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Cybele, Attis, and the Mysteries of the “Suffering Gods”

A Transpersonal Interpretation

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This study offers a transpersonal interpretation of the ancient cults of the Phrygian (Minor Asia) gods Great Mother Cybele and her lover Attis. Because of its contradictions, the classical interpretation of Frazer, who considered these mysteries to be magical cults of fertility or agricultural cults, is rejected. The author prefers a transpersonal and psychological interpretation of the mysteries of Cybele and Attis as a cathartic act of spiritual death and rebirth closely related to the Basic Perinatal Matrixes (BPM) described by Grof. The study analyzes in detail the cults of the suffering gods of the ancient Near East and compares the mysteries of the Phrygian gods with other contemporary cults (mysteries of Adonis, Osiris, etc.).

THIS STUDY offers a psychological interpretation of some cults and rites heretofore researched in detail by specialists in the field of religious studies. These are the so-called cults of dying and resurrecting gods of the ancient Near East, such as Attis, Adonis, and Osiris. Here, I shall limit the borders of this research to the cults and mythologies of the Great Mother, Cybele, and her lover-youth, Attis, and some related rites (e.g., the Syrian rites of Adonis).

The cults mentioned were analyzed in detail by J. Frazer in his classic work, *The Golden Bough*, through which his understanding of these cults and mythologies became widely known. Briefly speaking, Frazer regarded the cults of these gods as agricultural cults of fertility, the foundation of which was the agricultural cycle and stages in the living cycles of agricultural plants; he also connected them with archaic agricultural magic. The Frazerian point of view, due to his scholarly authority, still predominates in religious studies, though some thinkers and scholars have raised serious doubts about the completeness of

the Frazerian interpretation and the correctness of Frazer's methodology. The first critic who evaluated the theory sceptically was the religious thinker and Russian writer of symbolistic orientation Merezhkovsky (1865–1941), who lived in the West as a refugee since 1920. In his essay “The Secret of the West: Atlantis-Europe,” Merezhkovsky criticized Frazer rather sharply. It must be noted that Merezhkovsky felt the core of the problem extremely deeply, and though his interpretations are not always scientific or rigorously academic, his intuitions were surprising, and I consider them to be of essential importance. For example, after gathering data about an abundance of ritual castrations in these cults and characterizing their “eunuch spirit,” Merezhkovsky, rather venomously, debunks the interpretation of the cults of the suffering gods as the cults of fertility:

If all the religion of the suffering God—the primordial religion of all humankind—is an “agricultural cult of fertility” and nothing more, how can we understand the myth, preserved by Damascius, about the god

Eshmun, Adonis of Canaan, who castrated himself ... so as to be safe from the loving chase of the goddess Astronoya—Stellar Astarte, the same goddess as Aphrodite Celestial, Urania? Here the false “god of fertility” transforms into the real god of eunuchs, Attis. Is it possible to imagine something more different from the cult of fertility? (Merezhkovsky, 1991, No. 4, pp. 70–71)

The question Merezhkovsky raised against the Frazerian perspective is very acute. Definite scepticism is also found in the words of the Russian mythologist O. M. Freidenberg (lectures in Leningrad State University, 1939/1940):

This school treats religion even more unsatisfactorily than *it does with the folklore* [italics added]. The English School regarded every religion as descended from primitive magic and in this sense the religions of antiquity, the Mexican religion, or the cult of Our Lady had no differences among them. (Freidenberg, 1978, pp. 10–11)

It is, of course, impossible to speak about the mystery cults of antiquity without Frazerian material and without evaluating Frazerian concepts: every attempt to speak of something new in this field is still connected with the Frazerian point of view and its reevaluation. I, too, cannot escape such a link. Therefore, one of the tasks of this paper is a critical reevaluation of Frazer's classic theory of religious studies and ethnology.

Our knowledge of the Near Eastern cults of the suffering gods is generally based on data of Hellenistic or Roman sources. From IV–III B.C., these cults became widespread through the Hellenistic world, entering into a syncretic relation with the religion of the Greeks; from the beginning of the Imperial (Principate) Period they began their spread into the Western part of the Roman Empire (with the exception of the cults of Cybele and Attis, which were venerated by the Romans since the second Punic War, 218–201 B.C.). On the one hand, this situation makes the task of the researcher easier because it provides detailed and rather understandable sources of the narrative type, but on the other hand, it prevents us from reconstructing the basic myths and the related rites (the exception is the cult of Isis and Osiris because of the abundance of the ancient Egyptian materials). But there are many scholars

who see the prototype of all Near Eastern cults of the suffering gods as the Mesopotamian cult of Tammuz (Dumu-zi, Dumu-zi Absu). That is why the comparison of Hellenistic and Roman sources with the Mesopotamian materials is useful enough for the reconstruction of the basic cult. The Roman variety of the cults and mysteries of the suffering gods was described in detail by the Belgian scholar, F. Cumont, in his book *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (1956). The materials therein are very important for the present study.

In this paper, I will first of all analyze the mystery cults of the ancient Near East using the example of the cults of the Great Mother Cybele and Attis, the standard and best known ones. Some description of their myths and related rites will be given, also comparing them with similar cults of other Eastern gods (Osiris, Adonis, etc.). The critical analysis of the Frazerian approach is also important in this case. Then, I would like to suggest a new psychological interpretation of the material based on the theories, approaches, and experimental data of transpersonal psychology.

