Mystics from Antiquity to the Renaissance

PLATONIC SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

— Bruce MacLennan
“They cause sympathy of the souls in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession.” — Proclus
“One buries children, one gains new children, one dies oneself; and this men take heavily, carrying earth to earth. But it is necessary to harvest life like a fruit-bearing ear of corn, and that the one be, the other not.” — Euripides

Around Athens, burial grounds sown with grain to purify them and return them to the living

Plant shoots = korai
MOTHER AND DAUGHTER
Daughter becomes Mother
The Two are cyclically One
Separation and Reunion
But Persephone is eternally:
  + Queen of Dead
  + Daughter/Mother
Many myths in which a divine being dies
The death is only an apparent death
Henceforth mortal’s deaths are only apparent, if they recapitulate the divinity’s death
A dual continuation (not entirely distinct):
  + divine
  + plant-like (unindividuated life)
After human suffering & death, a divine/plant life without suffering & death
Persephone reveals the way to reach her
THE POMEGRANATE
ARCHETYPAL REBIRTH AND EVOLUTION

- Depth psychology: the gods (archetypes) are unconscious structures, shared by all people, regulating perception, motivation, and behavior.
- Rooted in the human genome.
- By surrendering the ordinary consciousness to these archetypes we experience ourselves as part of the human species.
- Through your individual life (bios) you allow life (zôê) to continue and evolve.
Mystery proper
  + e.g., Eleusinian Mysteries

Mystic cult
  + e.g., Dionysian Mysteries

Mysteriosophic cult
  + e.g., Orphic Mysteries

(“cult” here means “a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object” — Am. Her. Dict.)
THE DIONYSIAN OR BACCHIC MYSTERIES
Clear evidence by mid 7th cent. BCE
Athenian festivals instituted in Age of Tyrants (6th cent. BCE)
Movement of middle & lower classes
Societies of raving women (maenads) rave during specific festivals

Bacchanalia brutally suppressed in Italy in 186 BCE, afterwards strictly regulated
Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii (79 CE)
Mysteries still held in Crete as late as 4th cent. CE
THE MYTH

- Rhea bore Demeter to Zeus
- Demeter bore Persephone to Zeus
- Persephone bore Dionysos to Zeus
- Dionysos is enthroned and tempted by the Titans’ toys
- Cut into seven pieces and eaten

- Zeus blasts them
- Athena rescues heart
- From it and Zeus, Semele becomes pregnant
- Consumed by divine fire
- Dionysos rescued & sewed in Zeus’ thigh
- Born from it
- Goes to Underworld to bring Semele to Olympus
ZEUS AND SEMELE
THIRD BIRTH OF DIONYSOS
## Outer Rites

- Celebrations of indestructible life (zôê)
- Seasonal festivals connected with wine harvest and fermentation
- Ritual drinking
- Costumes and masks
- Dancing and acrobatics
- Satyr plays
- Revels (comoi)
- Comedy < com-oidia (revel songs)
- Tragedy < trag-oidia (goat songs) < tragos (goat)
- Dithyrambs
- Sacred Marriage / Union
- Sexual freedom
MAENADS IN DIONYSIAN FESTIVAL
INNER RITES

- Bacchic Mysteries were most influential as a private spiritual practice
- Required (1) application for admission, (2) preparatory period, (3) purifications, (4) sacred rites, (5) integration into the group
- *Orgia*: secret initiation rites taught by the god
- Take place at night in grotto or cave
- Procession to mountain
- Raving through the town
BACCHANALIA (HENRYK SIEMIRADZKI)
BACCHANALIA (NICOLAS POUSSIN)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecstatic Dance and Possession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Son of Heaven and Earth</td>
</tr>
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<td>God of vegetable and animal life</td>
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<tr>
<td>The vine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unmixed wine</td>
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<td>Sacred dance</td>
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<td>Omophagy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive regression / embracing the shadow</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecstasy and possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessed afterlife</td>
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</tbody>
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ENTHEOS / ENTHUSIASM

- Wine
- Omophagy
- Animal-skin cloak
- Dance and music
- Ivy chewing
- Maenads and thyiads
- Bacchi and Bacchae
The thyrsus-bearers are many, but the Bacchi are few.” — Plato
That is, many participate in the wild party, but relatively few are in genuine identification with the god
REBIRTH

- Emotion
- Immoderation
- Divine madness
- Return to nature
- Self-forgetfulness
- Deification
- Miraculous power
- Prophecy
As a nature god, Dionysos dies and rises again
Dionysos is immolated by proxy in the sacrificial victim, but always arises again
for he is the Indestructible Life behind nature
The Bacchi had received the undying substance into their bodies
Mystically united with the god in life, they could not be separated in death
PARADOX: UNION OF OPPOSITES

- Dionysos called “Born of Fire” and “Lord of Moist Nature”
- Vine (warm) and Ivy (cool)
- Wine and Water (spirit and matter)
- Blood and tears
- Comedy and tragedy
- Birth (new life) and death
  + Indestructible life (ζôê) requires birth and death of individual lives (bioi)
THE ORPHIC MYSTERIES
By late 6th cent. BCE: stories of the singer Orpheus to retrieve his dead bride

Thus he has specialized knowledge of Underworld and afterlife

A large body of Orphic writings survives in fragments
  + theogonies (births of the gods)
  + eschatology and theology
  + hymns
ORPHIC THEOGONY

“Invocation” by Lesley Keen, ©1984
http://veekspace.com/vegasqueen/invocation.htm
PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

