

**Encountering the sacred:** Rudolf Steiner's discovery of spiritual wisdom in Goethe's poem, 'Elegy'. ebooklet

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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749-1832, has been described as the equivalent of England's Shakespeare, and Italy's Dante; these descriptions usually refer to his literary genius. But in fact this description is deeply true, for both Shakespeare and Dante, like Goethe, were geniuses whose writings show evidence of being influenced from esoteric wisdom. Rudolf Steiner taught that Goethe had undergone a kind of initiation, although it occurred within his soul during sleep, rather than as a physical plane ceremony. It is clear to the perceptive reader that in the magnificent writings of Goethe, esoteric initiatory wisdom can often be found, as well as poetry and drama of the highest order.

As such, Goethe is ideally placed to describe the nature of the spiritual path, and how, to a supremely artistic and sensitive soul, the approach of the divine into one's life is experienced. And Rudolf Steiner as the great Goethe expert, editor of the first ever edition of Goethe's scientific writings, and also editor of an excellent complete edition of Goethe's works (The Weimar edition), was ideally placed to see and to explain the hidden depths of these texts. In 1823 Goethe had written his famous passionate love poem, *Elegy* in which he grieves over the loss of the relationship with a young woman, Ulrike von Levetzow.

In this poem Goethe reflects on many subtle aspects of love, loss and romantic yearning. However, in a lecture from April 1904, on a fairytale written by Goethe, called by Steiner, *The Green Snake and the beautiful Lily*, but simply called 'Fairytale' (*Märchen*) by Goethe, Steiner quotes an extract of this poem. He explains to his audience how in this section of the poem, *Elegy*, the theme is really that of a sensitive soul sensing the approach of the divine. In other words, in just this section of the long poem, it is Rudolf Steiner's view that Goethe is not focussed on romantic love, but, having written about the many deep responses to an idealized love that his soul feels (especially now that 'the affair of the heart' is over), the poem has moved to the theme of union with a sacred spiritual reality. He comments that this occurs as one's higher self becomes empowered, and earthly desires fall away. Steiner's interpretation, that this passage concerns the experience of becoming united to the divine, conflicts with scholarly interpretation.

In the section under consideration, Goethe proceeds to say that he experiences a mood of piety, whenever he is in the presence 'ihr'. This term in German is a feminine or neuter pronoun, meaning either 'it' or 'her'. This word is usually thought of as feminine, and scholars generally agree that it refers to the object of Goethe's love, the young woman, Ulrike. This pronoun occurs three more times, and in each of these cases it is also thought of as 'her', and as referring to Ulrike. Consequently, the passage is translated in published texts, along the following lines; this pronoun is in bold font,

1 ..... in the purity of our heart, there surges a striving, born of gratitude,  
2 to freely surrender oneself to a higher, purer, Unknown [Power];  
3 thus resolving the enigma to oneself of the Eternally Un-named;  
4 we call this – being pious!  
5 Of such blessed heights I feel  
6 myself partake, when I stand before **her** –  
7 before **her** gaze, just like before the power of the Sun,  
8 beneath **her** breath, just like beneath springtime breezes,  
9 melts away what long has lasted in chasms, in icy rigidity,  
10 self-centredness that has persisted so long deep in wintry tomb;  
11 No egoism or self-will lasts,  
12 before **her** advent they have fled.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear from the above, that the section of the poem comprising lines 6 – 12, is normally understood to refer to Ulrike and is thus a testimonial to how Goethe was powerfully inspired by his feelings. That is, the piety mentioned earlier (lines 1-4) arises in his heart whenever he imagines he is in her presence, being seen by her, or feeling her breath, by which he may mean her ambience. Consequently, the triune forms of egocentric attitudes, in lines 10 and 11, are conquered as this woman (or the thought of her) draws near. As such, this interpretation appears to be on particularly solid ground, as Goethe was famously inspired in his artistic endeavours through his enflamed love affairs, and the entire poem is a powerful testimonial to his passionate love of Ulrike, and grief over her loss. The poet is moving from expressions of an utmost personal, romantic love, to a passage about the experience of divine love, though triggered by the contemplation of romantic love.