The cult of the Phrygian (region in Asia Minor, contemporary Turkey) god Attis has been closely connected with the cult of the Great Mother (Magna Mater), the goddess Cybele, the mother of all the gods, symbol of the ever-feminine principle of the world. During the second Punic War, this cult was established (with some limitations eliminated later by Emperor Claudius) in Rome as an official one: Cybele became the protectress of the Eternal City. This cult, which became popular, to the exclusion of all others, from the beginning of the Imperial Period, flourished in Rome and its Empire until the end of IV A.D. (i.e., until the complete victory of Christianity).

We have three varieties of the Attis myth. Two of them were given by Pausanias (one of these two was also repeated by Emperor Julian the Apostate in his philosophical poem about Cybele), and one has been told by the Christian author Arnobius, who pointed to a pagan priest Timotheus Eumolpides (Egypt, IV–III B.C.) as his primary source. Arnobius declares that Timotheus found the myth of Attis in ancient secret books and sacred mysteries of antiquity.

The first version (according to Julian the Apostate): Attis was an orphan left by his mother on the bank of a river. He became a handsome

youth, who was in love with Cybele, who forbade him to love any other woman. Nevertheless, Attis fell in love with the river nymph Sangaria (Sangarios) and had sexual intercourse with her in a cave. Cybele caused him to go mad, and during this time of madness he castrated himself. Then he was pardoned by Cybele, who caused him to ascend to the celestial worlds.

The second version of Pausanias tells us that Attis was an earthly youth who was by birth unable to have a sexual life. Then he became famous owing to his mystery services to the Great Mother. Zeus became angry that the fame of Attis exceeded his own. So Zeus sent the monstrous wild boar to kill him. (This myth is akin to the Syrian myth about Adonis.)

The version of Arnobius-Timotheus is the most interesting one: According to it, Zeus finds his mother Cybele sleeping in the mountains. Zeus, filled with incestuous desire, tries to possess her but fails. His semen flows out on a mountain rock, which becomes pregnant and bears the androgynous Agdistis (Agdestis), a being of male/female nature. This Agdistis, like the androgynes of Plato, is extremely mighty and has strong sexual feelings toward both men and women. The gods are afraid of Agdistis' debauchery and so they send to him the god Bacchus the Liberator. He gives wine to Agdistis, and when this creature, Agdistis, is asleep from drunkenness, Bacchus castrates him. Agdistis thus loses his male nature and changes into a womanly nature—the Earthly (the second) Cybele. But the drops of the blood from Agdistis nourish the soil and it bears a blooming and fragrant tree. The nymph (the daughter of the river god Sangarias) puts the branch of the tree under her clothes. She then becomes pregnant and bears a son, who is Attis, the bearer of the male sex of Agdistis. The earthly Cybele then meets Attis and falls in love with him, because in reality he is the other half of herself. But the relatives of Attis want him to be the husband of the daughter of the king. During the wedding party, Cybele-Agdistis enters the palace; she is in a fury. Everybody feels horror. The king castrates himself; the princess cuts her breasts off. Attis runs to the forest and there castrates himself, too. Then he dies from loss of blood. The earthly Cybele is full of repentance. She prays to Zeus (Phrygian Sabasius or Papas?) to resurrect Attis and make him eternally youthful and

immortal. Resurrected Attis, together with Cybele-Agdistis, ascends into the celestial world (apotheosis).

This myth has many common features with the Syrian myth about Adonis (ancient semitic *Adon—the Lord*; compare with the biblical title of God as *Adonai—Our Lord*, or more literally, *My Lords*). Pausanias also practically equates Attis with Adonis.

Let us now return to Attis. In the Roman period, texts appeared glorifying Pileatus (i.e., god in a Phrygian hat) as *Pantheos* (the All-god) or *Shepherd of the Glimmering Stars*. He was equated not only with Adonis or Osiris, but with Pan and Mythras as well. His images included the crown of the solar rays with a lunar disc and numerous other attributes. A question, previously formulated by Cumont, appears here: Why did a weak and unhappy hero of a primitive love-story (as Attis of the myth) become transformed into the Omnipotent God and Lord of the Universe (Cumont, 1956, p. 71)? I think that Cumont himself answers this question quite correctly in what he says about the cult of Isis and Serapis (1956, p. 93). The cult of Attis had a very primitive theology and elementary morals, much more elementary than the ethical doctrines of the Greek and Roman philosophers. Nevertheless, it enjoyed great success and popularity. Why? The answer is that neither myth nor theology nor ethics can explain the success of the suffering gods cults; only reference to the rites and mysteries of these divinities can. The ritual is the strongest side of such cults and beliefs. So, let us leave the myths and mythologems and look at the mysteries of Attis, the central point of which is his bloody death and resurrection.

The mysteries of Attis have been described in detail by Frazer (1984, pp. 328–331), Cumont (1956, pp. 56–59), and Merezhkovski (1991, No. 5, p. 41) so I need not repeat the material here. It is enough to point out the most important elements of these rites.

