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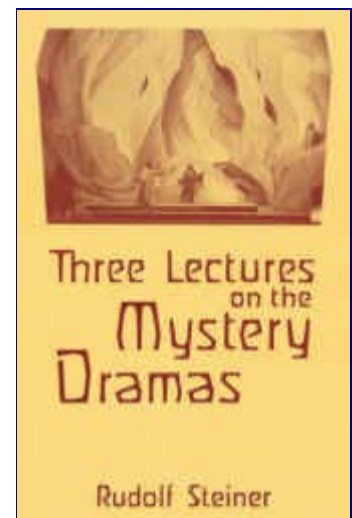
Three Lectures on the Mystery Dramas by Rudolf Steiner

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2006



What is the significance of Steiner's Mystery Dramas? This is a question that one might pose

if one considered the dramas to be recondite and esoteric badinage, rather than deep and insightful looks into the destiny of the human soul. As with all of Steiner's lectures, his mystery dramas require study for their meanings to emerge. In this next passage, Steiner is talking about his Rosicrucian Mystery drama, *The Portal of Initiation*, in which he strove "in a variety of ways to bring to expression what is living in [the anthroposophical] movement."

[page 1] Please do not misunderstand me when I say that if people would exert themselves to some degree to read what is in it — not between the lines but right in the words themselves, though certainly in a spiritual sense — if people would exert themselves during the next few years to try to work with the drama, I would not have to give any more lectures for a long time. Much could be discovered in it that otherwise I would have to put forth as one or another theme in lectures.

Steiner, dead some eighty years, has no more lectures to give us at this time, so it would be wise for us to study carefully these mystery dramas which he claimed would preempt his need for further lectures. And yet, he must have sensed that we would need his help to approach his dramas and thus perceived the need for these lectures in which he explains these dramas "as a picture of human evolution in the development of a single person." Of a single person, not the general process of human evolution for every person. One cannot watch a play about a bus driver and expect that would be the story of every bus driver, for example. One cannot take a single story and project from it a theory of human development. If one were to become a bus driver, one would do it in one's own way, not the way Jackie Gleason did it in "The Honeymooners." Johannes Thomasius is the Jackie Gleason equivalent in Steiner's [four mystery dramas](#).

[page 14] This Mystery Drama exists now as a picture of human evolution in the development of a single person. I want to emphasize that true feeling makes it impossible to throw a cloak of abstractions around oneself in order to present anthroposophy; every human soul is different from every other and, at its core, must be different, because each one undergoes the experience of his own development. For this reason, instruction to the many can provide only general directions. One can give the complete truth only by applying it to a single human soul, to a soul that reveals its human individuality in all its uniqueness. If, therefore, anyone should consider the figure of Johannes Thomasius in such a way as to transfer the specific description of that figure to general theories of human development, it would be absolutely incorrect. If he believed that he would experience exactly what Johannes Thomasius experienced, he

would be quite mistaken. For while in the widest sense what Johannes Thomasius had to undergo is valid for everyone, in order to have the same specific experiences one would have to *be* Johannes Thomasius. Each person is a "Johannes Thomasius" in his own fashion.

The motto over the Temple of Apollo at Delphi said, "Know Thyself." The paradox in following this advice is that one cannot know oneself except by deep interaction with others. It is for this reason that people become therapists — they learn about themselves by studying and helping others to help themselves — they heal themselves as they heal others.

[page 15] There is one deep truth necessary for him who wants to undergo development: self-knowledge cannot be achieved by brooding within oneself but only through diving into the being of others. Through self-knowledge we must learn that we have emerged from the cosmos. Only when we give ourselves up can we change into another Self. First of all, we are transformed into whatever was close to us in life.

When at first Johannes sinks more deeply into himself and then plunges in self-knowledge into another person, into the one to whom he has brought bitter pain, we see this as an example of the experience of oneself within another, a descent into self-knowledge.

Thomas Wolfe wrote that "you cannot go home again." It seems to me that he was re-stating Heraclites' famous dictum that "you cannot step in the same river twice." The flux of life is such that when you return to the place you called home you find that it is a different place and you are a different person. But anyone who has had this experience knows that one learns something from going home again, in other words, we can go home for a gain.

[page 15] Theoretically, one can say that if we wish to know the blossom, we must plunge into the blossom, and the best method of acquiring self-knowledge is to plunge again, but in a different way, into happenings we once took part in. As long as we remain in ourselves, we experience only superficially whatever takes place. In contrast to true self-knowledge, what we think of other persons is then mere abstraction.

