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The Veiled Image of Sais, by Friedrich Schiller, a poem about an impetuous
 quest for initiation in ancient Egypt ebooklet

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Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) was one of the greatest literary figures in European history, and a close friend of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. His ballads and dramas are amongst the finest ever written. He had a keen sense of social justice and an interest in the governance of society; indeed his life came to a premature end, through this commitment to bettering society. In Rudolf Steiner's view, Schiller was murdered because he was researching a drama, *Demetrius*, about a Russian aristocrat whose influence could have worked on into the future, and averted the disasters which came over eastern Europe in the early twentieth century.

Schiller's writings also contain one of the very few affirmations of the truth of reincarnation and karma in the western world at that time. It was not until the 1960's social revolution (the New Age) that this concept became socially acceptable. In his youthful poem, *The Secret of Reminiscence: to Laura*, Schiller writes of the intensity of his love for this woman, and indicates both pre-existence and the karmic interpretation of personal bonds of love. It reads in part,

Motionlessly clinging to your mouth, eternally –
 Who can explain to me this rapturous yearning?
 And explain too, the delight to drink in your ambience –
 to sink, dying, into your being,
 when our eyes beckon to each other...

... ..

...have we already been intertwined?
 Is this the reason that our hearts so throbbed?
 Had we – in the radiance of a sun since extinguished,
 in days of bliss, long since buried –
 already melted into one?
 Yes! – we had ! You were intimately united with me
 in aeons which have now passed away;
 my Muse beheld it written on the dim slate of the Past:
 "united with your loving!"

In the context of the late 18th century, where public expression of reincarnation would have been considered very suspect, these verses are a sign of the poet's spiritual awareness. Schiller was also very alert to esoteric ideas, and a variety of spiritual-esoteric themes are to be found throughout his writings. The theme of a veil being placed over profound spiritual realities occurs in his story, "The Spirit-Seer", where a seer explains that to him the past and the future are covered by two black covers which no living person is permitted to raise. In another text, the "Julian

Correspondence”, Schiller has two characters writing to each other about the deeper spiritual realities behind the perceptible, physical world,

The universe is a thought of God. Once this ideal spiritual image passed over into manifested reality, and the born world has – permit me this human notion – fulfilled its Creator’s design, it is the duty of all thinking beings to find again the initial design in this now extant whole; to seek out the principle in the machine, the unity in the compound, the law in the phenomenon, and to transfer retrospectively the edifice back to its {ideal} ground-plan.

The term, “Ideal” has the same meaning here that it has in Rudolf Steiner’s *Credo*; it is an adjective meaning, an archetypal Idea, in the sense of the high spiritual realm mentioned by Plato, wherein the archetypes of all created things are to be found.

Schiller had a deep interest in ancient Egyptian esoteric wisdom, and felt that it lived on, unacknowledged, in the religious traditions of the Hebrews. This is clearly expressed in his treatise, “The mission of Moses”, where he affirms the influence of Egyptian esoteric wisdom on the Hebrews. He emphasizes the indebtedness of Moses to his Egyptian mentors, in terms of his understanding of the divine, and shows his interest in Isis. He writes,

It is indeed in a certain sense undeniable that we owe to the religion of Moses a great part of the enlightenment which today so delights us...Moses was educated in the royal court, and instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptian wisdom...It is probable that they did not withhold from him any of their secrets....the epoptae (Egyptian high priests) recognized a single, highest principle of all things, a primal force....the essence of all being.

Rudolf Steiner affirms that Moses was indeed initiated into the Egyptian mysteries, and carried an important initiatory impulse with him into the Hebraic world. That Moses was highly placed, and lived a life removed from the masses of Hebrew tribes people, in a privileged court life, is also reported by Moses himself, in so far as he is the author of the Book of Exodus (chapter 11:3). There are various inferences throughout the Book of Exodus that Moses was highly initiated in the Egyptian mysteries.

