

WEIMAR CLASSICISM

Studies in Goethe, Schiller, Forster, Berlepsch,
Wieland, Herder, and Steiner

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Chapter 6. Weimar Classicism Reincarnated: Rudolf Steiner's Theatre of Spiritual Realism

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The Austrian philosopher and spiritualist Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) is a prominent figure in the reception of the works of Goethe in Germany. As an editor of Goethe's natural scientific works at the *Goethe-Schiller-Archiv* in Weimar, Steiner enthusiastically defended Goethe's achievements in the field of natural science against those who saw the poet's scientific endeavors as 'dabbings of an autodidactic dilettante.'²⁸⁴ Although there is controversy about the validity of his spiritualistic and esoteric interpretation of Goethe, Steiner is generally credited with being one of the first to recognize the importance of Goethe's views on science and their significance for the poet's artistic production.

Steiner's reception of Goethe was not limited to questions of philosophy, epistemology and science, however. Another outgrowth of his years defending and writing about Goethe is a series of four abstruse mystery plays known as the *Mysteriendramen* (1910-1913). Although these plays are still performed in present day Switzerland, in the Goetheanum, and thus constitute an example of living Goethe reception in contemporary German culture, they are virtually unknown to both the general audience and the academic community.²⁸⁵ Only three dissertations have treated the subject of the *Mysteriendramen* in any depth.²⁸⁶

The dramaturgy of these plays is undoubtedly influenced by several contemporary currents and traditions like Richard Wagner, Max Reinhardt, traditional religious theatre, theosophist drama and French symbolism.²⁸⁷ The most profound intellectual influence, however, on both his theory and his practice of drama were the aesthetic ideas of Weimar Classicism. In Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, ('On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters,' 1795) and Goethe's *Märchen* ('Fairy Tale,' 1795) Steiner saw the most essential expression of their belief in the power of art to perfect humanity by means of the aesthetic experience. His

Mysteriendramen can be seen as the attempt to apply this eighteenth century ideal to a twentieth century form of initiatory drama.

The following will be an examination of this attempted 'reincarnation' of the aesthetic visions of Goethe and Schiller in a twentieth century environment. First, we will examine to what degree the beginning installment of Steiner's tetralogy, *Die Pforte der Einweihung* ('The Portal of Initiation' 1910) is a dramatic adaptation of Goethe's *Märchen*. Secondly, we will review some of the main aesthetic and dramaturgical principles underlying Steiner's theatre – which he called *Spiritual Realism* – in order to show how they reflect and transform basic tenets of Weimar Classicism.²⁸⁸

I.

In a lecture given on April 9th 1921 Steiner professed: 'Wie man über die Künste reden soll, mit dieser Frage, ich darf es wohl sagen, ringe ich eigentlich mein ganzes Leben hindurch.'²⁸⁹ During his life he undertook numerous attempts to develop a language that would allow him to speak adequately about the nature and purpose of art without losing the very essence of the aesthetic experience in the process. Unlike Hegel, he did not believe that the discipline of philosophical aesthetics could ever grasp that essence and regarded discursive philosophy as the 'least worthy interpreter' of the arts.²⁹⁰ In his own attempts to develop a language congenial to the aesthetic experience, he often felt the enormous difficulty of that task: 'Mit demjenigen, was ich damals sagen wollte über das Wesen der Künste, kam ich mir vor wie ein Mensch, der reden wollte, aber eigentlich stumm ist und nur durch Gebärden ausdrücken muss, worauf er eigentlich hindeuten hat.'²⁹¹

The metaphor of the *gesture* points into the direction in which Steiner hoped to find a solution to the problem: namely by elevating language itself to the level of artistic expression and to speak artistically about the arts: 'Bilde, Künstler, rede nicht, und bist du als Mensch genötigt, über die Künste zu reden, so versuche es, bildend zu reden, redend zu bilden.'²⁹² As early as 1894, in the foreword of his seminal work *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, Steiner called philosophy itself a 'form of art,' thus designating the philosopher to be a

'conceptual artist' or *Begriffskünstler* and defining the very act of understanding as an essentially aesthetic process. In this framework of *Gedankenkunst*, the form and structure of human reasoning is given the same weight as its conceptual content. Form and content of the thought process are supposed to reflect one another to such a degree that they mirror and enhance one another and ultimately evoke a third element, which is not as such expressed in language and cannot be confined into a definite concept but realizes itself within the inner mental experiences of the reader or listener. According to Herbert Witzgenmann, Steiner's *Gedankenkunst* intends to give the audience an opportunity to inwardly live within the text as a process which addresses and activates all factors of the reader's mental life – that is, along with his reasoning also his feeling and his will.²⁹³ Based on this idea of applying principles of Weimar aestheticism to aesthetics itself, Steiner undertook the task of developing a language that enabled him to speak about art without losing its aesthetic qualities in the very process. The four *Mysteriendramen*, which were written and performed during 1910-13, can be seen as the artistic realization of this theory of *Gedankenkunst*, which Steiner developed between 1886 and 1894.