The stanza in *Elegy*, prior to the two that are under consideration here, reinforces this view, as Goethe writes of comparing the peace of God with the happy peace felt in romantic love. He also writes of feeling Ulrike's presence, and wanting to belong to her,

The peace of God, which, as we read,  
Blesses us here below more than reason,  
I would indeed compare with Love's happy peace,  
When in the presence of the dearest one.  
There the heart rests, and nothing can disturb  
the deepest intention: the thought of being hers.

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<sup>1</sup> The normal view that all of the lines here refer to Goethe's sweetheart, can be found – in addition to Trunz's commentary "ein Liebender klagt (a person in love mourns)" – for example in, *The Eternal Feminine: selected poems of Goethe*, trans. Frederick Ungar, (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co. 1980) 163, and in *Goethe: Selected Poems*, ed. Christopher Middleton, *Elegie*, trans. John F. Nims, ( Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1983), 250.

However, in his lectures on the esoteric knowledge and wisdom in Goethe's fairytale, Steiner gives an interpretation of this verse that is remarkably different to the usual interpretation. He sees in the verse that follows on from the above section, a special dynamic in the human soul, wherein our most spiritual, our most purified desires, can lead us to sense the divine. There is no reference to the woman Ulrike in Steiner's comments as he interprets the poem; but of course, his audience would have known well that the poem was about a young woman. In his lecture, he quotes the two stanzas without indicating that they are preceded by, and followed by, stanzas in which the theme of romantic love is again central.

Therefore in this interpretation, the pronoun 'her' in line 6, "feel myself partake, when I stand before **her**" – the entity that has caused him to feel a nearness to the divine – now has to refer to the purity of the heart. This becomes the factor which is stimulating Goethe to feel the uplifting, mystical presence of the divine. We noted above that the pronoun 'her', or 'its', occurs three times in this verse. Significantly in the way that Steiner quotes the text, in the entire section the pronoun always refers to purity, mentioned in line 1. Hence all of the references to this divine spiritual reality, expressed in lines 7 –12, derive from feeling a nearness to the divine, and not to Ulrike.

Consequently, in the way that Steiner uses this verse, the pronouns, the references to 'her' in the usual translation, from line six to twelve, all refer to the purity of the heart. So, these have to be rendered as 'it' in English, although it can still be read as 'her' in German, as 'purity' is a feminine noun in that language. Additionally, a few phrases need to be adjusted as to their nuances, in order to make Rudolf Steiner's deep insights here clear. So the translation reads as follows,

1       .....in the purity of our heart, there surges a striving, born of gratitude,  
2       to freely surrender oneself to a higher, purer, Unknown [Power];  
3       thus resolving the enigma to oneself of the Eternally Un-named;  
4       we call this – being pious!  
5       In such blessed heights I feel  
6       myself partake, when I am in its presence –  
7       before its gaze, as if facing the power of the Sun,  
8       before its breath, as if before springtime breezes,  
9       melts away what has lasted so long in icy rigidity –  
10      self-centredness, deep in wintry tombs;  
11      No self-interest, no self-will, lasts;  
12      before its dawning presence they have shuddered away

In this form, the passage can express the attitude inherent in Rudolf Steiner's interpretation that the element that is bringing about this condition in Goethe is not his beloved woman, but 'the heart's purity'. Now the yearning is to achieve union with the divine.

There are two major differences between the accepted meaning of this section of the poem, and Steiner's interpretation. Firstly, to Steiner it is clear that Goethe, impelled by his yearning for the woman, has now moved to a perception that amongst the emotional drives in human heart, there exists a particularly spiritualized, purified urge, namely to seek union with the divine. But, now Goethe feels this urge when he senses the efficacy of this purity, and not the presence of his sweetheart. Secondly, to Steiner, whenever Goethe senses this purity exerting its influence upon him, and thus feels a divine presence is approaching, and removing his egocentric urges, this is due to the nearness of 'the heart's purity', not his beloved woman.

Thus in line 6, "myself partake, when I am in its presence" – the intended image, in Steiner's view, is not that of physically standing before another physical person, nor a visionary view of the beloved woman. Rather the image is one of cognizing that oneself is within the immediate and active presence of something, namely the highest urges in the heart. The German phrase used here, and usually rendered "when I stand before it", is based on a well-established German idiom, which can be so understood, and then directly transferred into English. But it has also a nuance of being in the ambit of something, and, in terms of Steiner's interpretation, line 6 would be understood as 'when I am in the presence of', and not 'when I stand before'.