Rudolf Steiner reports that the capacity for the very high initiatory experiences, carried out in the early phase of Egyptian times, was diminishing by the 14th century BC. This is the century of Moses, who was to lead the Hebrew people out of Egyptian control to eventually establish their own nation. Moses was still able to perceive the nature of Isis, when most Egyptian initiates could no longer do so; and, Rudolf Steiner reports, Moses’ task was to initiate the foremost of the Hebrew priests to enable them to develop the unique spirituality of their nation.

Schiller focuses in his treatise on the Egyptian Mystery-religion of the goddess Isis. Steiner also lectured on the Isis mysteries of Egypt, affirming that in ancient Egypt a great spiritual esoteric wisdom was developed. This wisdom was given public expression in myths, especially in the myths about Osiris and Isis. The figure of the goddess Isis is perhaps the most fascinating and enthralling aspect of this wisdom. Steiner taught that the inscription to which Schiller refers constituted a lesson to the

acolytes there, that the profound meaning of Isis, as an experiential reality, could not be discovered until a definite stage of spiritual development had been attained. He explains that Isis represents the divine origin of the human spirit. That she is sometimes depicted with wings in ancient Egypt is due no doubt to the way in which she was experienced. As Steiner comments of the ancient Egyptian Mystery wisdom, “one understood something of the spirit, as it pulses in wave-like undulations throughout the created world”.

It is commonly reported that according to the historian Plutarch, who was writing in the first century of Christianity, in the town Sais, there was in a temple an ancient statue of the goddess Isis, covered over by a cloth. Sais is the modern day Egyptian town of Sa el-Hagar, located in the Nile delta. In fact, the statue at the time of Plutarch, was that of Pallas (Athena), but this goddess was equated with Isis. The actual deity of Sais, was a goddess called Neith. In remote ancient Egyptian times, Neith had become identified Isis. Sais was famous as the centre for the most important and elaborate Mysteries focussed on Isis-Neith, and for celebrating the goddess in public festivals.

Plutarch reports that on the base of this statue there was an inscription; it was an admonition that no-one may lift up the cloth, unless the goddess herself does this for the acolyte. This inscription has become famous, and the subject of many learned treatises. Schiller, as a highly spiritual person, carried within him a sensitivity to the esoteric past of humanity. The poem, *The Veiled Statue At Sais* written in ca. 1797, is set in the Egyptian town of Sais, where a temple devoted to Isis was located. Schiller reports on this comment from Plutarch, in his “The Mission of Moses”,under an ancient statue of Isis were to be read the words, “I am that which is”, and upon a pillar at Sais is a strange ancient inscription, “I am all that is, that was, that will be; no mortal man has ever lifted my veil.”

Rudolf Steiner lectured extensively on the theme explored in Schiller’s poem, the search for Isis, describing her as “a Being who exerts a formative power upon that in the human being which goes from incarnation to incarnation”. This important phrase refers to our eternal Self, to the divine within us; that from which our soul or personality, in each succeeding life is an expression. Steiner comments on this famous statue, and its inscription,

This image of Isis, what a lasting impression it makes on us, when we picture it to ourselves, how it stands there in stone, but at the same time the stone is veiled from top to bottom – *the veiled image of Isis*...and it has inscribed on it, ‘I am the past, the present and the future...no mortal has ever lifted my veil’.

I have translated this Greek inscription, as given by Plutarch from the ancient Greek, and it is the case that the goddess is in effect declaring herself to be that Being who, “had existed, is being, and is coming into being.” Both of the above renderings (Rudolf Steiner & Schiller) express this meaning. But a careful study of the Greek text given in Plutarch indicates that these words of Isis have an extended, deeper meaning, she also represents this archetypal self, existing in spiritual realms beyond time.