The most essential of all is the ecstatic and bloody forms of sorrow regarding the murdered god. The day of sorrow (23 March of the Roman calendar) was even called by the Romans, *Dies Sanguinis*, that is, “The Bloody Day.” During the service held on this day the priests wounded themselves (the priests of Cybele and Attis were eunuchs) and were dancing and crying, being in

an ecstatic state of mind. The novices were castrated on this day of sorrow, too. Then the figure of Attis was buried in the grave and the ecstatic mood of the preceding part of service changed into the silent mood of mourning. Then fire appeared, and in its light, the priest declared the resurrection of the god. The figure of Attis was then erected from the grave and the priest promised eternal life to all participants of the rite and believers. The next day was a holiday of enormous joy, sounds of happiness and carnival, suggesting the different kinds of excessive behavior of its participants. The last day of the festival was a day of rest and silence.

We can see in the foregoing, four different but interrelated stages: (1) ecstatic sorrow of pain with the bloody orgies and ritual castrations; (2) silence of mourning; (3) excitement and joy of excessive character; and (4) silent rest and quietness of catharsis and purification.

Below I shall also describe the mystery rite of *taurobolia* (the bull-killing rite), one of the most popular and sacred rites of the Great Mother Cybele. But first I shall make some notes on the occasion of ritual castration in the mysteries of the "suffering gods."

The cults involving ritual castration were widespread in the ancient Near East and were connected with the veneration of the great goddesses, such as Astarte-Aphrodite or Artemis of Ephesus—Oriental goddess with the Greek name, etc. In Hellenistic Syria there were also many ritual castrations; one of the kings had even prohibited them, but with no success.

Note that the myths are not very attentive to the resurrection of Attis; this moment is not accented by the myth. Even the version of Arnobius-Timotheus only mentions it briefly. The rite greatly stresses nothing but suffering, death, and the rising of the god; here lies the central point of the rite. This point lies in the very foundation of the cult of Attis itself and is the main cause of its popularity. So here it is correct to agree with Frazer, noting that myths have a secondary nature in comparison with the rites: the myths were invented to explain the rites and habits of the believers (Frazer, 1984, p. 327). I quite agree with this statement, but it seems to me better to add to this opinion that the value of the rite itself was determined by its psychopractical aspect or intention, the purpose of which was the cathartic

feeling realized through experience of death-rebirth. The psychopractical effect of the mystery rite was the magic power which changed the lovely boy-shepherd, the lover of two sacred female persons, into the Omnipotent Lord, Shepherd of Stars and the King of the Space beyond the world.

But this interpretation of the rites and myths of the Phrygian god in itself cannot explain the structure and construction of the mystery of Attis (or the mysteries of other "suffering gods"). In order to explain them we must recognize the incompleteness of the traditional agricultural theory as well as further interpret some substantial aspects of the myths and rite (first of all, the theme of self castration) and some features found only in the myth, which is the code of rite (the theme of incest). Before I proceed to attempt a psychological interpretation of these points, however, I should like to say something about a cult related to that of Attis, that is, the cult of the Syrian god Adonis.

The mysteries of Adonis took place everywhere in the Hellenistic Orient (Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt), in Greece (from a rather early period), and in Roman Italy. There were large variations in the details of the rite, but its essence was one and the same. This was, as in the case of Attis, the mystery of the death and resurrection of the god (the theme of secondary importance for the myth). Sometimes this mystery was preceded by the fest of *hierogamia* of Adonis and Aphrodite. The mystery of death-resurrection had the same stages as the mystery of Attis. It is interesting that the rite of mourning in the mystery of Adonis was served as a rule by women (according to the Bible [Ezekiel, 14] the participants of the rite of the mourning of Tammuz in Jerusalem were also women).

The interesting moment of Adonis' rite was preparing the so called "gardens of Adonis" (boxes or jugs with sprouts of different plants. When the plants faded, the women threw them (as well as the images of the god) into the sea or streams.

Curiously, Frazer used this rite to argue for the agricultural character of the cult of Adonis. Here I think it would be instructive to provide a long citation from Merezhkovsky (1991, No. 4, pp. 70–71):

All the religion of Adonis is only an "agricultural cult of fertility," (this

blasphemous nonsense is unchangeable from V until XX A.D. Certainly, Adonis is a dying and resurrecting cereal, but quite not in the sense of the “naturalists” from St. Hieronymus up to Frazer, but in the sense of St. Paul: “The seed you sow has to die before it is made alive...That is how it will be when the dead are raised...Now I will tell you the mystery” (1 Cor. 16:36, 42,51). Unfortunately, this “mystery” has been revealed in vain and not only in the ancient mysteries of Adonis.

If all of the religion of the suffering god—the primordial religion of all humankind—is only an “agricultural cult of fertility” and nothing more, why were cups of pottery...with cereals, put under the very sun rays near the walls of the houses and why were they watered in abundance so that the sprouts appeared and faded as soon as possible? Why did the ancients use the plants, symbolizing death and sterility?...Why did they throw the seeds and sprouts not to the fertile soil, but into the sterile sea and deep wells, the entrances into the underworld? And how can we understand the myth, preserved by Damascius, about the god Eshmun, Adonis of Canaan, who castrated himself...so as to be safe from the loving chase of the goddess Astronoya—Stellar Astarte, the same goddess as Aphrodite Celestial, Urania? Here the false “god of fertility” transforms into the real god of eunuchs, Attis. Is it possible to imagine something more different from the cult of fertility? (Merezhkovsky, 1991, No. 4, pp. 70–71).

