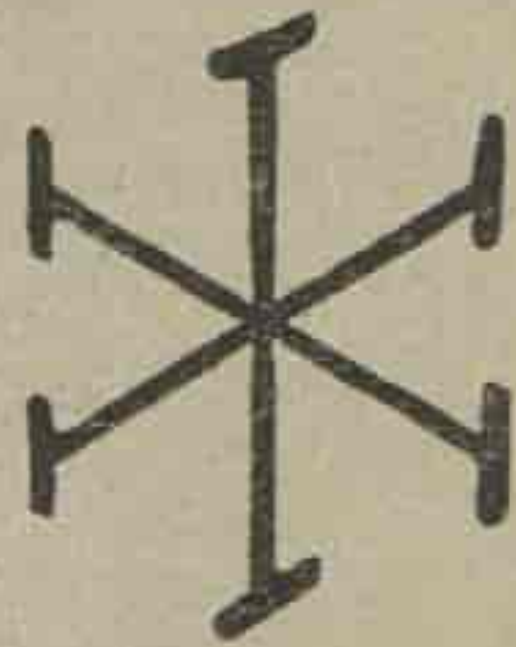


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THE RENAISSANCE OF
MYSTERY WISDOM
IN THE WORK OF
RUDOLF STEINER

SIXTH
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THE RENAISSANCE OF MYSTERY WISDOM IN THE WORK OF RUDOLF STEINER

IT WILL be interesting to know whether future ages will more respect our present century for its exploration of space or of time. Digging up the past is as characteristic of our age, and as novel in the history of man, as sending sputniks into space. Nor is it only a digging into barrows and graves and city mounds. The psychologist digs into the unconscious as relentlessly as the archaeologist into the soil of the earth. More and more it is acknowledged that the two diggings are part of the same great excavation of the human past.

In the case of the Mysteries it might have been hoped that the union of the two would have sparked off a bright light on the human past. Here was a psychological experience to whose enthralling and transforming character many ancient writers—themselves participants—have testified. It was enshrined in a ceremony, which took place—generally at a particular time of the year—in a definite place and even a definite building. Surely the experience must have left some tangible remains by which it could be reconstructed? But somehow the marriage has not been fruitful; the core of the Mysteries still eludes modern consciousness.

Take the case of the best known and best documented of all the Mysteries, that of Eleusis. Externally we can follow the yearly procession of the Eleusinian Mysteries in considerable detail. On the 13th of the moon month Boedromion (roughly October) the 'sacred things' were brought to Athens from Eleusis, and a festival was held. Three days later the Hierophant addressed the

catechumens, bidding all those depart who were impure of body, hand or soul. Then came a time of purification, including a ritual bathing in the sea. On the 19th the procession set out, bearing the image of the 'fair young god'. There was a ceremonial reviling of the participants at the bridge over the torrent Cephissus. At Eleusis came a religious revel under the stars, then the torch-light procession to the Hall of the Mysteries, past the fissure through which Persophone had been carried into the domain of Hades. We know that only those who had passed a preparatory test in earlier years were admitted to the final rites, and that part of these rites consisted in showing a blade of corn and in touching certain sacred objects, with regard to which a formula has been recorded:

I have fasted, I have drunk the potion, I have taken (something) from the chest, and after acting laid it in the basket, then taken it out and (put it) in the chest again.

But what were the sacred object or objects and what experience did they evoke? A measure of our present ignorance is to be found in the contradictory opinions of two learned writers in the *Eranos* essays on the Mysteries (1955). One writer—Walter Wili—takes it for granted that the core of the Mystery was the touching of an effigy of a womb¹: another—Walter F. Otto—(more convincingly) states that there is no evidence for any such assumption, and indeed that practically all the available evidence is against it.²

It is true that archaeology has cleared away some former theories. There can have been no sacred drama at Eleusis in the ordinary Greek sense, because there was no theatre where a drama could be performed. But it has found nothing to explain what many writers have described as the culmination of the initiation—the experience of *Light*. Thus Aristides (530-467 B.C.) wrote: "I was between waking and sleeping, my spirit was all light, so that no man who is not initiated can comprehend it." If the secret of the Mysteries was well guarded, it is no doubt largely because the central experience could not be put into words. Kerényi, the very sensitive and profound writer on Greek Mythology and Mysteries, suggests that there were two stages in the experience of initiation. The first when it was *arreton*—

¹ The Mysteries, Pantheon Books, p. 82.

