priest in his divine kingdom, but when that was laid waste and burned up, I saw him, Apollo, in the flames, and he stretched me his bow-and-arrows and said:

“Go around the world and shoot down the animal-idols, wheresoever they sit in their temples!”

I began to tremble in fear and asked:

“May I then never die?”

The god answered:

“First upon that day mayst thou bow thy head in slumber, when a mortal shall bring to

[15]

thee the announcement that a god is about to be born—a god more mighty than I.”

[*Loses himself in thought*]

Mightier than he! I dreaded to hear those words uttered by mortal man.

STRANGER

And no one has brought you the announcement?

DYSKOLUS

In the beginning, I kept myself hidden in the desert; from the distance, I saw men and women who, with always the same shout of victory or of prophecy, climbed upon pyres or allowed themselves to be cut into pieces; but I did not venture to draw nigh and listen. Apollo had often spoken in riddles, and what surety was there that I had rightly interpreted his words that time? Always, I hoped that his kingdom would arise again and his citterns sound forth the sacred hymn.

STRANGER

So passed the years . . .

DYSKOLUS

And my solitude dragged and I became filled with anxiety. I wandered, at last, into the midst

[16]

of the ruins and shot at the animal-idols. But, when I met men, they no longer shouted their pæans of victory or of prophecy, but went along with bowed heads, filled with weariness. Whenever I asked them if a great god was about to be born, they would shrug their shoulders and give me an alms. Like a beggar, since then, have I trudged from door to door, with that question of mine; that longed-for announcement I have never received.

STRANGER

Neither can I greet you with that announcement. My coat still reeks of the coal-smoke of the great cities, and in my ears rings that everlasting laughter. What I have seen is a world without a god.

DYSKOLUS

Thou thyself art an unbeliever.

STRANGER

Give me a god . . . Give me a god, and I will be his flaming sword, his Gideon!

[The idols lean against one another, groaning.

The dancing stops.]

[17]

HORUS

*[Mirrors his hawk-head in
the sun-disk that he holds in
his hands.]*

The sun setteth, the sun riseth; but where do they greet her now—those white robéd priests who, early, even before dawn, arose from their beds and bathed, that they might be worthy to worship the sun as it rose?

OSIRIS-HEAD

[Moves his lips]

DAMNATION!

STRANGER

[To Dyskolus]

I see the morning-gleam upon my window; I see the seasons come and go; I see grave bed itself beside grave—but everything I see, with my heart empty.

THOTH

*[Ibis-headed. He holds in
his hands papyrus-scrolls.]*

Wherever the learned assembled, whether to set up a script, or to study the plants or the animals, or the movements of the stars; wherever a ploughshare was forged, a brick fired, a harp's-

frame carved—there stood also an altar. The souls of all the people burned in an ecstasy of perfect sacrifice.

OSIRIS-HEAD

DAMNATION!

STRANGER

[*To Dyskolus*]

Light that sacrificial fire within my breast and I shall be transformed and become invincible. Do you know when man first sloughed away the trait of the beast?

DYSKOLUS

When he sharpened the first flint-point, a worldling once answered me.

STRANGER

He sloughed away the beastly trait, on that morning when he, for the first time, raised an altar.

ANUBIS

[*Jackal-headed*]

Under the sands of the desert sleep they, our great kings who, shimmering in purple and pearls, themselves attended us with sacrifice. Their palaces they builded of wood; but their graves

[19]

they hewed inside rock and their temples they
raised of colossal stones.

OSIRIS-HEAD

DAMNATION!

STRANGER

[*To Dyskolus*]

So ought they to live, who dare to call themselves rulers—not in the great palace, with the little chapel by its side.

DYSKOLUS

That is the priestly attribute, almost extinct in mankind; its death, man himself can not survive.

STRANGER

What a time I would behold! What a jubilee of faith! What a swishing of banners of the Cross! What a pealing of jubilant bells throughout a world that has GOD!

TYPHON-SETH

[*Ass-headed. He brays.*

*He bumps against the
Stranger, who does not run
away.*

He stands still.]

[20]

I no longer cause alarm. The celestial bodies have become petrified rubbish. When I draw my fingers through living fire, to spread destruction, the flame feels cool to me, like a jet of water.