The doubts and questions of Merzhkovsky are quite reasonable. Here, he also points out that the “freethinking” and “atheistic” theory of Frazer was in reality established by ancient Christian authors (St. Hieronymus and others) with the self-confessed aim to differentiate between “false” resurrections of the pagan divinities and the “true” resurrection of Christ. And it seems that the Frazerians do not notice a very strange contradiction: if we evaluate the nature of Adonis by the “gardens,” it would be the god of spring plants which dies under the hot rays of the summer sun, but if we make our judgment on the basis of the season of the festival (in Alexandria), or if we rely on the words of Ammian Marcellinus (historian of IV A.D.), Adonis is the god of ripened fruits and the autumn harvest. He (as well as Attis) could even be the god of the Moon—is it not the Moon which permanently passes through the cycle of death and rebirth? And Attis can be as well the solar god—the time of his mysteries

(March 23rd–26th) is the time of the spring equinox. Such self-contradicting preconceptions clearly demonstrate the weakness of the Frazerian and any other “naturalistic” explanation, and the artificial character of such theories. And what can we do with the practice of self-castration and its mythical counterpart? Is it not too strange to be regarded as an “agricultural cult of fertility”? It is very difficult to believe that the agricultural myth about seed, its death in the soil and resurrection in the sprout, can affect human feelings to such a degree that the male believers would wish to cut off their testicles and become eunuchs. And how can fertility increase as a result of castration? It is far more rational to presuppose that here we have something very different from an agricultural cult.

I shall try now to look at the mystery cults of the suffering gods from another angle: not from the side of the outer world, where flowers bloom and people take in the harvest, but from the unconscious side of *psyche*, in which dwell all the archetypes and all pre-images of all myths, mysteries, and rites. First of all I shall argue that the mysteries of the suffering gods are closely related to the cathartic experience of death-and-rebirth, with some distinctive perinatal connotations. Of crucial importance here are the psychological states connected with Basic Perinatal Matrix (BPM) III, described in detail by Stanislav Grof (1993) in his work summarizing “almost thirty years of research on nonordinary states of consciousness induced by psychedelic drugs and a variety of nonpharmacological methods” (p. 12).

According to Grof, BPM’s are patterns of prenatal and early postnatal experience preserved on the unconscious level of the human *psyche*. BPM III reflects the prenatal experience of the foetus when it step by step moves along the channel of the uterus, suffering from exclusively strong mechanical pressure and hypoxia. In the perinatal experiences reported in transpersonal sessions are such elements of a titanic struggle, sadomasochistic intentions, sexual excitement, demonical scenes, scatological themes, and fighting with fire in the constant process of death-and-rebirth. The corresponding archetypical images are pictures of the Last Judgement, deeds of the great heroes, and battles of a cosmic scale. Constant themes are also bloody sacrifices, self-sacrifices, killings, sadomasochism, and rapes, the

roots of which lie in the conjunction of the pain of the foetus suffered from the activity of the maternal reproductive system and the furious biological reaction of the foetus to hypoxia, pain, and unrest. A number of the images, related to the transpersonal states of BPM III during the sessions, have the nature of religious ceremonies and rites in which sexuality is connected with the ecstatic dance (phallic cults, rites of the Great Mother Goddess, etc.). A classical symbol of the passage from BPM III to BPM IV (i.e., the experience of the passage from prenatal state to the postnatal one, climax of the process of birthing) is the Phoenix bird, burning in the fire and rebirthing from the ashes, and then flying to the sun. The experience of the struggle between death and rebirth according to Grof is on the border between agony and ecstasy, the unification of both.

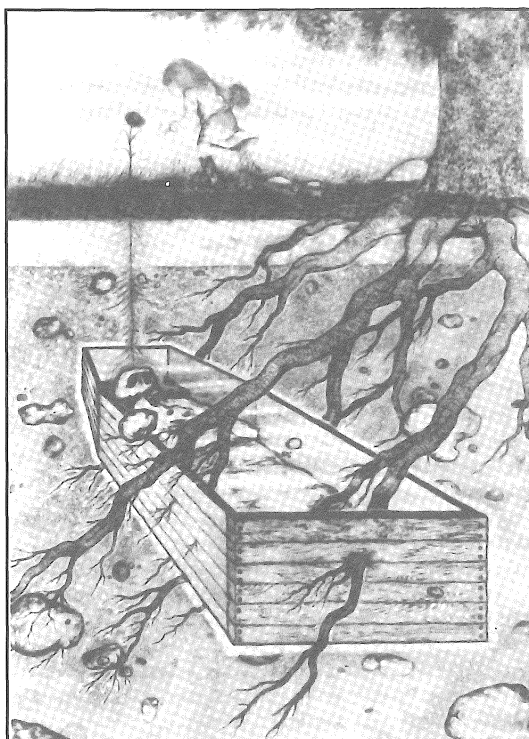
The battle between death and rebirth finds its completion in the stage of BPM IV. On the very eve of liberation, the subject feels the coming of a catastrophe of great scale, destruction, absolute defeat, and death. The dissolution of the old "ego" comes about, precipitated by the annihilation of all previous worldviews. From the experience of total destruction, death, and a fall beyond the limits of being, there follows the vision of the brightest flash of white or golden light of supernatural brilliance and beauty and the vision of the spring nature after the storm. The person experiences a profound feeling of spiritual salvation, liberation, and purification of all sins. The subject's world seems to be a very good and safe place, and interest in life increases greatly (Grof, 1993, pp. 140–141).