² Ibid, p. 23.

literally unspeakable: the second when it had become *aporreton*—forbidden to be spoken. In the second stage the true mystical experience had already been largely lost. But of how the experience at either stage was brought about, or in what it actually consisted modern scholarship can tell us little or nothing.

It is perhaps not difficult to understand why this must be so. The modern intellect can only grasp what belongs to the intellect, what can be deduced, measured and proved. It deals with the sphere of the calculable. Human consciousness has only recently entered that sphere. Brecht's play of Galileo well represents one phase of that entry. But Brecht has little sympathy with the last—no doubt decadent—outpost of the incalculable, in the Church which clung to the tradition of a spiritual universe, which cannot be numbered and measured and weighed. Steiner had great sympathy with, and an immense understanding of, the sphere of the calculable, but his great achievement was to become a Galileo of the incalculable, that is, of the spiritual. To understand the spiritual with the same clarity as the intellect understands the physical calls for different forms of thought, and a type of consciousness which has many affinities with the experience of the Mysteries. If we pursue this consciousness patiently and far enough we can come a long way in understanding the essential experience of ancient Mystery Wisdom.

Let us therefore take some of the characteristics—Cardinal Newman would have called them 'notes'—of Mystery Wisdom and see how they reappear in Steiner's spiritual knowledge.

First, we have the fact that Mystery Wisdom and experience require a moral preparation. The Eleusinian Hierophant bade all depart who were impure of body, hand or soul. This is a 'note' which has entirely disappeared from modern scientific knowledge. We may be glad if they are there, but we do not demand moral qualifications of our physicists, astronomers and engineers. In the ancient world morality was not so inward a thing as it is today, and external purifications had a significance they have lost for the modern man. But Steiner, with no less solemnity than an ancient Hierophant, wrote over the gateway of his path to spiritual knowledge, that whoever sets out on that journey must take three steps in morality for every one he takes in knowledge. For it is a path which leads to direct experience of

spiritual beings—both good and bad. The intellect separates: it looks at the 'objective' world and says: I am *not* that. It is therefore relatively innocuous as far as morality is concerned. Spiritual consciousness unites, and it may unite with either the good or the bad elements in the spiritual world.

A second 'note' of Mystery Wisdom is that it assumed a correspondence—and a potential identification—between macrocosm and microcosm. In Egypt the Pharaoh *became* Ra or Osiris; as indeed was finally held to be the case with all souls after death. In Greece the four elements in man 'correspond' to the same four elements outside him. The 'correspondences' between stars and planets, the kingdoms of nature, the social structure, and the physiology of man were an essential of medieval lore, and are still taken for granted even in the plays of Shakespeare. Ours is the first civilization which has assumed that man can know the world without knowing himself. The adjuration of the Delphic oracle was not only *Know Thyself*, but *Know thyself and thou wilt understand the world*.

All this has been lost today. Man is no longer at the centre of creation but has become an accidental speck on a fortuitous and relatively minute planet in a solar system which is one of millions scattered through the infinitude of space. But in describing his own development during the first years of the century, when the new scientific outlook was at its most assured, Steiner (himself scientific by training and temperament) could write:—

"Man as a microcosmic entity who carries within him all the rest of earthly creation, and who has *become* a microcosm by throwing off all the rest—this was for me a revelation which I attained only during the early years of the century."

