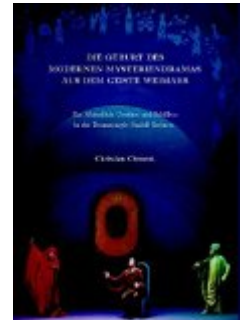


Christian Clement. *Die Geburt des modernen Mysteriendramas aus dem Geiste Weimars: Zur Aktualität Goethes und Schillers in der Dramaturgie Rudolf Steiners.* Berlin: Logos, 2007. 270 pp. Appendix, bibliography ISBN 978-3-8325-1645-1.



Reviewed by Andrew Bonnell

Published on H-German (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Outside Germany, Rudolf Steiner is remembered today mostly as an educational reformer, with Waldorf schools around the world drawing inspiration from his ideas. Some bakeries also make bread on the principles of "bio-dynamic" farming developed by Steiner a century ago. In the context of the *Lebensreform* movements of pre-1914 Imperial Germany, Steiner was a many-sided and almost ubiquitous figure. In addition to his writings on education and agriculture, he took part in debates about modern literature (editing the *Magazin für Literatur* in the 1890s), philosophy, science, religion, mysticism, and spiritualism. He also took an active interest in architecture, sculpture, and other arts, and was the inspiration behind the eurhythmics movement, an influence on the development of expressive modern dance. He became involved, for a while, with the Social Democratic Workers' Educational School in Berlin and gave lectures for Berlin's Freie Volksbühne. He also led the German Section of the Theosophical Society from its foundation in 1902, and then broke away from it to found the Anthroposophical

Society in 1912-13. Steiner was an extraordinarily prolific writer. His collected works fill some 350 volumes, even if 300 of these consist of posthumously published lectures and other material not originally published by the author himself. On the one hand, then, anyone working on the cultural and intellectual history of Wilhelmine Germany will have encountered Steiner, perhaps in a number of different fields of endeavor, but, on the other, few specialists outside the circles of practicing anthroposophists will know his work well. Christian Clement's work may change that, at least for literature scholars, if not for historians.

Between 1910 and 1913, Steiner wrote and directed four "mystery plays": *Die Pforte der Einweihung*, *Die Prüfung der Seele*, *Der Hüter der Schwelle*, and *Der Seelen Erwachen*. These dramas coincide with the formative period of anthroposophy, with Steiner distancing himself from the occultism and emphasis on Asian religious thought of Helena Blavatsky's disciples, and basing his own movement more on principles derived from

western philosophy, with the predominant intellectual inspiration for Steiner coming from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (whose scientific writings Steiner had edited when still a young student). These plays form the subject of Clement's study, although only the first of the four dramas is analyzed in detail.

Two-thirds of Clement's study is devoted to laying the groundwork for an understanding of Steiner's mystery plays, and in particular of the extent to which they exemplify the importance of Goethe's thought to Steiner. Clement's first chapter traces the development of Steiner's philosophical thought (drawing to some extent, inevitably, on the work of the late Steiner scholar, Christoph Lindenberg); from being a devoted student of Goethe's works, to his radical-individualist, even anarchistic phase, and then his evolution towards theosophy and anthroposophy. Goethe remained a key influence on Steiner throughout this evolution, and he also integrated Schiller's thought on the aesthetic dimension of the education of the self towards greater freedom into his intellectual borrowing from Weimar classicism. Clement argues persuasively that Goethe's "Märchen" (1795), as understood by Steiner, was a key text for the evolution of anthroposophical thought. Clement also traces the elements synthesized from Goethe and Friedrich Schiller in Steiner's thinking about aesthetics in general and the theory of drama more particularly.

Clement presents Steiner's mystery plays as exercises in the aesthetic enactment of the process of human self-knowledge. For Steiner, the plays were not intended as simple allegorical representations of his ideas (although they do clearly carry plenty of allegorical freight): every aspect of the drama should allow the audience to participate in the experience of what it meant to share insights into their humanity. Some of Steiner's thoughts on the drama will strike many readers as somewhat arcane: for example, his theory of an original universal language, from which each

vowel still derived its own innate spiritual meaning (there is a suggestion of influence from Goethe's hypothesis of an *Urpflanze* in Steiner's idea of an *Ursprache*), and Steiner's thoughts on costume and stage scenery--the visual aspects of the drama--borrowed explicitly from Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (1810). Much in *Die Pforte der Einweihung* is derived directly from Goethe's "Märchen."

Within the compass of his thesis, which clearly takes the approach of literature scholarship, Clement provides a well-worked out account of how Steiner's writings on and for the theater showed how formative the influence of Goethe (and to some extent Schiller) was on the founder of anthroposophy. Some readers may wonder how great a claim Steiner's plays have on the attention of a lay audience--Clement concedes that they were and are performed almost exclusively for gatherings of the Anthroposophical Society. And some historians might ask for more historical contextualization of the analysis of Steiner's ideas. But Clement has made a contribution to elucidating the intellectual development of one of the more intriguing (if often esoteric) thinkers of the Wilhelmine period, and his work is also a case study in the long history of Goethe reception in Germany.

/

are

re

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Andrew Bonnell. Review of Clement, Christian. *Die Geburt des modernen Mysteriendramas aus dem Geiste Weimars: Zur Aktualität Goethes und Schillers in der Dramaturgie Rudolf Steiners*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23127>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.