Grof points out that the symbolism of the experience of death-and-rebirth is extremely rich, appearing from different regions and strata of the collective unconscious. For example, the death of the ego is experienced in the form of self-

personification in the figures of Christ, Osiris, Adonis, Dionysus, and other mythological beings. The abstract image of the god as the brilliant source of light also can play the role of *theophany*. The experience of meeting and union with the great goddesses-mothers (Isis, Lakshmi, Parvati, Cybele) or with the Virgin Maria can also take place.

As stated earlier, I consider the transpersonal interpretation of the cults of the suffering gods to be more natural than the agricultural one. Not the strange cult of fertility, but the religious, psychotherapeutic procedure leading to catharsis and the feeling of release is the understanding of the ancient mysteries that seems more correct to me. Let me give one simple but clear example.

There exists a well-known image of the dead Egyptian god, Osiris (Usir/Ousir), or, more correctly, the mummy of Osiris, which gives life to the sprouts of cereals. This image was considered to be one of the arguments for the agricultural character of this god. Nevertheless, the Russian edition of Grof's *Beyond the Brain* (Grof, 1993, p. 335) contains a picture, inspired by a psychedelic session, and presenting the cycle of



Reprinted by permission of Stanislav Grof

death-and-rebirth. In the picture, reproduced here, we can see the coffin with the skeleton which gives birth to the mighty tree. From the skull of the skeleton a carnation flower is growing and a little girl is running to it (here we have a play of words: *carnation* as the name of the flower and the related word "carnal," "made of flesh," with the connotation "*reincarnation*"). Who can believe that the author of this picture has expressed the idea of an agricultural or botanical cycle? But it is also well known that myths of Attis and Adonis use the image of the pine or another big tree in their imagery to express the idea of the death of the god killed (or who committed suicide) under the huge tree or the idea of the

divine transfiguration (the tree as the transubstantiated body of the god-martyr)—as, for example, in the myth of the nativity of Adonis his mother Smyrna was transformed into the tree.

Let me now try to interpret the myths and rites of Attis and Adonis from an approach of transpersonal psychology and to explain some specific details of the cults of these divinities. Here I should like to stress some special features of these cults, such as castration and the theme of incest.

I will begin by looking at the Attis myths again. First of all, it must be noted that the image of Cybele (Mother of the gods) here shows the conformity of the myth to the themes of maternity and birth. Cybele is the archetypal expression of the idea of maternity. But in the myths, no one but Cybele (Cybele-Agdistis) is the cause of the castration and death of Attis, as well as the cause of his resurrection and apotheosis. It is quite understandable, because in the perinatal experience nothing but the maternal reproductive system is the source of the pain of the foetus as well as of the bliss of birth/rebirthing. If we add that the prenatal experience of the blissful state of the foetus in the womb, along with the related “oceanic” feelings, quite correspond to the peaceful love of Attis and Cybele before Attis was seduced by the nymph, the function of the image of Cybele is very clear. She is the Mother. The image of the nymph is not so clear, but the presence of the theme of water (river) is closely connected with the prenatal symbolism of the “ocean” of the maternal waters of the womb. It is possible that the seduction of Attis by the nymph symbolizes his wish of not being born: he does not want to leave the primordial waters and experience the sufferings of birth/resurrection. This desire, of course, could be a cause of Cybele’s wrath. Then the passions of Attis begin, culminating in his self-castration (see below). The same theme of the maternal archetype has been presented in the myth of Adonis in the image of Aphrodite-Astarte (but in a much milder form).

It is interesting that the Emperor Julian the Apostate and the neoplatonist Sallustius, who were engaged in the purely philosophical interpretation of the Attis myth, explain the “sinful” love of Attis and the nymph as his attraction to matter and his departure from the absolute unity of the spiritual principle. If we

remember that in antiquity matter was often thought of as the primordial waters, this interpretation can be of relevance. This circumstance once again underlines the close relation between myths, archetypes, and the speculative thinking of the ancient epoch. Sallustius also stressed the archetypism of the mythological narrative: the subject of the myth “is not appearing in the past, but existing in eternity, forever.”

“The passions” of Attis come to an end with his resurrection and apotheosis, that is, the ascension to the celestial kingdom of Cybele.

Note that perinatal themes of the ancient myths are often in the form of descending to the depths of the earth, to the grave, to the underworld (the correspondence between the images of the grave and the maternal womb is well known to scholars of mythologies). This archetype has been presented not only in the famous mysteries of Demeter and Persephone, but in the most ancient myth of Tammuz.

To complete the analysis of the perinatal theme in the mysteries of Attis, it would be useful to look at another Phrygian rite of the cult of Cybele, which probably is the simplified variety of the mysteries of death/rebirth of Attis. I mean the *taurobolia*, the rite of bull-killing.