OSIRIS-HEAD
DAMNATION!

HATHOR-SEKHMET
*[Cat-headed. She holds a
tambourine; she snarls and
claws around.]*

One thing, assuredly, I believed would have outlived destruction, and that was Love . . . I was mistaken. Mi-aou! Mi-aou! Whenever I cast two lovers into each other's arms, they curse me and glare at each other, like two strangers. . . . Ptoo! Ptoo! They think that they hate each other, but they hate their own blood.

*[She draws near to the
Stranger—with sideling and
gliding steps.*

*She rubs herself against him
and purrs.*

*Quick as a flash, she strikes
a crashing blow upon her tam-
bourine.]*

Upon thy knees before Hathor, of Love's
sweet pleasures the cherisher!

STRANGER

[Uneasily]

Before thee, last of all . . . Give me a god to
worship!

DYSKOLUS

*[He points to the idols, sur-
rounding the Stranger, as if to
drag him off.]*

Choose!

STRANGER

*[He breaks away and wrings
his hands in increasing an-
guish.]*

Give me a god, and I will welcome every pri-
vation . . . I will bear sickness and old-age as
though jewels . . . I will stir up my people as
a hurricane does an ice-bound sea.

DYSKOLUS

Choose!

STRANGER

I went backward in Time, to seek among the
wild animal-idols . . . Wasted steps! Bring
out your bow-and-arrow, and shoot!

[22]

DYSKOLUS

Next time, go thou forward . . . far upon
morrow's untrodden tracts!

STRANGER

There, the dew still cools the foot . . . Here
is fire-smoke in the air.

DYSKOLUS

Pledge thy troth, or I help thee not!

STRANGER

[*Bound—almost overcome*]

Arrow to the bow! You have my promise—
a man's word.

DYSKOLUS

For that word, I thank thee.

[*He sights with his bow
upon the Osiris-column and
shoots.*

*It breaks into bits and tum-
bles. The animal-idols, moan-
ing, flee to one side and vanish.*

*The moonlight fades and the
stars scintillate in the heavens.]*

DYSKOLUS

Wilt thou listen to me?

STRANGER

You have seen much and have learned much.

DYSKOLUS

Once upon a time, I saw a woman kneeling before a simple wooden cross, by the wayside, and that sight drew tears from my aged eyes. I cannot understand mockery of that action. "This is religion," thought I, "but religiousness is not to be found within the cross, which is a symbol, and, perforce, nothing but a worldly thing; nor in her simple language; but in that ineffable faith which the symbol and her words try to express." Then, it occurred to me that all men have the same basic religion, both they who doubt—such as thou—and they who, believing, declare their faith, though it be sheer imagination. What men dispute over are the worldly things, such as symbols, ceremonies and interpretations. Let us build a white temple and carve over its door:

WE KNOW AND UNDERSTAND NOT
WHAT WE BELIEVE

Let us meet within it, not by daylight, because vision itself is a worldly attribute, but during

star-lit nights; let us, before its altar, intone a mass or stand in silence, because we know and understand not what we believe.

STRANGER

You speak like a sophist of old, but, all-the-same . . . Maybe, some day, your white temple shall be built.

DYSKOLUS

All of earth's peoples should march therein. Fear not. Just now there is a cloud over the divine; but clouds come and go—and that they have done since the beginning of time.

STRANGER

How does that help me? When next the clouds shall have rolled away, I myself shall have passed away. I have shivered in the shadows so that my teeth have chattered . . . but that new light I may never see.

DYSKOLUS

Prophesy not too soon, but lift thy head, because even now thou canst glimpse that light. Wherefore do the animal-idols no longer have power to switch space into blaze? In the beginning, chaos burned, without soul or desire; but it is now a long time since Cronus pushed the

monstrous form of Uranus from his throne, and the universe stood forth diaphanous and clear like a still water. Why do the stars move in their appointed ways and circle their suns, as in a dance? They are in formation, as for a ceremony. Hast thou not remarked that men, too, go along as though in expectation and preparation for the same festival? The Ways of God, which struggle through, in fire, in air, and in ourselves, flow together into a wide, royal tide. The world awaits the Birth of God.