For this powerful inscription has a further implication, for there is an inference in the Greek grammar here that this statement is also applicable to the Higher Self of the

human being, which could be called the “I am”. The gender of the ‘person’ referred to in the sentence in Greek is actually neuter, not feminine. So it can be seen as a statement extending beyond the goddess; it refers to the higher eternal Self of the human being. We shall return to the theme of Isis later. Schiller’s poem emphasizes the solemn responsibilities that the quest imposes upon the acolyte, he had intuited that someone in ancient Egypt had pressed on too quickly in his wish to achieve success.

In lectures from 1916 Rudolf Steiner taught that the message of the inscription on the statue of Isis suggested that only that soul who can approach the Mysteries of Isis with reverence may uncover the secrets of Isis. The results of improper questing would be severe,

...in those times in which the ancient wisdom was living, human beings approached this wisdom in the appropriate way, or more precisely, were simply not allowed such access, if they did not approach in the appropriate manner...The priests of the Isis cult “researched the efficacy of the gods in practical life...it was certainly necessary that this temple activity was kept holy, for what mischief could have been undertaken, if had not been kept confidential!

Writing in 1902, in his fascinating book, *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, Steiner comments on the matter of just how serious was the responsibility for the leading initiates, when they agreed to induct an acolyte into the Mysteries, and how very much depended upon the right mood of soul existing in the acolyte,

“Terrible is the responsibility which one places on oneself ... It was the view of the mystagogue that one may not take up involvement in this good fortune {of being initiated} in an impious manner. For what then would be the outcome if the Mystagogue betrayed his secret? ...Nothing more than a terrible, life-destroying foreboding would one be then able to impart (to the acolyte). One would have to view that as a crime...everything (the revelation) would be merely an empty noise...yet a deity appears before one! It is either everything or nothing. It is nothing, if you encounter it in the mood in which you encounter everyday objects.

Schiller’s poem tells the story of a very significant acolyte in the ancient Egyptian mysteries, whose too vehement striving led to his premature death. The poem was very highly valued by Rudolf Steiner, who regarded it as an accurate portrayal in spirit, if not in historical detail, of the efforts of this young man. Rudolf Steiner indicated privately that this person was an historical personality, who was later reborn in Palestine at the time of Christ.

THE VEILED STATUE AT SAIS

A young man, whose burning thirst for knowledge
lead him to Sais in Egypt,
there to learn the secret wisdom of the priests

had already hastened through many a degree
 With his quick mind;
 his thirst for research constantly drove him on,
 and scarcely could the Hierophant calm the impatient Seeker.
 "What do I have, if I don't have all?" said the youth,
 "Is there here such a thing as more or less?"
 Is thy Truth, like happiness,
 merely a total sum, of which
 one may possess a greater or lesser amount,
 but always possessing it?
 Is not Truth a single, indivisible thing?
 Take a tone from a harmony,
 take a colour out of the rainbow
 and all that remains to you is nothing, so long as the
 beautiful entirety of tones and colours is missing.
 Once when they were speaking thus,
 they were standing quietly in a solitary rotunda
 wherein a veiled statue of enormous size
 attracted the gaze of the youth.
 Astonished, he looks at his guide and says:
 "What is it that is hiding behind this veil"? –
 "The Truth," is the answer –
 "What!" called out the other,
 but Truth alone is what I am striving for, and it is precisely this which
 one is hiding from me?"

"Arrange that with the deity", responded the Hierophant;
 'No mortal', she says, 'will lift this veil until I myself raise it,
 And whoever should raise the holy forbidden thing
 with guilty hands, they...', says the deity..."
 – "Well?"
 – " 'They will see the Truth'."
 "A remarkable oracular utterance!
 You yourself would never have raised it?" –
 "I?" "Certainly not! Nor was I ever tempted to do so."
 "That I don't understand. If only
 this thin partition separates me from the Truth –
 "And a law", his guide adds interrupting him –
 "more important is this thin cloth, my son, than you realize
 – light indeed for thy hand,
 yet a hundredweight heavier for your conscience."
 To his quarters the youth then returned, engrossed in thought.
 the burning desire for knowledge robbed him of sleep,
 he tossed around on the bed feverishly,
 and about midnight he arose.
 Unwillingly his diffident steps lead him to the temple,
 it was easy for him to climb the wall,
 one bold leap brought the daring one
 right into the middle of the rotunda.