The plot of his first Mystery Drama, *Die Pforte der Einweihung* is based on Goethe's *Märchen*. This short tale is without doubt one of the most mysterious and enigmatic among Goethe's texts. It has been interpreted as encoding the author's political views, his religious beliefs, his philosophical standpoints, his anthropological ideas, his theory of art, his confession as a Rosicrucian, and his friendship with Friedrich Schiller – to name only a few of its standard readings. *Die Pforte der Einweihung* provides a new and imaginative interpretation of the story by reading it as a symbolic representation of the process of creative imagination or artistic inspiration itself. Steiner reenacts Goethe's prose text as a dramatic initiation that symbolically describes the inspired consciousness in order to initiate and facilitate the attainment of such a consciousness in the spectator itself.

Goethe's *Märchen* is set in two adjacent kingdoms, which are separated by a river. For the inhabitants of both realms, it is very difficult to cross the river and have interactions with the other side: only at certain times and at certain places is this possible. Hence everyone longs for a permanent bridge that would enable everyone to cross over at any time. At the end of the story, such a bridge is actually erected: the green snake sacrifices herself and out of the remains of her body the pillars of a beautiful permanent bridge emerge. The two rulers of these kingdoms, a young prince and the beautiful lily, are in love and want to unify in marriage. Tragically, they cannot come together, because the touch of the lily brings death to every living being. Hence the catastrophe is inevitable: when the prince cannot restrain his passion any longer and embraces his beloved one, he falls into a death-like sleep. In order to reawaken the prince and unify him with lily, a hidden underground temple has to be brought to the surface. In this subterranean temple we encounter four mysterious kings, living metal statues actually, who reside there on thrones. There is a golden one, a silver one, a bronze one and one king mixed of all three metals. As long as the three pure kings sit on their thrones, the temple remains underground. But at the very moment when they rise from their thrones, the temple ascends to the surface, while the fourth mixed king disappears. As a result, the prince becomes the new ruler of the renewed kingdom and can finally unite with the beautiful lily.

In Steiner's rendition of the story, the plot is set in the author's own time and place, that is early twentieth century Germany. The lead protagonist is the young painter Johannes, who strives to develop a new form of metaphysical art. He wants to create paintings that communicate the invisible behind the visible, the super-sensuous reality behind the sensuous appearance of things. When he enters the stage, he has already made some progress in that direction; but lately, as we learn, he is experiencing a sort of 'creative block,' the cause of which is his friend and muse Maria, a young woman to whom Johannes has a complex relationship. On the one hand, Maria is the object of Johannes' love and his inspiration as an artist; on the other hand, she is a member of an esoteric circle of people seeking

spiritual knowledge. We learn that the more Johannes is exposed to her spiritualistic views, the more his artistic creativity ceases.

In this constellation we clearly recognize the protagonists from Goethe's text and their dilemma. The fairy tale motif of the prince who seeks to marry the lily whose touch in turn petrifies himself is turned in a modern discourse about knowledge, spirituality and art. John represents humanity in a post-Kantian age, a humanity that seeks knowledge of the transcendent, but whose ability to actually receive such revelation is impeded by the limitations of his cognitive faculties. In this dilemma, art is presented as the bridge that provides a solution to this epistemological predicament; the artistic experience is supposed to bridge the gap between reason and revelation, thinking and feeling, science and religion. Thus Steiner interprets Goethe's *Märchen* as a universal epistemological drama: we all are John (the prince) while Mary (the lily) represents the object of man's cognitive longing, Kant's *Ding an sich*, which we all desire to know, but which to embrace with full understanding our intellectual capacities are insufficient. In the aesthetic experience, however, man can achieve what Kant declared to be unattainable: to bridge the abyss between reality as it is and reality as we perceive it, between our empirical Self and our true nature, between the material and the spiritual world. In that sense, *Die Pforte der Einweihung* is a dramatic reenactment of not only Goethe's *Märchen*, but also Schiller's response to and rebuke of Kantian epistemology in his 'Aesthetic Letters.'