Amazing, isn't it, that most people talk willingly about what they think of other people, but rarely about any true self-knowledge that they acquired from other people. Is this perhaps because so few people ever learn how to dive into another person or plunge into a blossom? They willingly share the menu with us when, for a bit more effort, they could share the banquet with us. Do they not see that their abstractions about others are empty fruit, peach pits which offer no nourishment? Their empty abstractions are admissions that they are unwilling to dive into others to learn about themselves. "True self-knowledge leads, first of all, by having to plunge into a strange Self, into suffering." (Page 16)

What is the echo of a slap in the face? If this seems like a strange question to you, consider that each of your deeds is echoed or reflected back to you during the time between death and a new birth known as Kamaloka. In each reflected deed, it is you who feels the brunt of the slap. You experience the slap you gave someone else as if it were someone else slapping you with exactly the same intensity. In a wonderful cosmic balancing act the bully becomes the bullied by his own hand.

[page 19] All the elements of kamaloka have to be undergone as the elements of initiation. Just as Johannes dives into the soul to whom he has brought such grief, so must the normal human being in kamaloka dive into the souls to which he has brought pain. It is just as if a slap in the face has to come back to him; he has to feel the same pain. The only difference is that the initiate experiences this in the physical body, and other people after death.

The dangers of initiate are like those suffered by the people who went to California by wagon trains in the nineteenth century. One had to deal with powerful forces to survive the trip. And pain and sorrow were

one's daily companions along the way. There are today no jet airliners on which one can book a flight to the spiritual world.

[page 33] The description of dangers was aimed at strengthening a person against powerful forces. The dangers are there; pain and sorrow are the prospect. It would be a poor sort of effort if we proposed to rise into higher worlds in the most convenient way. Striving to reach the spiritual worlds cannot yet be as convenient as rolling over the miles in a modern train, one of those many conveniences our materialistic culture has put into our everyday lives.

Reading the words in a book is like ordering items from the menu of a fine restaurant — you will obtain no nourishment from what you order unless you consume it when it arrives and make it a part of you. It is not the words in the book that are important, but rather the effect they have upon you in the process of reading and studying them.

[page 34] When I gave you some indications about the Gospel of St. Matthew, I asked you not to try to remember the very words but to try — when you go out into life — to look into your heart and soul to discover what the words have *become*. Read not only the printed lectures, but read also in a truly earnest way your own soul.

In Lecture II on the first of his four mystery dramas, “The Portal of Initiation”, Steiner points to its germination in 1889, twenty-one years before the date of this lecture. Seven years is the period of time when all the cells in the human body are replaced. Seven years is the elapsed time between each major stage in the life of the human being: birth to teeth change, then to puberty, then to adulthood, etc. Three of these seven year periods or twenty-one years marks the time from the conception of an idea or concept into its full fruition, when we come to a place where we can speak about it. What concepts or ideas in your life, dear Reader, are in full fruit which you planted twenty-one years ago and can only speak about today? Can you notice how these planted seeds moved through each of the seven year stages of descent, return, and growth to a new level?

[page 37, 38] If I may, I would like to touch on the long, slow spiritual path that led to this Mystery Drama. When I think about it and look at it, its origins go back to the year 1889, twenty-one years ago; it is not approximately but exactly twenty-one years that bring me back to the germinal point of this drama. In these matters absolute exactness can be observed. The direction has been quite clear to me in which, in 3 x 7 years, these seeds have grown (without any special assistance, I can say, on my part), for they have led their own individual life in these 3 x 7 years. It is truly remarkable to follow the path of such seeds to what may be called their finished form. Their progress can be described as a passage through the Underworld. It takes seven years for them to descend; then they return, and for this they need seven more years.

By then, having reached more or less the place where they first engaged a person before their descent, they must go in the opposite direction for seven years toward the other side; one could even say, onto a higher level. After twice seven years, then, plus seven more years, it is possible to try to embody them, foreseeing that whatever has been right in their development can take on a distinct form. If I were not convinced that within the Rosicrucian Mystery an individual organism has lived and grown for 3 x 7 years, I would not venture to speak further about it. I feel not only justified in speaking, however, though this is not really the question, but also in a sense obligated to speak about what lives in this Rosicrucian Mystery, not only between the lines, between the characters, in the What and the How, but what is alive in everything in the drama and what *must* be alive in it.