Here already is a theme—essential to Mystery Wisdom—which Steiner was later to develop into a new account of evolution in the light of the 'records of the rocks', of which he was a keen student, as befitted a young friend of the great Haeckel. The new evolutionary scientist studied the development of organic forms in their physical remains. But for Steiner it was obvious that form is not essentially a physical phenomenon. Even a single man changes his physical substance pretty well entirely every seven years—yet he keeps his characteristic form. If we consider man as *spiritual* form, then we can interpret the record of the rocks as revealing a premature, and therefore

distorted, physicalisation of the human form in a condition of the earth not yet ready for the incarnation of the individualised spiritual being—man. It is a highly complicated process, deeply affected by the shattering event known in different ways to nearly all ancient tradition and called in the Hebrew-Christian version the *Fall*. But it meets all the discovered facts, and enables a modern mind to find its way back into the old understanding of man as a microcosm—‘in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god, the beauty of the world, the paragon³ of animals’.

This relationship between Man and the World is one of the keys which Steiner puts in our hands for opening the secret of the old Mysteries. If we may again refer to the Mysteries of Eleusis for the sake of greater concentration, we find that there has been and still is, great difficulty in interpreting the myth which is basic to this Mystery—the rape of Persephone (known only as Kore—the maiden—at Eleusis) by Hades. In the early days of Anthropology it was naturally taken as a fertility myth—Kore being the corn which reappears every spring. But to closer thought difficulties appear. If Demeter is Mother Earth (as the original derivation of the name seemed to assure) surely it is Demeter who receives the corn into her bosom in the winter? Yet the myth tells us that it was then that she *lost* Kore. Then came Sir James Frazer with the happy solution that Demeter represents the *old* corn and Persephone the *new*. But to still more penetrating minds it occurred that it is the old corn and not the new which is sown into the earth. So another solution had to be found. It was well known that harvest rites were often accompanied by the sacrifice of a pig which was thrown into a pit. So to the mind of another anthropologist the problem was solved by the happy idea that Persephone was originally the sacrificial pig. But we cannot, alas, rest even with this brilliant solution. For it is now known that in the earliest versions of the story there was no corn until after the whole event of the rape was over, when Demeter gave to Triptolemus the gift of corn as a reward. (Perhaps the most beautiful stele excavated at Eleusis shows Triptolemus between Demeter and Kore receiving the gift of corn.) It therefore seems difficult to know how precisely to

³ Paragon (sub.) = *pattern* of excellence: (verb) to set forth a perfect *model*.
—Oxford Dictionary.

interpret the myth as corn process at all—as difficult as it is to feel how the sight of a blade of corn in the Mystery Sanctuary could have produced the ecstatic experience described by the participants as an assurance of immortality.

The difficulty partly arises from the endeavour to tie down a myth to physical objects. The experience of man—even as late as the Greeks—was an experience of processes rather than objects. In connection with nature it could be called an experience of the *etheric* rather than of the physical. Demeter is the fruitfulness of the earth experienced as living process: Persephone the fruitfulness in realisation. In their abstract but acute terms, the schoolmen might have said the one exists in *posse* the other in *esse*. At all levels the two are not easily to be distinguished, so it need not surprise us that in some variants of the myth Demeter plays many of Persephone's parts. But we shall not understand the meaning of the myth unless we take into account its microcosmic as well as its macrocosmic significance. This Rudolf Steiner explains as follows. When we take food and digest it, all unperceived by our consciousness a work of immense wisdom is taking place (Steiner said that teachers ought always to remember how much greater was the wisdom with which the children were digesting their breakfast than in anything they would learn in their lessons). This wisdom was not always as unconscious as it is today. By a kind of instinctive clairvoyance it would light up in pictures in the still half-dreaming mind of man. In the microcosm the fruitful power of the earth (Demeter) gave birth to a dream picture of the world (Persephone). It is interesting to notice that in one version of her myth Persephone is described as sitting in front of her cave and *weaving a picture of the world*.

This early picture consciousness united man with man, and man with the world. In the history of Greece it was gradually giving birth to the *individualised* intellectual consciousness. But it could still be evoked under special circumstances and pressure. It was the entering of the light of this consciousness, the experience of Persephone in the human soul, which was the great event of the Eleusinian Mystery. It brought—as all Mysteries bring—an experience which cannot properly be described in words—*arreton*, ineffable.