In Goethe's *Märchen*, the prince has to be separated from the lily for a while in order to prepare for the ultimate unification with her. A similar course of action can be seen in *Die Pforte der Einweihung*: Johannes separates from Maria, gives up his artistic endeavors for a while and instead begins to undergo a certain spiritual training that encompasses both scientific studies and meditation practice. He gives up his old ways of thinking and feeling and develops a completely new personality. After some years of such rigorous training, Johannes is actually able to create the art he is after. One admirer of his paintings states:

Dies Bild ist mir ein Wunder wahrlich.
 Und ein noch gröss'res
 Ist mir sein Schöpfer.
 Die Wandlung, die in euch geschehn,
 Es kann ihr nichts verglichen werden.
 Was Menschen meiner Art
 Bisher für möglich hielten. [...]

O diese Farben, sie sind flächenhaft
 Und sind es nicht,
 Es ist, als ob sie sichtbar seien nur,
 Um sich unsichtbar mir zu machen.
 Und diese Formen,
 Die als der Farbe Werk erscheinen,
 Sie sprechen von dem Geistesweben,
 Von vielem sprechen sie,
 Was sie nicht selber sind.²⁹⁴

The man obviously has a genuine spiritual experience as he gazes at the painting. As he looks at his friend's portrait, he feels as though he were beholding the persons inmost spiritual Self. Johannes' art has become a bridge between the two kingdoms of the sensuous and the super-sensuous, between what we see and what really is.

In Goethe's tale, the erection of the bridge that connects both kingdoms is linked to the ascent of a subterranean temple to the surface. Hence it is not surprising that *Die Pforte der Einweihung* also features the motif of a temple. Steiner's 'temple,' however, is not to be taken in a naturalistic manner as an actual edifice, but rather as a symbolic representation of John's inner mental experiences in the state of meditation, a window into the invisible interior world of his mind and soul. It represents, in psychoanalytical terms, the unconscious which is supposed to be brought into the light of consciousness. In this 'subterranean temple' we meet again the four kings from Goethe's story. From their dialogues it is obvious that they are representations of human mental faculties: the gold king represents intellectuality and thought, the silver king symbolizes emotionality and feeling, while the former bronze king stands for intentionality and will. As these kings converse with one another, they talk about the possibility to overcome the boundaries of human understanding, as Kant defined them. They claim that true

knowledge can be achieved by a systematic education of thinking, feeling and willing. One of them states:

Es fühlt in mir der Weltenwille,
 Dass jene Menschen nahen,
 Die ungeweiht, aus Sinnenschein
 Den Geist entbinden können. [...]
 Sie fanden sich bis jetzt
 Dazu noch nicht bereit,
 Sie hingen an dem Glauben,
 Dass Seherkräfte von Vernunft
 Getrennt sich halten sollen.
 Sie haben nun erkannt,
 Wozu Vernunft den Menschen führt,
 Wenn sie vom Schauen abgesondert
 In Weltentiefen sich verirrt.
 Sie werden zu dir sprechen
 Von Früchten, die aus deiner Kraft
 In Menschenseelen reifen müssen.²⁹⁵

The fourth king, significantly called *Retardus*, to a certain degree represents the Kantian position as he strongly opposes the development of such 'higher knowledge.' Although he believes that true understanding can be obtained, he thinks man is not yet ready to receive such revelation by himself and refers, like Kant, to religious faith as a proper substitute for actual knowledge of the transcendent. In his opinion, a confrontation of man with the true nature of his being is even harmful. He says:

Ich halte euer Geisteslicht
 Deshalb zurück in diesem Tempel,
 Auf dass nicht Schaden
 Statt Heil es bringe,
 Wenn es die Seelen unreif trifft.²⁹⁶

Later, after Johannes has achieved his mastery of spiritual art, this underground temple ascends to the surface. As a result of rigorously training the faculties of thinking, feeling and willing, they have now been strengthened in him to such a degree that he is now conscious of them. The 'temple' of his own

unconscious has risen into the sunlight of his consciousness. He now truly knows himself and understands the forces that constitute his body, mind and soul. Drawing from this source of self-knowledge he is able to create his marvelous artworks. As another admirer of John mentions:

Ich habe nie bezweifelt,
Dass Geist im Menschen wirksam sich erzeugt;
Doch bleibt ihm sonst
Des Geistes Wesen unbewusst.
Er schafft aus einem Geiste,
Doch er versteht ihn nicht.
Thomasius jedoch erschafft im Sinnensein,
Was er bewusst im Geiste schauen kann.²⁹⁷

At the end of the play stands a prophecy, given to the skeptical scientist Strader – and simultaneously to the spectator as well – promising that he will also be admitted into this temple, once he is ready for it. The last words of the play are these:

Aus deinem Herzen
Entschwebt ein Lichtesschein,
Ein Menschenbild entringt sich ihm.
Und Worte kann ich hören,
Die aus dem Menschenbilde kommen;
Sie klingen so:
«Ich habe mir errungen
Die Kraft, zum Licht zu kommen.»
Mein Freund, vertraue dir!
Du wirst die Worte selber sprechen,
Wenn deine Zeit erfüllt wird sein.²⁹⁸

At this point we must end our survey of Steiner's dramatic adaptation of the *Märchen*, although I have necessarily abridged many of the details. But even this short summary leaves no doubt that the overriding idea in this drama is the core belief of Weimar Classicism: the limits of human understanding can be expanded by the powers of creative imagination. Against those who insist (like Kant), that human understanding cannot grasp the true nature of world and man, Steiner argues (with Goethe and Schiller) that such transcendent knowledge is

indeed attainable, if we allow our thinking, feeling and willing to be transformed by the aesthetic experience. The goal is, as Goethe once put it, that science and poesy could unite again, to a mutual advantage, on a higher plane.²⁹⁹

II.

The four *Mysteriendramen* are only the one aspect of Rudolf Steiner's reception of the aesthetics of Weimar Classicism. As he wrote and repeatedly staged these plays, he also developed a theoretical framework that outlined the fundamental aesthetic principles that guided him in the creation process and which he called *Spiritual Realism*. Throughout his entire lifetime he was engaged in the philosophical discourse about the nature and purpose of dramatic art. During a first phase, which began in the late 1880s, he wrote articles on questions concerning theatre and drama and edited several literary journals like the *Dramaturgische Blätter* and the *Magazin für Litteratur*, in which he published hundreds of articles, opinion pieces and critiques of theatrical performances. After the turn of the century, a phase of radical individualism followed, during which he tended to a form of aesthetic anarchy. Finally, during a third phase Steiner outlined the essential principles of *Spiritual Realism* which are summarized in a 1924 lecture cycle on dramaturgy and language art. The following pages will briefly characterize these three phases and highlight the influence of Weimar Classicism on Steiner's development as a drama critic and theorist.

The early Steiner established himself as a very conservative critic who praised Goethe, Schiller and other classics as the measure of all things and who had a lot of criticism for the playwrights of his time, the quality of contemporary theatrical performances, and his fellow critics. He accused the two major theatres in Vienna, the *Hoftheater* and the *Burgtheater* of catering to an entertainment-seeking audience³⁰⁰ and blamed the contemporary critics for promoting a style of criticism that does nothing to educate the audience, but rather corrupts the German language and the aesthetic taste of their readers.³⁰¹ Many of these barrages against the 'feuilletonistic age' and the literary avant-garde (and, most

prominently, against the Viennese writer and journalist Hermann Bahr)³⁰² were very polemic and, compared to Steiner's treatments of philosophical problems, rather superficial. His critiques of concrete plays, on the other hand, reveal a keen observer with a developed sense for aesthetic nuances.

As one reads these early critiques and follows Steiner's attempts to understand the dramaturgical intentions of various playwrights, one can witness the gradual development of *Spiritual Realism*. Early on he adapts Lessing's idea that drama is supposed to display psychological truth and to provide 'einen tiefen Blick in das Menschenherz.'³⁰³ In Hebbel's *Gyges* he admires, how this drama reveals 'wie die Naturgewalten in der menschlichen Seele sich kreuzen und bekämpfen' and 'wie in jeder Menschenbrust eine Wiederholung des Lebens im Universum sich vollzieht.'³⁰⁴ As he talks about the *Jüdin von Toledo*, he praises that Grillparzer does not simply let his tragic hero die, but subjects him to a deep inner metamorphosis as a result of which 'a completely new human being emerges.'³⁰⁵

If we summarize Steiner's ideas in these early critiques, three essential principles can be discerned:

1. The nature of drama is to represent nature, however not external nature in a naturalistic sense, but the inner mental, psychological and spiritual nature of man.
2. This 'inner life' of man is a reflection of the laws that also govern the external world, so that the human 'microcosm' displayed on stage mirrors the 'macrocosm' of nature.
3. The ultimate purpose of drama is initiation. Theatre is supposed to not only entertain and educate, but to subject the viewer to a process of radical inner transformation through aesthetic means.