In his landmark book, [Knowledge of the Higher Worlds](#), Steiner strove to help individuals find their way to the spiritual world. Due to the general scope of his aim, he admits that the book has an abstract, even

slightly theoretical character. But he emphasizes that there is no such thing as human development in general — the only human development is that of the individual. To talk in general about esoteric or spiritual development is to talk in a way that will not match anyone's individual development.

[page 39] Should one actually describe the path of development as seen in the spiritual world, one can do it only by shaping the development of a single human being, by altering for the individual whatever is universally true. The book, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, contains, to a certain extent, the beginning of the secrets of all human development. The Rosicrucian Mystery contains the secrets of the development of a single individual, Johannes Thomasius.

The path of the one may mirror the path of the many, and the path of the many descends down to the path of the one. Steiner recognizes that *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* as the "path of the many" is the polar opposite of *The Portal of Initiation* which describes the "path of the one." With *The Portal of Initiation*, Steiner entered the realm of art where the laws are the reverse of those in the more theoretical realm of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*. The artistic laws cannot be manipulated by ordinary human consciousness, he says, or else "only dry-as-dust allegories" would result.

[page 40] Artistic laws must be handled just as Mother Nature handles her own laws when she lets a child, a plant, or an animal come into existence. If everything we can know about the world of nature is to be seen from the one direction that reveals its laws and secrets to the beholder, then whatever is to be revealed in art — any kind of art — must be seen from the other side, from just the opposite point of view. Therefore, it would be the worst imaginable interpretation of a work of art to start from ideas, concepts, or laws we have picked up somewhere, when we approach, say, a poem. Whoever thinks of explaining a work of art by means of abstract or symbolic ideas cannot be considered artistic.

Steiner says that Johannes Thomasius is just one human being just as you and I are one human being and that in *The Portal of Initiation* nothing is portrayed but the mystery of development of that one man.

[page 41] If one speaks in too general a way about the various characters, one thing will be missing, which is hinted at in the words of the drama itself: [RJM Note: See Benedictus's words on page 47 for the context in which these words appear in *The Portal of Initiation*.]

*There forms itself out of this circle
a knot out of the threads
which karma spins in world becoming.*

As I read from page 41 on, Steiner's words formed themselves in me into a series of stanzas which I would like to share with you along with the words which inspired them when appropriate. The first stanza was obviously inspired by the above quotation from *The Portal of Initiation*.

I.
Karma spins in world becoming
How our lives in one life lives.
How we live and have our being
In this one life that we live.

~^^~

[page 41] The world in which karma spins its knots was quite different in 5000 B.C., for instance, from the world in 300 B.C. or in 1000 A.D. or today.

II.

Spinning knots from out of threads
Forming lives from living circles
Weaving one life where it leads
To where this karma lives in us.

~^~

[page 42] In the ordinary world outside there are trivial waves touching the shore; in the small circle great waves are surging high. They show their turbulence, however, only within the soul of Johannes. That is why we are introduced first to the physical plane, and it is shown to us in such a way that the threads, which karma is spinning everywhere within this physical plane, are pointed out.

III.

On the shore the waves are lapping
In my soul a tidal surging
Overwhelms me from within
Tossing threads of karma flying.

~^~

[page 43] The extraordinary scene of the seeress Theodora had to be brought into this setting of our ordinary world. She, as one who sometimes looks into the future, now foresees the event that is to happen before the end of the twentieth century, the coming Christ event. It is a future event that can be explained karmically, although it would be wrong to interpret other events so precisely.

IV.

All my threads become as glimmer
Beings — each one quite unique —
Theodora as a seeress seeing
Reveals to us what humans seek.

~^~

[page 43] While so much is being spoken about on the physical plane, a light begins to radiate in Johannes' soul, a light that arouses terrible waves within him. At the same time, however, this light kindles his esoteric development; as a distinctly individual development it will cross his own karma with world karma. We see, therefore, what a strong impression the happenings around him on the physical plane are making on him and how the unconscious greatness in his soul is striving upward to higher worlds.

V.

With so much light upon the shore
A light pours out from in my soul
Kindling my own karma as it crosses
With the karma of the world.