The taurobolias were at first mentioned in I B.C. The main source is the description of Prudentius, who presented his own version. The bull was killed by knife on an open platform. His blood flowed down and washed the participant of the mystery, who stood in a hole excavated beneath the platform:

Through thousands of hollows in the wood—the Roman poet says—the drops of the blood fall through the hole and wash the head, the clothes, and the body of the neophyte. He tries to use the blood to color his ears, lips, and nostrils. He washes by the bloody liquid his eyes, and even his mouth is not dry, because he washes his tongue with blood and willingly drinks it. (Cumont, 1956, pp. 66-68)

After this bloody shower, the *myst* (participant of the mystery) went out from underneath the hole and was enthusiastically received by the believers. It was considered that such a person, due to this bloody baptism, had been liberated from all his sins and all impurities and became equal to the god himself. Cumont (1956) considers this rite to

be the result of the syncretism of the Phrygian mysteries and the ceremonies of the Iranian god Mithras. If this is so, it must be noted that in the cult of Mithras the mystical bull (or ox) was thought to be the source of creation and resurrection; so the rite described may be seen as a means of the temporal or even eternal purification and rebirth of the soul.

It is clear that the *myst* in taurobolia represents the god Attis himself. The descension to the hole is analogous to death and the embryonic state as well (grave as womb). The blood of the bull renovates the dead and prepares them for a new and more perfect life. The neophyte experiences death and rebirth; he obtains a new birth, passing through all the pains and sufferings of the process of birthing (the rite concentrates, first of all, on BPM III) and the blood of the bull is nothing other than the maternal blood of the archetypal Mother—the goddess Cybele (the bloody baptizing marks the borderline between BPM III and BPM IV, between prenatal existence in the hole, or pit, and the postnatal state of the born/reborn subject). Then the mystery ends with the experience of the cathartic renewal and rebirthing of the adept through this bloody mystery ceremony.

A parallel between taurobolia and the Christian mystery of baptizing, it seems to me, is that in their inner, transpersonal sense, both rites are quite similar (though from the moral standpoint, the bloodless baptizing is certainly preferable): the baptizing also supposes new spiritual birth. Baptizing is a mystery rite, too, but here the blood is changed by water, i.e., orgiastic BPM III is changed into the oceanic serenity of BPM I (blissful prenatal state of foetus in the maternal womb). It is important to note that the first Christians were baptizing adults, or even the aged (not infants like the Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches today), preserving the understanding of this act as a mystery of rebirth (but not as a purely symbolic act of entering the community of the faithful, as in the majority of Protestant churches). The baptizing, rooted in the Judaic practices of the Essenes (who were probably connected with John the Baptist) would, in the *aeon* of the New Testament (as St. John pointed out), be changed into baptizing “with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11), which probably had to replace the oceanic waters of the safe womb, describing the rebirth for new godlike life.

But Christianity preserved the tradition of the watery baptism.

The strong cathartic effect of the taurobolia explains its enormous attraction to the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Passing through it was considered to be “in the eternal rebirth” (*in aeternum renatus*), the expression known to us by numerous inscriptions.

Now let us return to the rites of Attis and Cybele. The version of their myth by Timotheus-Arnobius has much more complex structures than the versions which were analyzed above, but its contents may still be reduced to the more simple versions. I should like to draw attention to some of its specific elements:

(1) The theme of the divine incest appears here in its quite distinctive form. It is known also from the myths of Isis (Iset) and Osiris (here it may be explained by the real matrimonial practice of the reigning families of ancient Egypt) and the mystery myths of Dionysus and Demeter. So this theme must be analyzed in detail.

(2) The interesting aspect of this version is the functional identity of Bacchus the Savior (the Liberator) and Attis himself. The first, by the castration of Agdistis objectivized or explicated his/her male sex, that is, Attis. The second (Attis) being in the sacred horror produced by Agdistis/Cybele, castrated himself and returned to fundamental bisexuality, but in its subtle, potential form, transcending human sexual duality. The self-castration was the precondition of his resurrection and apotheosis.

(3) In this version, the nymph was not a lover, but a mother (of the secondary type; the mother of the primary type was Celestial Cybele herself) of Attis. This circumstance shows the connection between this river nymph and the prenatal symbolism of water.

It is now time to try to explain the themes of self-castration and incest. Freud wrote about a complex he called “fear of castration,” but he could not give a satisfactory explanation of it. Transpersonal psychology sees the roots of this complex in the perinatal impressions; firstly, the shock from cutting the umbilical cord, which is a great trauma for the baby, then the psychedelic session reproduces it by the painful feelings in the lower part of abdomen of the patient (as testified to by the experiments and clinical practice of Grof). So the fear of castration is rooted

in the subconscious recollection about this aspect of the birth trauma (Grof, 1993, pp. 233–234; on birth trauma, see also Share, 1994, pp. 86–116).