As Steiner ended his work in the Schiller-Goethe archive in Weimar and moved to Berlin to become editor of the journal *Dramaturgische Blätter* in 1898, his tone radically changed. In one of his first essays entitled *Moderne Kritik* he writes:

Es kann keine allgemeinen Kunstgesetze, keine allgemeine Ästhetik geben. Jedes Kunstwerk fordert seine eigene Ästhetik [...]. So wie jedes wahre Kunstwerk ein individueller persönlicher Ausfluss eines individuellen Menschen ist, so kann jede Kritik auch nur die ganz individuelle Wiedergabe der Empfindungen und Vorstellungen sein, die in der Seele der betrachtenden Einzelpersönlichkeit aufsteigen, während sie sich dem Genusse eines Kunstwerkes hingibt. Ich kann niemals sagen ob ein Gedicht objektiv gut oder schlecht ist, denn es gibt keine Norm des Guten oder Schlechten [...]. Die wahrhaft moderne Kritik kann keine Ästhetik anerkennen; ihr ist jedes Kunstwerk eine neue Offenbarung; sie urteilt in jeder Kritik nach neuen Regeln, wie das wahre Genie bei jedem Werke nach neuen Regeln schafft.³⁰⁶

As Steiner now embraced a radical individualism, he turned away from uncritical admiration for the classics and developed a new appreciation for contemporary art and art theory. He speaks about *die Modernen* with an attitude of appreciation and even includes himself into their ranks as he frequently uses the formula '*wir Heutigen*.' As he praises and defends Ibsen, Hauptmann, Schlaf, Holz, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and other contemporary playwrights, his main criterion of evaluation is no longer conformity with the principles of Weimar Classicism, but the individuality and authenticity of a play and his author. His advice to playwrights is no longer to preserve the aesthetic and artistic achievements of Goethe and Schiller, but to creatively adapt and further develop the impulses which they gave.³⁰⁷

In a third phase, from about 1910 on, Steiner worked on this project of conceiving a new theoretical 'body' for the 'soul' of Weimar Classicism. These efforts resulted in a lecture cycle entitled *Sprachgestaltung und Dramatische Kunst* (1924).³⁰⁸ Steiner's approach to drama and speech in these lectures is clearly indebted to Schiller's rejection of naturalism and realism in art. Like Schiller in his preface to *Die Braut von Messina*, Steiner feels that truly artistic drama has 'to declare war on the tendency towards naturalism in the arts.'³⁰⁹ He insists that language must not be reduced to a mere means of communicating conceptual information, but rather treated as a sensuous medium that has content and meaning in itself, in addition to the intellectual content it communicates. The

same is true for gestures. The actors' bodily posture, Steiner writes, should harmonize with the psychological expression of the text. Also, regardless of the action that goes on in the drama, the actor should always face the audience and not his fellow actors on stage.³¹⁰

Many of these dramaturgical ideas are a result of Steiner's reception of Goethe, as they correspond with the *Regeln für den Schauspieler*,³¹¹ a short text which Goethe wrote during his time as director of the Weimar Theater. The central category in Steiner's approach to dramatic art, however, is the concept of style. Style is achieved if all aspects of the dramatic performance – language, gesture, setting, costume, lighting – not only communicate the 'external reality,' that is the plot of the drama, but at the same time the 'inner reality,' that is the emotional, mental and spiritual condition of the person who acts. True style, Steiner asserts, cannot result from mere experimentation with artistic means, but only from a true understanding of the inner nature of man – very similar to what Goethe had formulated in the article on *Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil*, published in 1789 by Wieland in the *Teutscher Merkur*: 'Style rests upon the deepest foundations of knowledge, upon the essence of things, so far as we are able to recognize it in visible and comprehensible forms.'³¹² In order for the dramatist and the actor to achieve such an artistic style that is based on understanding the nature of man, Steiner asserts that the playwright and the actors must become conscious of their own personal dream life. In statements that sound almost Freudian, he explains that dreams reveal much of the hidden inner nature of man, which has been lost in modern philosophy and anthropology. The dream life, however, cannot be re-enacted on stage without the use of symbolic imagery and the creation of *Stimmungen*. Hence 'Mood' becomes a core concept in *Spiritual Realism*. The 'mood' always communicates the wholeness and complexity of a human being in a dramatic situation, while intellectual thoughts focus on the detail and the particular. And as the purpose of drama is to represent the whole man, physically, mentally and spiritually, the experiences of the dream life are the model for Steiner's stage presentation.³¹³

The rejection of naturalistic imitation and the goal of representing a certain dream-like mood by means of artistic stylization pertains not only to the realm of acting (which includes, of course, costume, lighting, and all other aspects of stage presentation), but also to language itself. Steiner sees the word not primarily as a medium of communicating a concept, but as an aesthetic entity that has value and meaning in itself. Words that only communicate ideas, he asserts, are 'der Tod der Kunst.'³¹⁴ Words always communicate more than just what the actor is saying; they convey insights into the emotional, mental and spiritual nature of man.