~^~

[page 43, 44] The journey into higher worlds, however, should not take place without a compass; there must be guidance and direction. Into the midst, then, of these many relationships comes the one who is described as the leader of the group. He is also the one who understands the cosmic relationships and discerns therefore "the knots that karma spins in world, becoming"; it is Benedictus, and he becomes Johannes' guide. The karma working in Johannes Thomasius, which perhaps otherwise would have to work another thousand or even thousands of years, is kindled and set ablaze in one particular

moment through a karmic relationship between Benedictus and Johannes, lightly drawn in the Meditation Room scene (Scene Three). There we find ourselves at the point where a human being, destined by karma to develop himself, begins to strive upward into higher worlds. In order not to do so blindly, he will be led by Benedictus in the right direction.

VI.

With the wings of love I journey
On my way to higher worlds,
With the morning star to lead me
With the blazoned flag unfurled.

~^~

**[page 47, from drama text] For spirit eyes, which should awake
in human souls, can only be evolved
when first a god has laid the seed
within a human being.
The task was now assigned to me
to find that human being
who might be worthy to accept within his
soul
the seed-force of the god.
I had to link a deed of heaven
unto a human destiny.**

VII.

My spirit eyes which should awake
Spirit lay as seed within me
And I this deed of heaven take
As my awaited destiny.

~^~

**[page 62, drama text] And messengers of spirit join
light's weaving essence
with revelation of the soul.
And when with both the human being
can join his own true self,
he is alive in spirit heights.**

Steiner tells us a story of a poor boy who owned nothing but a clever cat. This cat convinced the King that her master possessed so huge an estate that King decided to inspect it. Everything the King saw during his visit the cat claimed belonged to her master, even the magnificent castle which actually belonged to a Giant Troll. While the King inspected the castle, the cat stretched out on the entrance of the castle to await the Giant's return which came shortly before dawn. The cat kept the Giant's interest with long tales until the Sun rose and then told the Giant to turn and look at the Golden Maid of the East, and when the Giant did so, he burst into pieces and her master, the poor boy, became owner of the vast estate of the Giant.

[page 84] Everything the human being has acquired through his senses, whatever he now possesses of the outer world through the intelligence limited to the brain, is absolute poverty in comparison to the whole cosmic world and to what man experienced in the ancient Saturn, Sun, and Moon epochs. All of us are basically "poor boys," possessing only our intelligence, something that can exert itself a little in order to promise us some imaginary property. In short, our modern situation is like the boy with the clever cat.

[page 85, 86] A rough faith in the divine worlds was possible in earlier times because of man's more primitive constitution, which gave him a certain kind of clairvoyance. But in the face of reality today, this kind of faith has to burst into pieces just as the Giant Troll did. Only through clever cat questions and cat tales, spun about everyday reality, can we hold him back. Certainly we can spin those endless tales of the clever cat to show how here and there external reality is forced toward a spiritual explanation.

VIII.

A clever cat with crass eclat
Spins endless tales of everyday
And out the dross of nighttime's hat
Extracts the truth of spirit's way.

^^~

[page 66] Now, I should have to talk for weeks if I wished to explain how it is with that figure of the higher powers shown as the initiate of the powers of will; he has met Johannes Thomasius on the physical plane, and there he really seems to be an ordinary, superficial fellow. In such a case the question can arise: are the primal forces of will supposed to work through such a person? Yes, they are. We can perhaps understand that the force manifesting the powers of will can permeate just this kind of less developed human being in the same way as the radiance of wisdom enters a man like Benedictus. We must grasp the following. If we have a beautiful flower in full bloom and place a seed beside it, it may be that the seed when developed will bring forth a still more beautiful flower. The flower can at this moment be considered quite perfect, but, according to cosmic reality, the seed is actually something more perfect. Hence, we have these opposites: Benedictus, the eminent bearer of wisdom, and the man [Romanus] who on the physical plane behaves in such a strange way toward everything said about the spiritual worlds and in such a strange way rejects it all. When in a group of people he hears talk about the spiritual worlds, he says, as if he were unwilling to listen:

*I cannot find the bridge
that leads across
from mere ideas to actual deeds.
(Romanus, Scene One)*

IX.

To find that bridge that leads
Along the spirit's hidden way
From human thoughts to living deeds
From nighttime dreams to light of day.

^^~

[page 89] But within us there is a genuine King, which is a strong and effective part of our human nature; he would never let himself be prevented from carrying something into our world of ordinary reality out of that world in which the soul has its roots. What is thus carried into our everyday world is the projection or reflection of experience; it is the world of phantasy, a real phantasy, not the fantastic, which simply throws together a few of the rags and tatters of life, but it is true phantasy, which lives deep in the soul and which can be urged out of there into every phase of creating.

X.

In us abides at night a King
Giving into the day our soul
All that its roots are creating

In life's phantasmagoric mold.