It was said above that in the history of Greece clairvoyant picture consciousness was *giving birth* to the individualised

intellectual mind. This is something on which Steiner insisted against the prevalent view that thinking was born as a new creation of the Ionian philosophers. Steiner held that it was not so much a creation as a translation, or metamorphosis, of the quite different experience of the Mysteries. He pointed to the fact that Heraclitus laid his book 'Concerning Nature' on the altar of Artemis at Ephesus. He even said that the categories of Aristotle were a translation into intellectual terms of 'zodiacal' experiences in the different Mystery Schools. That the 'individualising' intellect, though a different force from the 'atoning' picture consciousness, yet stems from it—this is also portrayed in the mythology of the Greeks. For Dionysus, the individualising God at whose altar the Greek drama was born and performed, was descended from Demeter and Persephone. It is a difficult story, with many variants and involving two manifestations or avatars of the God, but there is no doubt that the 'fair young god' whom the Athenians hailed under the name Iacchos, and whom they carried in procession from Athens to Eleusis, was experienced as none other than Dionysus. Perhaps we may see in the procession a picture of the new consciousness being carried back to the fields from which it sprang, and where the mother was still to be found—and to be known.

A third 'note' of the Mysteries is that the experience is generally described as resembling the experience of death, or even of being identical with it. Thus Apuleius writes—again of the Mystery of Eleusis—in the second century after Christ:—'I drew nigh to the confines of death, I trod the threshold of Persephone and returned to earth again.'

Plutarch testifies in the same strain:—'At the moment of death the soul experiences the same impression as those who are initiated into the Great Mysteries.'

It has been observed that the present century has witnessed a remarkable change of tabus. The unmentionable subject in polite society used to be sex. The last fortress in this field has now fallen, but—as though man cannot live without a tabu—the subject of death has now taken its place. Christians are indeed allowed to believe in immortality, but they may not talk about what happens to the soul after death. This is the domain of cranks.

In contrast to this present attitude, Steiner's 'wisdom of man' is full of a perpetual interplay between the realms of death and



life or to use more exact descriptions, life in the spiritual world, and life on the earth. Herodotus tells us that it was the Egyptians who first proclaimed their belief in reincarnation, but among the Greeks it is to be found in the Myth of Er which concludes Plato's Republic, and there is no doubt it was part of the experience of the Mysteries. Intellectually Steiner approached the subject of reincarnation by a variety of roads. For him the experience of time—real time, not clock time—was essentially an experience of rhythm. No man has ever been more sensitive to the rhythmical processes of life—the systole and diastole of breath and heart beat, the alternation of waking and sleeping, the rhythm of the seasons, the seven year rhythm which dominates the life of man—all these were for him not merely organic processes but—though little noticed today, except in the case of sleeping and waking—deeply connected also with human consciousness. With these rhythms it is somewhat the same as with the scale of sound—there are sounds too high and too low for the ordinary ear to perceive, they transcend the normal stretch of consciousness. Similarly the greatest human rhythm—life in the spiritual world and life on earth in rhythmic alternation—lies beyond the normal consciousness. But man can feel his way to it by the deepened experience of other rhythms.

Another approach which Steiner makes is by way of that sense for 'spiritual form' which has already been discussed. The 'form' of man even as species is in reality spiritual not physical. But man is not merely 'species' like the animal: he is individual, and every biography of every individual has its own 'time form', which is no less real than a form made manifest in space. It was here that Steiner carried the idea of evolution further than his contemporaries were willing to go. Every form, he pointed out, can only evolve from an anterior form. Even the human form evolved (though in Steiner's view not altogether in the way generally accepted) from earlier and less perfect forms. Similarly the form of the individual—the way his capacities play themselves out in life, his connections with other individuals, in short his biography must have evolved from a previous 'form'—that is from another life on earth. Of course such thinking about, or better meditating on, rhythm and form is only the prelude to a *real* experience which it may awaken. In modern Mystery Wisdom it must be attained by inner effort. In the ancient Mysteries it could be

induced from without, by word and ritual, and sacred actions, of whose deep effect Steiner has spoken in connection with the Hibernian Mysteries. It is dangerous to speculate on such things, but if the 'box' of the Eleusinian Mysteries was experienced as a tomb like the chest of Osiris—*soma sema* said the Greek proverb, the body is a tomb—then the action of removing, working with and replacing (something) at a high ritual moment may well have induced an experience of great significance.