The attentive reader will realize that Steiner's aesthetics run into a major problem here. On the one hand, it is stressed that the instrumental aspect of language is secondary, even detrimental to the artistic experience. But on the other hand, this instrumental aspect of language is a core element of every drama. Even the most idealized and stylized dramatic style has to use words in order to communicate ideas. Steiner acknowledges this problem and argues that it is to be solved by the actor's gesture and mime. While many of the 'subtle messages' contained in language are lost in the act of using words as an instrument of relating concepts, the actor has to make up for this loss by means of communicating the same subliminal messages through the expressions of his body and his face. As the 'inner man' is no longer to be communicated by language alone, but by other elements, speech as such is freed from its instrumental purpose and can become more artistic. The more the actor 'speaks' through his gestures and facial expressions, his language is freed up to communicate other things. A thought expressed in language, Steiner claims, is dead, but a thought expressed in gesture remains alive.

The phenomenon of the 'death of art' that results from a merely instrumental use of language must be countered by an ever deeper understanding of the organism of language itself. 'All depends,' Steiner writes, 'on understanding first and foremost the organism of language as such.'³¹⁵ He claims that the reality that can be experienced in the aesthetic qualities of the spoken

word is, in fact, nothing else than the very life-force that constitutes and maintains the human organs of speech.³¹⁶ In the same way in which Goethe formulated that the eye as the organ of light has been formed by the very forces of light itself – (*Wär nicht das Auge sonnenhaft/ Die Sonne könnt' es nie erblicken.*)³¹⁷ – the organs of speech are formed, according to Steiner, by the very transcendent forces that manifest themselves in language. Hence the spoken word is for Steiner not just an expression of the speaker's ideas, feelings or desires, but also a manifestation of his totality as a human being endowed with body, mind and soul. But the Dornach drama course does not stop at such general assertions. Steiner also goes into the very details of his spiritualistic understanding of language by analyzing the 'seelische Geste' of each individual language component.³¹⁸ The vowels, for instance, are described as being formed by two major tendencies. In a similar way in which Goethe described the morphology of plants as a metamorphosis of one original form – the leaf – by the forces of contraction and expansion, Steiner speaks about two major gestures in the formation of speech: 'seelisches Sich-Öffnen' ('mental expansion') expressed most predominantly in the German vowel 'a,' and 'seelisches Zusammenziehen' ('mental contraction') as in the German vowel 'u.' Both tendencies express the duality of '*seelische Tätigkeit*' and '*geistige Tätigkeit*.'³¹⁹ As a pure German 'a' is sounded, Steiner writes, the 'Seele' is fully active while the 'Geist' remains mostly passive. The opposite is true for the German 'u': in this sound the soul activity steps back and gives room for increased mental activity. In other words: when the speaker sounds an 'a,' the soul 'awakes' and the mind 'falls asleep,' so to speak, while the opposite occurs in the 'u.' A kind of balance of both tendencies is established in the German vowel 'o.'³²⁰

In statements like these, in which Steiner tries to illustrate what he actually means when he speaks about the non-conceptual content of language, he challenges a core dogma of modern linguistics, namely the idea that the individual elements of language itself do not mean anything in themselves. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, the elements of language only 'mean' something,

inasmuch as they are signifiers of certain mental concepts. Steiner challenges this idea by asserting that every vowel, consonant or combination of both corresponds to a certain activity that takes part in the 'Scele,' in the 'Geist' or in the 'Leib' ('body'). The first step toward a true understanding of the organism of language – and hence to a truly artistic dramatic art – must be the attempt to become conscious of these undercurrents.

