IAMBLICHUS AND JULIAN’S “THIRD DEMIURGE”:
A PROPOSITION

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One Demiurge, Many Demiurges

In a chapter of the great book he devoted to the work of Julian the Apostate, Jean Bouffartigue enumerates some of the Emperor’s philosophical doctrines that he thinks can be traced back to Iamblichean influence. One of those is the notion of a “third Demiurge”, appearing three times in the Oration To the Mother of the Gods (Oration VIII in the Belles Lettres edition begun by Joseph Bidez, Oration V in Wilmer Cave Wright’s translation in the Loeb collection). This enigmatic deity is intimately tied with Attis, the main protagonist of Julian’s Oration. The following texts contain all the references that are made to it:

Text nº 1: τοῦ τρίτου δημιουργοῦ, ὃς τῶν ἐνύλων εἰδῶν τοὺς λόγους ἐξηρημένους ἔχει καὶ συνεχείς τὰς αἰτίας, ἣ τελευταία καὶ μέχρι γῆς ὑπὸ περιουσίας τοῦ γονίμου διὰ τῶν ἀνωθὲν παρὰ τῶν ἀστρῶν καθήκουσα, φύσις δ ἡ ἰητούμενός ἐστιν Ἀττις.

The nature of the third creator, who contains in himself the separate concepts of the forms that are embodied in matter and also the connected chain of causes, I mean that nature which is last in order, and through its superabundance of generative power descends even unto our earth through the upper region from the stars—this is he whom we seek, even Attis.

* It was not before this paper was very close to publication that I took knowledge of an article by Jan Opsomer (2008), other than the one I frequently quote in the course of this work, which reaches conclusions quite similar to those that I have personally been led to. I cannot but refer my reader to his article, which is certainly more detailed; I will be happy if mine can be considered as a useful complement.

I wish to thank Prof. Constantinos Macris for allowing me to take part in the original seminar in his place—without his kind proposal nothing would have been possible.

2 Mother of Gods, 161d–162a. English translations of Julian’s theological Orations are taken from Wilmer Cave Wright’s edition in the Loeb collection (as are those of To King Helios). The text is that of the Belles Lettres edition by G. Rochefort (Paris, 1963) and does not differ substantially from Wright’s for the passages I quote.
Accordingly, since for the forms embodied in matter a wholly immaterial cause has been assigned, which leads these forms under the hand of the third creator—who for us is the lord and father not only of these forms but also of the visible fifth substance—from that creator we distinguish Attis, the cause which descends even unto matter, and we believe Attis or Gallus is a god of generative powers.

Therefore it is not contradictory to suppose that our Attis also is a sort of demigod—for that is actually the meaning of the myth—or rather for the universe he is wholly god, for he proceeds from the third creator, and after his castration is collected again and reunited to the Mother of the Gods. But though he seems to lean and incline towards matter, one would not be mistaken in supposing that, though he is the lowest in order of the gods, nevertheless he is the leader of all the tribes of divine beings.

Some context is provided so as to make the general meaning clearer. The myth of Attis, as expressed and interpreted by Julian, introduces this god as a young boy, playing innocently on the banks of the river Gallos, under vigilant protection of the Mother of the Gods. Eventually, however, he leaves the Mother in order to rejoin the Nymph, whom Julian defines as the cause presiding over matter. It is then made clear that the myth is an allegory of a demiurgic power endangering itself while getting closer to the matter it must inform.

Three points seem of interest in the depiction of the third Demiurge: 1) Attis depends on him, “proceeds” from him (προέεισι, T3) and he is his “subordinate” (ὑπὸ τὸν τρίτον δημιουργόν, T1); 2) he possesses dominion over enmattered Forms (T1, T2); 3) he possesses dominion over the “visible fifth

3 Mother of Gods, 165a–b.
4 Wright has ἐπανάγεται here: therefore I had to modify her translation (“is led upwards again to the Mother of the Gods”).
5 Mother of Gods, 168a.