The experience of death is essentially that of breaking through a limiting force, of overcoming a boundary. In Initiation boundaries are overcome in the same way as in death. But it is these very boundaries that give us support and confidence in our waking life. The removal of them must therefore be accompanied by an element of fear or terror, which the Initiate has always to overcome. Some knowledge of this necessary overcoming of fear remains in Aristotle's definition of the function of Tragedy as the 'grouping around a hero successive deeds calculated to arouse in the beholder feelings of fear and compassion, in order that a purification may take place in his soul'.

Steiner himself has described the overcoming of these boundaries in a modern initiation in a course of lectures entitled *Mysteries of the East and of Christianity*. Normally, he says, our percepts represent the boundaries of our consciousness. Our eyes rest on the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the red of the rose. Or we perceive our own thoughts (for thoughts also we can regard as percepts) as our ultimate inner experience. Initiation is the development of an intensified perception by which the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the red of the rose or the perceived thought vanish as objects, and become windows through which to see the spiritual forces which create and sustain them. At that moment the solidity and the separateness attached to all earthly experience vanishes, and the initiate knows the terror of a world taken from under his feet. It is a necessary prelude to spiritual experience, but through it comes that union of macrocosm and microcosm, of self and world, which is another 'note' of Mystery Wisdom.

Steiner not only developed the idea of such a union in a spatial sense in a number of scientific fields—for instance the 'correspondence' of the earth with the human organism, of the planets with the life organs, of the fixed stars with the brain—but he also

carried it into the field of correspondences in time. Smaller historical periods he considered as 'reflections' of larger epochs (for instance the Hellenic age of the time of Atlantis), while in the life of the child the three seven year periods which childhood comprises are reflected in smaller divisions in each single period, and even the three miraculous achievements of the child's earliest years, walking, speaking and thinking, may be considered as a microcosm of the powers of willing, feeling and thinking which he develops in succession as he grows to manhood.

It is in the achievement of this union of the self with the great world, the ability to say 'I am that', as it is expressed in Eastern wisdom, that there arises the experience known in Mystery Wisdom as seeing the sun at midnight. 'I saw the sun'—writes Apuleius—'gleaming with bright splendour at dead of night.'

The sun in the ancient world was not considered, as it is today, purely as the physical giver of physical light (if even this light may be called physical). Julian the Apostate, who was initiated into the Mysteries both of Eleusis and of Mithras, wrote his famous hymn to the *Threefold Sun*. The Greeks long before had distinguished between the physically visible sun (helios) and the sun's spiritual potency (Apollo). At Delphi there were no oracles in the winter, for while Helios travelled southward Apollo took *his* departure to the north. Homer speaks of Apollo descending to earth 'like the night'. The experience of light attained in the Mysteries was undoubtedly that of spiritual light. There is no doubt a great difference both in the experience itself and in its attainment as between ancient and modern initiation. For the modern experience, as Steiner tells us in the same lecture course, is bound up with the human ego which had not yet come to full expression in the ancient world. It is that of the ego becoming one with the spiritual sun, and from that exalted region looking down upon the body as the sun itself looks down on the plants which it vivifies and nurtures.