While Steiner sees the vowels as an expression of certain 'innerseelischem Erleben' (soul experience), consonants are interpreted as 'geistige Gebärden' (mental gestures) which serve the function of structuring those soul experiences in time and space. In 'Blaselaute' (fricatives) like 'h,' 'sch,' 's' or 'f,' for instance, he identifies the gesture of flowing and streaming (*fließen, strömen*), which have a much richer sound than 'Stoßlaute' (explosives) like 'd' or 't,' which display the gesture of pointing, as can be experienced in 'da,' 'dort,' 'dies' and in the German direct articles 'der,' 'die' and 'das.' Steiner also parallels certain 'Konsonanten-Erlebnisse' (consonant-experiences) with certain body parts. 'Zitterlaute' (trills), for instance, like the German 'r' are attributed to the natural motions of arms and hands, manifesting the bodily and mental gesture of 'grasping' (*greifen, begreifen*). 'Wellenlaute' (laterals), on the other hand, like the German 'l' are attributed to the arms and legs and thus to process-related gestures like 'walking' (*laufen*) or 'reading' and 'learning' (*lernen* and *lesen*). Steiner summarizes all these detailed excursions into the mental and bodily equivalents of sound by stating: 'Im Sprechen ist die Auferstehung des in der Gebärde verschwundenen Menschen.'³²¹ Here lies for Steiner the reason for the powerful impact that dramatic art has on human beings: although language as such already reveals to a certain degree the true nature of man, its revelations are tainted by the instrumental use of speech. The intelligible thoughts that are communicated by words distract, in a way, from the non-intelligible content that also manifests itself in them. But in drama this loss can be compensated by the subliminal messages of the bodily gestures and the interplay of light and color. This compensation is, according to Steiner, put into play by the productive and

creative activity of the audience. The 'gestures' of body, language and light on stage are supposed to stimulate the viewers imagination to fill in what is lost by the conversational and narrative use of language. Drama fascinates us, because it gives us an opportunity to create within ourselves a representation of the inner super-sensual nature of man – just as we do in our dreams.

It is very interesting to compare Steiner's views on the use of language in drama with those of Bertolt Brecht. It is well known that Brecht criticized classical playwrights like Goethe and Schiller for their use of metered speech. In his essay *Über Reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmäßigen Rhythmen* (On Unrhymed Poetry with Irregular Rhymes) he relates that being exposed to regular rhythms always had a dulling and soporific effect on him that would carry him away into a trance-like dream mood.³²² Especially listening to long iambic passages would extinguish the rational thought process, while ideas and concepts would take on an emotional nature; thus he felt like being rocked by emotional waves into a mood that levels and blurs everything.³²³ What Brecht is describing here corresponds well to the 'dream mood' that is deliberately sought in Steiner's theatre of *Spiritual Realism*. The rhythmic and sonic qualities of language are meant to put reason 'to sleep,' so to speak, in order to open up the viewer's attentiveness to the non-rational content that is communicated. The 'dream mood' is so important, because it turns our attention away from mere intellectual processes to the inner realities of the soul and the spirit. 'The impression of being true to life and realistic,' Steiner writes, 'occurs in those moments on stage, when it is obvious that the dramatic images are metamorphoses of our dream life into living imagination.'³²⁴

Although the evocation of dreams was a very prominent theme in early twentieth century theatre, we may also identify Goethe as one of the models that Steiner had in mind. The dream-mood is the element which is evoked with the dedicatory poem at the beginning of *Faust*, when Goethe calls on the 'schwankende Gestalten' and 'liebe Schatten,' which ascend 'aus Dunst und Nebel' in order to cast their magical spells on the poet.³²⁵ Also, it is 'die Traum-

und Zaubersphäre,' into which Faust and Mephisto ascend during the *Walpurgisnacht*,³²⁶ and during extended scenes of *Faust II* the hero is completely asleep, rendering the staged events representations of his dream life altogether. In his poem 'Ideale', Goethe even seems to identify the dream with the aesthetic experience altogether:

Der Maler wagts mit Götterbildern,
Sein Höchstes hat er aufgestellt;
Doch was er für unmöglich hält:
Dem Liebenden die Liebste schildern,
Er wag es auch! Ein Traum wird frommen,
Ein Schattenbild ist hoch willkommen.³²⁷

In order to achieve this dream state on the stage, Steiner points out three modes of 'Stimmung' – while we must be aware that this German word means 'mood' as well as 'atmosphere' and 'tuning': Good drama, we read here, requires *Charakterstimmung*, *Lautstimmung* and *Farbstimmung*. 'Charakterstimmung' entails that, although the individual characters on stage may be depicted as distinct personalities with unique traits and circumstances, the ensemble as a whole should represent an archetype of what it means to be human.³²⁸ Just as all the organs of a plant in Goethe's theory of the *Urpflanze* represent the primal form of the leaf, all the characters of a play together should create a representation of the *Urmensch*, the archetype of man as such. 'Lautstimmung,' on the other hand, implies the unfolding of the inner qualities of the spoken word that were described in detail above. 'Farbstimmung,' finally, employs the elements of light and color in order to create the right mood on stage.³²⁹ Most of Steiner's assertions in this context are based on Goethe's theory of colors, in which Goethe emphasized 'die sinnlich-sittlichen Wirkungen der Farben.'³³⁰