- Enthronement
- Distraction by toys
- Dismemberment
- Humans made from ash
- Athena saves the heart
- Nurtured by Zeus

- Redescent and implantation in matter
- Consumed in illumination
- Rebirth out of fire
- Descent into underworld to redeem mother
- A model for initiates
PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE
ENDS — GOALS

- Wisdom (*Sophia*) and the sage (*sophos*)
- The *philo-sophos* (philosopher) as lover of Wisdom
- Unending pursuit of Wisdom
- Pythagoras coined the term *philosophia* (philosophy)
- “Empty are the words of the philosopher who has cured no one’s soul” — Epicurus
“Spiritual” because involve entire spirit
+ intellect
+ imagination
+ sensibility
+ will

“Exercises” because:
+ requires effort and training
+ has to be lived
OUTER PRACTICES

- Self-mastery
- Fulfillment of duties
- Need for rules to be ready to hand
- Example: Epicurus’ *Fourfold Medicine*: “God presents no fear, death no worries; and while the good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable.”
INNER PRACTICES

- Memorization
- “View from above”
- Meditation on death
- Inner discourse
- Examination of conscience
- Examination of dreams
- Reading, research, investigation, listening
ROLE OF DOCTRINE

- Theories are intellectual exercises in service to spiritual exercises
- Cures intended for students in a particular spiritual state
- “Therapy of the word”
- A treatise is a progressive therapeutic treatment
- Purpose is “to form rather than to inform”
ASCEBT TO THE ONE

Plato’s Cave
NEOPLATONIC THEURGY
DEFINITION

- Spiritual practice involving congress with gods and daemons for:
  - communication
  - liaisons
  - deification

- Contrast:
  - theology = “god talk”
  - theurgy = “god work”
HISTORY

- Shamanism
- Pythagoreanism
- Platonism
- Neoplatonism
  - Pagan
  - Jewish
  - Christian
  - Islamic
  - Renaissance
PYTHAGOREANISM
Pythagoras

- Born in Samos, mid 6th cent. BCE
- Traveled and studied widely
- Emigrated to Croton about 530
- Founded Pythagorean Order
- Considered an incarnation of Hyperborean Apollo
Discovered musical intervals correspond to simple ratios
Reduction of an “irrational” phenomenon to “rational” explanation
A model for mathematical explanations in science
The Music of the Spheres

“There is geometry in the humming of the strings, and there is music in the spacing of the spheres.”

The universe as an ordered structure — a cosmos — obeying harmonic principles

Cf. modern super-string theory
CONTINUING INFLUENCE...

All things are numbers.
Pythagoras
NUMBER MYSTICISM
THE PYTHAGOREAN ORDER

- Closely related to Orphism
- Communal property
- Vegetarianism (?)
- 5 years of silence
- Moral & political precepts
- Abolished in Croton about 450 BCE
- Continually revived / resurrected
PYTHAGORAS TEACHING

Theano, his wife, is shown in foreground
PYTHAGORAS ADVOCATING VEGETARIANISM

— Rubens
PYTHAGOREANS WORSHIP SUNRISE

— Bronnikov
Scholars have commonly believed there were two Pythagorean traditions:
- mathematical/scientific
- spiritual

There is little actual evidence for this

More a reflection of modern inability to comprehend a unified spiritual-scientific viewpoint
PLATONISM AND NEOPLATONISM

- Plato (427–437 BCE)
- Philo Judaeus (fl. c.40 CE)
- Plotinus (205–270 CE)
- Hypatia (365–415)
- Proclus (c.411–486)
- Damascius (fl. 529)
- pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th cent.)
  + Mystical Theology
  + Divine Names
- Psellus (1018–c.1081)
- Suhrawaiḍi (1152/3–1190/1)
- Ishrâqî Sufis (13th cent.)
- Qabalah (13th cent.)
- George Gemistos “Plethon” (c.1360–1452)
- Cosimo de’ Medici (1389–1464)
- Ficino (1433–99)
- Thomas Taylor (1758–1835)
Releasing-stimuli that activate archetype & cause it to manifest

“Unconditioned”: part of lineage of a god

“Conditioned”: mediated by a daemon

Invoke gods & daemons and invite them to possess or project
THE LINE OF APOLLO

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DREAM INCUBATION

- Seeker goes to cave to sleep and dream
- For information, healing, etc.
- Prior purification and prayers
- Guidance and interpretation from priests
“ENSOULING” DIVINE IMAGE
Ensouling a sacred image
Material tokens
Immaterial tokens
Does not compel god or daemon
Preparation of suitable receptacle to receive projection of god or daemon
Creates archetypal relation
God or daemon invited to possess a human receiver

Like *telestikê*, but human receiver can embody a personified archetype better

Best receivers have easily pacified personal daemons
“Active imagination” in Jungian analysis
Establish a liaison with a god or daemon
They may not be truthful
For learning about archetypal realm
For actualizing energy of a god
For acquiring a familiar spirit
THEURGIC ASCENT

- Ascent to union with a god, Demiurge, or Ineffable One
- “Like knows like”
- Separation as symbolic voluntary death
- Actualizing the energy of Death-and-Resurrection archetype
THE PROTESIS
Active imagination: a process developed by Jung for engaging in dialog with unconscious archetypes and complexes

- Archetypes are universal and correspond to gods
- Complexes are personal and correspond to daemons (mediators)
- Good introduction: Robert Johnson, *Inner Work*
Mind and matter are two sides of same Ineffable One
Jungian psychology & evolutionary neuroethology are mutually informing
Both compatible with & explain Neoplatonic theurgy
Theurgy can be an efficacious tool for “care of the soul”
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