So the major divergence in Steiner's interpretation is that the experiences in this passage are descriptive of a universal mystical experience, and no longer a personal experience of Goethe's, deriving from romantic love. On this basis, line 7, which is usually, "before her gaze, just like before the power of the Sun" now has to read, "before its gaze, as if facing the power of the Sun". This now implies that it is the heart's purity which is encountered, and this has the effect mentioned later, that selfishness melts away. Thus to Steiner the experience is one in which one's own highest spiritual urges – enveloped in a divine milieu – are encountered, as an external reality, radiantly illumining (with spiritual light) one's sentience. This stands in strong contrast to the accepted view, of Goethe himself seeing his beloved, either physically, or in a visionary sense.

Consequently, line 8 which is usually understood as, "beneath her breath, just like beneath springtime breezes," is now viewed as indicating the presence of a sacred spiritual reality, and has to read, "before its breath, as if before springtime breezes." Note the implication here in the interpretation by the initiate Steiner, himself so familiar with the exquisite ambience of sensing the approach of divine beings. It is the encountering of the purity of the heart; the highest spiritual drives active in the soul-body, which are described as similar to sensing quickening springtime breezes. This wonderful interpretation of Goethe seems more valid than the accepted interpretation of this line; the latter would have to mean that the effects of perceiving the breath-stream (or subtle ambience?) of a deeply beloved person is causing selfishness to melt away.

This seems improbable in view of the sheer depths of esoteric knowledge which Goethe had attained. It is unlikely that the quickening of the pulse which a person in romantic love experiences, in special moments, would be thought of as melting away of all ego-centricity. It brings rather, a heightening of self-sense, although imbued with a wonderful paradisaical quality. The usual scholarly rendering here may possibly allow that the term, 'her breath' is metaphorical for Ulrike's ambience, rather than her breath as such. However, the expression, 'her gaze', in the previous line, does not appear to be metaphorical.

Finally, the last three lines in Steiner's interpretation bring into yet sharper focus his differing interpretation of Goethe's text. These lines become an attestation to the spiritual path for any acolyte; it is no longer a personal experience of Goethe's. It therefore concerns the powerful effect of the impinging upon any person's normal consciousness of his most spiritual urges – rather than a sensing by Goethe himself of his beloved's presence. These three lines are usually understood as,

10 self-centredness (that has persisted so long) in deep wintry tombs;

11 No egoism or self-will lasts,

12 before her advent they have fled.

But in the interpretation put forward by Rudolf Steiner, they would read,

10 self-centredness, deep in wintry tombs;

11 No self-interest, no self-will, lasts;

12 before its dawning presence they have shuddered away

Consequently all three negative attributes, self-centredness, self-interest and self-will, 'shudder away' as the heart's purity manifests. This creates an image which accords very clearly to the threefold human soul, as explained in anthroposophy, and how the spiritual potential arises in the soul, as its triune nature is transformed. One can see here how the esoteric interpretation of this verse by Rudolf Steiner affirms the anthroposophical perspective that the polar opposite to the condition of piety is self-centredness. It is precisely this which is eradicated from one's attitudinal qualities and emotive responses through the condition of attaining to spirituality, or at least of sensing its approach.

With regard to line 12, to allow the profound insight in Steiner's interpretation, I have chosen a more appropriate rendering of 'Vor ihrem Kommen' (usually rendered as 'before its advent'), namely, 'before its dawning presence'. So, now the verse in its rendering which corresponds to the esoteric view of Rudolf Steiner,

“...in the purity of our heart, there surges a striving, born of gratitude, to  
freely surrender oneself to a higher, purer, Unknown [Power];  
thus resolving the enigma to oneself of the Eternally Un-named;  
we call this – being pious !  
In such blessed heights I feel  
myself partake, when I am in its presence –  
before its gaze, as if facing the power of the Sun,  
before its breath, as if before springtime breezes,  
melts away what has lasted so long in icy rigidity –  
self-centredness, deep in wintry tombs;  
No self-interest, no self-will, lasts;  
before its dawning presence they have shuddered away.”