~^~

The first stories I heard as a child were fairy tales, most of them by the Brothers Grimm. One might think from experiences like mine, that fairy tales are only for children, but the experience of Professor Capesius when he visits Felix Balde demonstrates that they are also for adults. Capesius grows sleepy as he listens to Felix drone on about spiritual realities, but as soon as his wife, Felicia Balde, arrives and begins telling a fairy tale, Capesius perks up and his interest is heightened. He doesn't understand much of the meaning of the tale or its connection with what Felix had explained to him earlier, but curiously, on the next occasion he has to listen to Felix, he finds that he is able to understand the explanations much better than before. The fairy tale of Felicia had done some magic to deepen his ability to understand what Felix had to tell him.

[page 92, 93] For Capesius, fairy tales stimulate imaginative knowledge. What works and weaves from them into his soul is not their content, not their plot, but rather how they take their course, how one motif moves into the next. A motif may induce certain powers of soul to strive upward, a second motif persuades other powers to venture downward, still others will induce the soul forces to mingle and intertwine upward and downward. It is through this that Capesius' soul comes into active movement; out of his soul will then emerge what enables him finally to see into the spiritual world. For many people a fairy tale can be more stimulating than anything else. We will find in those that originated in earlier times motifs that show elements of ancient clairvoyance. The first tales did not begin by someone thinking them out; only the theories of modern professors of folklore explaining fairy tales begin like that. Fairy tales are never thought out; they are the final remains of ancient clairvoyance, experienced in dreams by human beings who still had that power. What was seen in a dream was told as a story -- for instance, "Puss in Boots," one version of which I have just related. All the fairy tales in existence are thus the last remnants of that original clairvoyance. For this reason a genuine fairy tale can be created only when — consciously or unconsciously — an imagination is present in the soul of the teller, an imagination that projects itself into the soul. Otherwise, it is not a true fairy tale.

In my review of Steiner's [Genius of Language](#), I asked and answered the question, "Why does poetry use rhyming of words?" It is the little boy or girl inside of each of us which is attracted to the rhymes. When we were that little boy or girl below five years old, we lived in the same developmental stage when ancient clairvoyance prevailed in all of humankind. It is through poetry that we are able to reconnect with that ancient clairvoyance today.

[page 93, 94] Nothing put into poetic form can actually ever be grounded in truth unless it turns essentially to such a longing — a longing that has to be satisfied and that longs for the ancient clairvoyant penetration into the world, or unless it can use anew, genuine clairvoyance that does not need to reveal itself completely but can flash up in the hidden depths of the soul, casting only a many-hued shadow. This relationship still exists. How many people today still feel the necessity of rhyme? Where there is rhyme, how many people feel how necessary it is? Today there is that dreadful method of reciting poetry that suppresses the rhyme as far as possible and emphasizes the meaning, that is, whatever accords with external reality. But this element of poetry — rhyme — belongs to the stage of the development of language that existed at the time when the aftereffects of the ancient clairvoyance still prevailed.

It was only during the fourth post-Atlantean or Greco-Roman cultural epoch (747 B. C. to 1413 A.D.) "when in poetry the memory dawned of earlier times that reached back into the ancient imaginative world."

[page 94] This dawning memory found its expression in the regular formation of the end-rhyme for what was lighting up in the intellectual or feeling soul; it was cultivated primarily by what developed in the fourth post-Atlantean epoch.

There is a genius in language which escapes the most learned professors of language today because they have lost the ability of imaginative perception. They are relegated to the dry, dusty realm of abstract analysis which tears to pieces the language which it purports to study, much as the modern pathologist dissects a dead corpse in the faint hopes of describing how a living human being operates.

[page 99] Man will not become aware of the secrets of language until it is led back to its origin, led back, in fact, to imaginative perception. Language actually originated in the time when man was not yet a "poor boy" but also when man had not yet a clever cat. In a way, he still lived attached to the Giant, imagination, and out of the Giant's limbs he was aware of the audible imagination imbuing each sound. When a tone is laid hold of by the imagination, then the sound originates, the actual sound of speech.

These three lectures contain vital insights into Steiner's mystery dramas, insights which can provide a way to know all about them before one begins to read and study them in earnest. Steiner as author plays the role of Maria, Benedictus, Prof. Capesius, Felix Balde, and Felicia Balde, among others to us as we read and participate with Johannes Thomasius as he evolves as a human being. We can have no better company on our journey.

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