There he stands now, and dreadfully
 does the lifeless stillness envelop the lone seeker,
 relieved only by the hollow echoing
 of his footsteps among the secret crypts.
 From above, the Moon through the cupola's opening,
 cast a pale silvery-blue light,
 and the figure under its long veil
 glows through the darkness of the rotunda
 with a terrible light
 as if a God were present.

With uncertain step he approached;¹
 already the insolent hand wants to touch the sacred object;
 when a burning heat and coldness flashes through his bones
 and pushes him back with unseen arms.
 Unhappy youth, what do you intend ? –
 thus did a faithful voice cry out within him.
 Do you want to put the Most Holy to the test?
 "No mortal", spoke the mouth of the Oracle, "lifts this veil
 until I myself raise it".
 Yet did not the same mouth also say;
 Whoever raises this veil shall see Truth?
 Be behind it what may, I will lift the veil!"
 In a loud voice, he cries out: "I want to behold it!"

..... B e h o l d i t !

The long shrill echo clangs after him mockingly.
 He speaks thus, and has lifted the veil.
 "Well", you ask, "and what was revealed to him here?"
 That I don't know. Senseless and pale, thus did the priests
 find him the next day, outstretched by the pedestal of the statue of Isis.
 Whatever he there saw and experienced,
 his tongue never disclosed it.
 Gone forever was his happiness,
 a deep sorrow tore him away to an early grave.
 "Woe to that person", were his words warning –
 "When impetuous interrogators then beset him:
 Woe to him who approaches the Truth through guilt !
 It will nevermore bring joy to him."

Quite how the youth actually died is unknown, but in any event, this poem presents an evocative poetic depiction of the result of a too vehement search for higher consciousness. It is certainly the case that in ancient Mystery centres the acolyte had to undergo rigorous trials, to determine his or her moral integrity, courage and wisdom. In regard to the mysteries of Isis, if the acolyte were to encounter her, then such a person would be encountering the core of their own spiritual self or higher ego, and much preparation is needed indeed for such an event.

¹ The tense changes from past to present in the original.

In the exquisite words of Rudolf Steiner, about the Isis experience,

Then came a moment of experience wherein the initiates felt like a traveler in a country encompassed by the sea, who had reached the shore. They knew they had come to the farthest point attainable. In the Egyptian Initiation they experienced what one cannot clothe in words other than these: "In your vision you have been led far and wide through cosmic realms and have come to know the beings and forces that work on your physical body and your etheric body. But now you are entering the most holy place. You are entering a realm where you can feel yourself united with the Being who works with others on the part of you that goes from one incarnation to another, and on your astral body."

When the aspirant who was going through the Isis Initiation had reached the furthest shore of existence and had gazed upon the beings who build up the physical body and the etheric body, when he had stood before the silent Goddess from whom warmth and light come forth for the innermost of the human soul, he said to himself: "That is Isis."

This is the mute and silent Goddess whose countenance can not be unveiled to one who sees only with mortal eyes, but only to those who have worked themselves through to the shores which have been described, so that they can see with those eyes which go from incarnation to incarnation and are no longer mortal. For an impenetrable veil hides the form of Isis from mortal eyes.²

It was to attain this goal that the young man of Sais pushed on, too eagerly; and a faint, distant memory of the dramatic events that ensued arose in the sensitive poet soul of Friedrich Schiller.³

² From a lect. 5th Feb 1913, in "The Mysteries of the East and of Christianity"

³ The additional implications of this inscription and the various other phrases recorded about Isis from ancient sources will be examined in a later booklet in conjunction with the connection Isis with the Virgin Mary.