The fear of castration must however be distinguished from the will to castration or the desire for castration, a phenomenon which is limited not only to the cult of Attis. We can note here the desire for castration of the Russian peasant Kondraty Selivanov, who on the border of 18th–19th centuries established the sect of the castrates or eunuchs (*skoptsy*), and which has been preserved almost up to the present time (some old representatives of this sect are still alive, but they have no young followers). This Russian sect and its practice is of interest for the evaluation of the mysteries of Attis. One point here is of special importance: Russian sectarians, like believers in the Phrygian god, have a cult of an extremely ecstatic (“Dionysian”) character, which at first glance may seem rather strange for the religion of the castrates. The Russian sect of the *skoptsy* gradually separated itself from its maternal group—the sect of the Christ-believers or the so called “flagellants” (*hristovoveriy; hlysty*)—which in the beginning of the 19th century still existed as a mixture, “ships” (communities) of flagellants and eunuchs. And the sect of the eunuchs preserved the ecstatic prayer meetings (*radeniye*) of the flagellants with their ecstatic dances, singing, and trances.

The ecstatic character of such cults (the extreme form of which is orgiastic trance) is rather widespread in different mystery cults, for example, in the mysteries of Dionysus, which included the excessive worship of *maenads*, the female votaries of this god, who in their wild ecstasy tore apart the bodies of animals and even human beings.

Here I must mention the transpersonal phenomenon which Grof called the “Volcanic” or “Dionysian” ecstasy. It is distinctly opposite to the “Apollonic” or “Oceanic” ecstasy corresponding with BPM I and its feelings of quietude, serenity, and unity with all forms of existence.

The Volcanic ecstasy has been characterized by Grof as having extreme physical and emotional expression, a high degree of aggression, destructive impulses of inner and outer orientation, powerful impulses of a sexual nature, and rhythmical orgiastic movements. It is a unique mixture of emotional and physical suffering together with

wild sensual passion and desire. Here love is the same as hate, the agony of death is the joy of rebirth, apocalyptic horror is the excitement of the creation, and so on.

A person feels the coming of the great event—of spiritual liberation or *unio mystica*. But even if this feeling is of great force, it cannot attain its realization and the completion of the dramatic sequence of death and rebirth: Volcanic ecstasy corresponds to BPM III, the states of which need for their realization the transition to the experience of BPM I or BPM IV (Grof, 1993, p. 337).

The feelings and images of religious nature which correspond to the Volcanic ecstasy are bloody sacrifices, the Black Sabbath of the witches, Dionysian orgies, and so on.

To me, the rites of the suffering gods (especially as explicitly given in the mysteries of Attis with their flagellations, bloody wounds, and self-castrations) represent this type of ecstasy with the passage to the illuminating ecstasy of BPM IV. But why is this kind of ecstasy especially related to masochism and self-castration?

It has been noted by Grof, a transpersonal psychologist, that the recollections about pain in the perinatal experience during psychedelic sessions (the most painful impressions are related with BPM III) express themselves in the patient’s striving to be rescued from pain through following pain to the source of pain (i.e., to the place of suffering in the body or the painful organ).

Note here another important detail. The experience of BPM III is rooted in that stage of the birth process when synergism of the mother-and-child takes on the character of struggling and even hostility. The associations with the feelings of the victims of rape are rather widespread in this case (the feeling of fear, hypoxia, the attempts to obtain freedom, the enforced sexual excitement, etc.). This painful experience has some common features with the experience of BPM III (this circumstance increases the psychic trauma of the victim of a real rape—Grof, 1993, p. 237). Recall the fight between Zeus and his mother Celestial Cybele, when Zeus tried to take her by force (the beginning of the version of Timotheus-Arnobius). In addition, subjects who have experienced BPM III in psychedelic sessions often compare the birth process with the process of the sexual (especially, enforced) act. But what in such cases does the self-castration mean?

I think that its basis consists of a complex of experiences grounded in the ecstatic states of BPM III: the attempt to counteract the pain caused by the situation of the synergetic conflict with the maternal body and the attitude about the negation of the birth process associated with sexual intercourse. It is a physical expression of the negation of the birth process (which is the process of the extrusion of the foetus from the maternal body) or through the coming back to the blissful synergism of BPM I (this way is impossible for the rite, or myth as can be seen from the above-told story about Attis' adultery with a river nymph, and Cybele's wrath on this occasion), or through the completion of this process in the birth/rebirth which leads to establishing of a principally new unity with the mother (myth clarifies this reestablished unity in the image of the apotheosis of Attis and Cybele after the death and resurrection of Attis). The same idea lies in the meaning of the theme of incest, which is especially clear in the mystery myths of the Dionysian cycle. The myth rejects incest: Zeus, in the version of Timotheus-Arnobius, cannot overcome his mother Celestial Cybele. Here, therefore, the mystery attitude is not coming back to the womb, but to rebirth. Nevertheless, implicitly, the incest has some support in the myth: Agdistis has been born from the semen of Zeus fallen on the stone, which is the ancient symbol of androgyny. So, the incestual theme of the myth also has the meaning of returning to the maternal womb. Archetypically, incest rejects the birth process as some progressive act: in incest this process turns to its source signaling the attitude of coming back to the womb to restore the basic synergetic unity with the maternal body to attain the perfect union with the female/maternal principle archetypically represented in the image of Cybele as *Magna Mater*, as Mother *par excellence*.

Here, we can recollect some ideas of the Russian religious thinker V. V. Rozanov (1856–1919), who wrote about the extremely feminine character of the founder of the Russian sect of eunuchs (*skoptsy*), Kondraty Selivanov, for whom self-castration was like cutting off an unuseful and alien detail so as to realize the perfectly feminine type of personality (Rozanov, 1914).