In his above comments on this passage from *Elegy*, Steiner describes the state of spirituality in terms of his view of the capacity for spirituality inherent as a potential

in everyone. It is just this condition of spirituality which Steiner already in his thirties, laboured to demonstrate as a fact, perhaps the most important fact about humankind's inner nature. He argues that such a potential for truly selfless goodwill does exist in us all. In his book, *The Philosophy of Freedom*, written in 1894, Steiner argues that this spirituality is also the condition which is true freedom. That is, in true freedom, all actions are carried out from an inherent ethical quality, which has now been attained. Hence these actions occur in the realm of divine love in the human soul,

...the realm where the human being is no longer compelled to any deed, rather where everything, which lies in the realm of human knowledge and development, happens through freedom and devotion, from deep love...where every compulsion, every arbitrary act, becomes transformed through a spiritual alchemy, where all actions flow into the realm of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

To Rudolf Steiner the condition of freedom is an ethical state, the final goal of spirituality, and is crucial both for the fulfilment of the human potential as well as for the future of civilisation. This condition is one in which a person has the above qualities of a spontaneously ethical nature as an inherent quality. It is also to Steiner a state of exceptional spirituality, because to him 'freedom' is not simply a condition bestowed upon the human being, rather is a condition which, developed through specific arduous esoteric soul-exercises, is the truest manifestation of the human spirit. To Steiner, 'love' is primarily a capacity developed in the volitional powers of the soul; in effect, 'good will'. In the poem *Elegy*, Goethe has in effect written about this exalted state of 'freedom', as a result of his profound reflections upon intense romantic love.

Further, the attainment of such spirituality is seen by Steiner as the fulfilling of the actual intention underlying the creation of humanity, that is, humanity has the mission to become the bearers of spiritual, selfless love. He elucidates his idea in lectures on the Gospel of St. John, where he explains that Christ is the Being of spiritual love, or good-will in the finest sense. He concludes that the result of the Incarnation of Christ, fulfilled through the Passion and Resurrection is that human souls have the very real potential to achieve this state of freedom, or ethical intuitiveness.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we can note here the striking words in Goethe's poem,

...to freely surrender oneself to a higher, purer, Unknown [Power];  
thus resolving the enigma to oneself of the Eternally Un-named;  
we call this – being pious !

Goethe is here very radically re-defining the meaning of being pious – which in today's language means being 'spiritual', in the sense of having reverence for the sacred. He has removed the scene of action for piety from organized religion to the striving person's inner life. In doing this, Goethe is again pre-figuring the teachings of Rudolf Steiner, who taught, as we have just noted, that through the deeds of the

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<sup>2</sup> Lecture, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1904 „...das Reich wo der Mensch zu nichts mehr gezwungen wird, sondern wo alles dasjenige, was im Berich der menschlichen Erkenntnis und Entwicklung liegt, aus Freiheit und Hingebung, aus voller Liebe geschieht...wo jeder Zwang, jede Willkür verwandelt wird durch spirituelle Alchemie, wo alles Handeln einfließt in das Gebiet der Freiheit.“

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Steiner, lecture cycle [The Gospel of St. John](#) Lect. 3

cosmic Christ in every human being the highest ethics can arise – freedom – a condition which is also one of feeling reverence for the sacred.

Rudolf Steiner's interpretation, as explained above, and expressed in my translation, seems to me to be more accurate than the alternative view. Indeed this verse becomes a gem of poetic wisdom, proclaiming the very essence of the 'mystical' experience, as the sacred draws near to the modern questing soul.

#### APPENDIX

The German text of the extract from "*Elegy*".

...In unsers Busens Reine wogt ein Streben,  
Sich einem Höhern, Reinern, Unbekannten  
Aus Dankbarkeit freiwillig hinzugeben,  
Enträtselnd sich den ewig Ungenannten;  
Wir heißen's: fromm sein ! –  
Solcher seligen Höhe fühl' ich mich teilhaft,  
Wenn ich vor ihr stehe.  
Vor ihrem Blick, wie vor der Sonne Walten,  
Vor ihrem Atem, wie vor Frühlingslüften,  
Zerschmilzt, so längst sich eisig starr gehalten,  
Der Selbstsinn tief in winterlichen Grüften;  
Kein Eigennutzt, kein Eigenwille dauert,  
Vor ihrem Kommen sind sie weggeschauert...