[The Stranger quickly grasps his hand and gazes searchingly into his eyes.]

Since the earliest ages, His birth has been foreshadowed to the many who have waited and trusted upon Him, and who have died for their faith! One morning, I lit a candle and went down into the Catacombs of Rome, to read their names upon the stone tablets. When I was about to return, I saw a malefactor dragged to the execution-block. "That is an apostate monk named Bruno," said the people. "He fell upon his knees and chanted a mass to the starry heavens; he picked up a stone from the street and kissed it and said that it had understanding

and soul!" "Still another groper-in-the-dark, another witness!" thought I. "Many are the roads to Rome, but even more to that God who shall be born."

STRANGER

And if we must wait another thousand years or more?

DYSKOLUS

Nevertheless, thou hast a God to honour from that moment in which thou believest that He, some day, shall be born.

STRANGER

And He shall be even mightier and greater than he at whose door you kept vigil?

DYSKOLUS

More glorious and great, He, but like him, as a son is like his father. Hast thou seen the statue of Apollo Citharædus by Scopus? Gravity upon his forehead, rapture in his eyes, Elysian breezes in those flowing folds of his robe!

STRANGER

God of Light, God of Judgment, Builder of Cities, Giver of Laws, God of Music and of Knowledge?

DYSKOLUS

Not only the simple and lowly, but the highest, should strive to serve Him. His priests should follow Him like a sacred choir, but never reach Him, as that doth not please Him. They should liken Him to Sirius, certainly the star which shines brightest and strongest in the heavens at night, yet is, by no means, the nearest to us . . . Shattered lie those animal-idols in the midst of their temples; therefore, His altar should burn upon every hill-top.

STRANGER

*[He presses to his forehead
the hands of Dyskolus.]*

I believe!

DYSKOLUS

In blindness, hast thou hunted and sought?

STRANGER

Blind, I have gone; now I bring you the announcement. The world stands ready and awaits the Birth of God.

*[Dyskolus bows his head and
stands silent. Then he leads
the Stranger over the gritty*

*sand—up, to the top-most
block of stone.]*

DYSKOLUS

Be careful! The way is steep.

STRANGER

It reminds me of my own home-town—of the path that leads from behind my father's farm up the Klockberg.

DYSKOLUS

And when thou hadst climbed to the mountain's peak, what wast thou in the habit of doing?

STRANGER

When I was a child I used to gather twigs and light a bonfire. Then I would lie down upon the moss and think of Moses, who heard a voice out of the burning bush.

DYSKOLUS

Be a child again, now!

*[He points to the brambly
bushes, and helps the Stranger
gather branches.]*

[29]

My back is too stiff, but build thou of the twigs a pyre.

STRANGER

The thorns sting.

DYSKOLUS

Thy hands are bleeding.

STRANGER

And I do not feel it. See, I can press on the thorns as hard as I please, yet I do not feel the smart any longer.

DYSKOLUS

[He breaks his bow and arrows and hurls them on the bonfire just as it bursts into flames.]

Burn! Burn! The world stands ready and awaits the Birth of God!

[He falls—dying.]

STRANGER

[Supporting the head of Dyskolus]

What shall I cast upon the sacrificial fire, in dedication of myself as His priest?

[30]

DYSKOLUS

All that thou hast.

[The Stranger empties his pockets and throws upon the fire all his money—bank notes and gold.]

DYSKOLUS

That is not enough.

STRANGER

[He unclasps from his neck a chain and amber heart.]

These are a memento of my life's first May-dream.

[He throws them.]

DYSKOLUS

That is not enough.

STRANGER

Speak out and tell me what you mean by "all"!

[He bends over Dyskolus.]

Why do you not answer? Do you not hear me any longer? For mercy's sake, open your mouth and answer me!

[31]

[He lifts the eyelids and examines the eyes of Dyskolus.]

Dead! He cannot answer . . . He took the secret with him into that silence . . .

[He rises and goes over in front of the pyre; he gazes at it for a long time.

Suddenly he lifts his hands and throws himself on the fire; flames flare through his clothing and his hair.]

I have gotten a God. Burn—be burned to ashes—that will I offer as my sacrifice. Praises be to Him forevermore!