Many more things would have to be said in order to exhaust all the ideas Steiner presents in his drama course. But even this short summary should give the reader an impression of the basic tenets of *Spiritual Realism*: Steiner's main goal is to achieve true style in drama, and style is defined as using all the elements of dramatic performance – language, body gesture and stage setting – for the purpose

of creating a certain dream-like mood, which allows the audience to access certain levels of subliminal understanding beyond rational thought. What happens inside the soul, mind and spirit of the person on stage must be reflected not only in the spoken text, but also in the sounds of the language, the motions of the bodies, the costumes, the setting, and the interplay of light and colors. If this is achieved, Steiner claims, the play on stage can become a representation of the hidden 'übersinnlichen Menschen' ('super-sensuous man'), a modern mystery drama that confronts the human being with his/her own true self as a being of body, soul and spirit. This 'self,' which lies at the core of Steiner's dramatic art, is not supposed to be a construction based on a particular modern ideology – it is not the human being as envisioned by dialectic materialism or capitalism, by pragmatism, existentialism, nihilism or even modern spiritualism – it is the human being that, as Steiner believed, reveals itself in the very essence of the spoken word, the gestures of the body and the revelations of color and light.

With this understanding of artistic style as expression of 'the foundations of nature itself,' Steiner's theatre of *Spiritual Realism* seems indeed, despite all his actual deviations from and misinterpretations of Goethe and Schiller which we did not mention here, to be true to the intellectual and spiritual core of Weimar Classicism. The question remains open, though, whether this attempt of reincarnating Weimar into a modern world will fare better in the twenty first century than it did in the twentieth. When Christian Morgenstern witnessed a performance of the *Mysteriendramen* in 1913, he emphatically wrote:

Das Steinersche Mysterium [...] leitet ein, mag sein noch mit mancher Mühsal eines Anfangswerkes, einer ersten Tat beladen, eine neue Stufe, eine neue Epoche der Kunst. Diese Epoche selbst ist noch fern; es können hunderte von Jahren vergehen, bis die Menschen, die diese rein geistige Kunst wollen, so zahlreich geworden sind, dass etwa in jeder Stadt Mysterien solcher Art würdig geboten und empfangen werden können – aber hier in der *Pforte* ist ihr historischer Ausgangspunkt, hier wohnen wir ihrer Geburt bei.³³¹

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, on the other hand, one of the few notable dramatists that commented on the *Mystery Dramas*, suggested that Steiner's plays could never reach a broader audience because of their embeddedness in the culture and ideology of anthroposophy. 'Es gibt nichts Komischeres,' Dürrenmatt wrote, 'als in den Mysterienspielen der Anthroposophen als Unbeteiligter zu sitzen.'³³²

But must one really be familiar with or even personally involved in theosophy and anthroposophy in order to understand and appreciate these plays? A deeper understanding of the profound connection between Steiner's *Mysteriendramen* and Weimar Classicism may provide a bridge that makes his theatre of *Spiritual Realism* more approachable and maybe even, as Helmut Zander has recently formulated, 'viable outside of the arcane space of the Goetheanum.'³³³ Despite a huge ballast of esoteric theorems and an unarguable lack of dramatic and artistic maturity, these plays are fascinating documents of a twentieth century attempt to create an authentic form of modern initiatory drama. Steiner's plays bring ideas and rituals to the attention of a public audience that were previously only accessible to members of secret esoteric societies in secluded rituals. In that regard, we may compare them to the *Zauberflöte* of 1791, in which, to a certain degree, the mysteries of eighteenth century freemasonry were widely publicized to a broad audience.³³⁴ We know that Steiner did not intend to write for anthroposophists only, but had plans for public performances,³³⁵ consistent with his conviction that in the twentieth century the time of esoteric knowledge and secret societies was over and any kind of esoteric knowledge that exists has to be brought into the light of public. But Steiner was, of course, no experienced playwright like Schikaneder – and no genius like Mozart put his words to immortal music.

Who can say whether Christian Morgenstern was a prophet when he envisioned a time when 'mysteries of this kind can be offered and received worthily in every city' or whether Dürrenmatt was right when he predicted that nobody outside of anthroposophy could ever take these plays seriously? As we

formulate this question, the theatre ensemble at the Goetheanum in Dornach presents a new installment of the *Mysteriendramen* to the public.³³⁶ It remains to be seen whether this new approach will be able to transcend the secluded space of the Goetheanum and speak to a broader audience – or whether Steiner's attempt to reincarnate Weimar Classicism into the modern world will remain an obscure ritual in anthroposophical circles.