In saying this we are already passing the bounds of *aporreton* (the forbidden) and reaching the *arreton* (the ineffable). But to give some kind of completion, however crude, to Steiner's account of the Mysteries one other figure must be added which constantly appears in ancient Mystery cults, and not least at Eleusis, the mourning woman: Demeter mourning for Persephone, Isis for Osiris, Astarte for Thammuz, culminating in the *mater*

dolorosa of Christian tradition. In all these Mystery figures of the dying God Steiner saw a prophetic imagination of what has once to take place on the plane of history and physical reality. 'Christianity as Mystical Fact' is the title of one of his earlier books. The Divine Sun-Being, the Cosmic Christ, entered the body of Jesus of Nazareth and suffered the death and resurrection foreshadowed in the religion of the Mysteries. That is why so many elements of the Mysteries enter into the life of Christ. And Steiner called attention to the fact that the last word of Christ on the Cross need not necessarily be rendered: 'It is finished'. For the original Greek word *tetelestai* is a word taken from the heart of the Mysteries. At Eleusis the Hall of Initiation was called the telesterion and the initiate himself was a teletes. It would therefore be equally possible, and probably more true, to render Christ's last words as: "*The Mystery is accomplished.*"

It cannot be too much emphasised that Steiner did not think that Mystery wisdom was unchanging. It was already a far cry from the Egyptian preoccupation with the mystery of the body to the Eleusinian cry of 'Iacchos'. At one time Steiner demonstrated this development in an outstanding way. As already described, he conceived biography as *spiritual form*, and showed that this conception leads naturally to the idea of re-incarnation. But such a form no more exists in isolation than do organic forms. It depends on its interaction with many other 'spiritual form'. As an imaginative—and yet real—picture of such an interweaving of biographies from one incarnation to another, Steiner wrote four Mystery Plays. They are not plays in the ordinary conception of drama. The action is almost entirely inward, showing how the thought and being of one character affects and is affected by that of others: and the spiritual Beings who stand invisible behind the facade of life play their full share in the action. Moreover, for the performance of these plays in especial, he built the only building of modern times which could be called a Mystery Temple, the first Goetheanum in Switzerland which was unhappily destroyed by fire within a few years of its completion. It expressed in architecture a principle which was represented in the lives of the characters in the plays, the principle of *metamorphosis*. Between building and play there was thus a consonance of artistic form and spiritual function, found of old in Greek temple and Gothic Cathedral, but hardly in modern times.



It was at this time also that in response to a request made to him—it was his method to meet the demands which life brought to him—Steiner created a new art of movement which he called Eurythmy. One of the great differences between the old pagan and the Christian religious ritual which supplanted it is that the latter entirely eliminated the element of the dance. But the Roman writer Lucian tells us (and there is plenty of evidence to support him) that ‘there were no Mysteries without dancing’. To create again a form of movement capable not merely of representing a religious scene but of immediately expressing religious experience was Steiner’s achievement in the domain of movement. Of course Eurythmy can—and does—cover a wider field as well. But there is always in it something of what Matthew Arnold called ‘high seriousness’. Even without doing the movements himself, the spectator follows them in imagination and experiences something of the creative power of sound in word and music which played also into the ancient Mysteries. Were not the hereditary priests of Eleusis called the *Eumolpidae*—the Sweet Singers?

The first Goetheanum and its activities expressed the new Mystery wisdom in the sphere of the arts, the realm of feeling. But increasingly toward the end of his life, and especially after the burning of that unparalleled building, Steiner—again in response to definite requests—brought his Mystery wisdom, the wisdom of life, into many practical activities, education, curative education, farming and horticulture, medicine and many others. For in all these spheres there were men and women who realised that human thought and endeavour has become imprisoned in the sphere of the calculable, and that the only escape was by means of a new form of consciousness, a new spiritual revelation. Nor have matters greatly improved since Steiner’s death. In a mechanical world men are still seeking the element of creation, in an organised world the faculty of freedom, in a specialised world the sanity of the universal. All this was summed up by that wonderful woman Simone Weil in her conception of a new saintliness for which the age is calling, a saintliness ‘which is equivalent to a new revelation of the universe and of human destiny’. This is the new Mystery Wisdom, and many who have devoted their lives to the study of his work believe that Rudolf Steiner is its herald.



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