Moreover, we have the same “*complex of Attis*” in the basis of some new religious movements. As

one example, I can mention the new Russian sect “Marianic Church of Russia” (previously—*Bogorodichnyi Centr*, the “Centre of the God's Mother”) founded by I. Bereslavsky about seven years ago. In the teaching of this sect, Lady Maria has nothing common with the Virgin Maria of Christianity. She became the real Goddess-Mother like Cybele or Isis. The moral doctrine of the sect includes the veneration of the Lady as the highest female principle of the Universe and the condemnation of real earthly mothers (and then all other women) as the sources of sin and seduction; their attitude toward sex is also purely negativistic—intercourse with a woman is disgusting. The most interesting point here, though, is the principal coexistence of the cult of the Eternal Female with practical misogyny.

We can therefore say that the mysteries of Attis and Adonis have one and the same sense: that of obtaining a more integrated *psyche*, sacralized in religion, through the mystery experience of death-and-rebirth due, as in solving of the conflicts of BPM III and entering the experience of BPM IV, to a cathartic experience of a new spiritual birth-renewal. The purely mystical (transpersonal in a strict sense) experience in the process of experiencing death-and-rebirth at the turning points of BPM I as well as BPM IV cannot be excluded.

It can be supposed that the same idea was also the sense of the little-known mysteries of Isis and Serapis, coming back to the rites of the ancient Egyptian divinities Isis (Iset) and Osiris (Usir). And, of course, mention must be made of the phenomena of early Hellenistic Christianity, which had transformed the psychopractical archetype of death-rebirth into the majestic doctrine of universal corporeal resurrection due to the incarnation and intrahumanization of the *Logos*, His physical death and physical resurrection. Herein lies the principal difference between Christianity and late Biblical and intertestamental Judaic religion, where the universal resurrection was not connected with self-sacrifice and passion of the only God-Man. And here, to my mind, is an unquestionable influence of the ancient mysteries of the suffering gods of Syria, Phrygia, and other parts of the Hellenistic world.

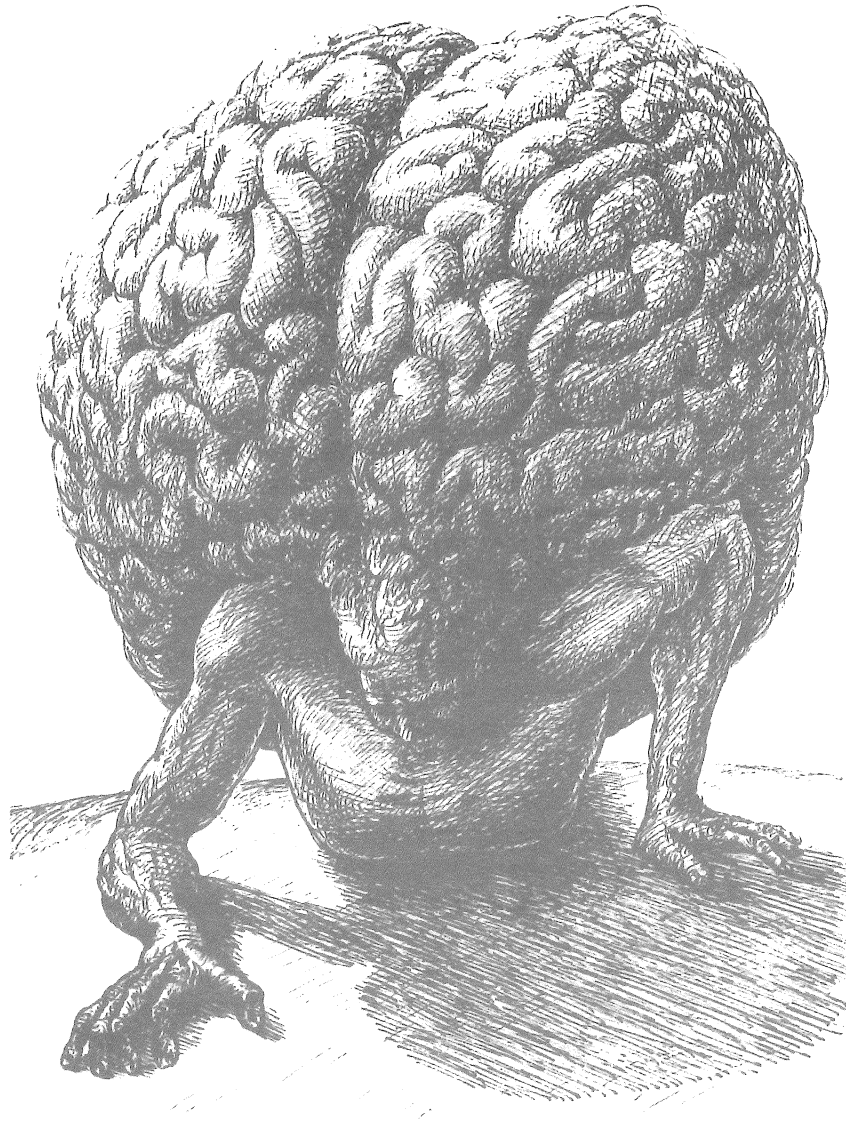
Notes

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