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Steiner and the Theosophical Current

Egil Asprem

This sixth volume of Christian Clement's impressive series of critical editions of Rudolf Steiner's writings provides a lens onto some of the most controversial questions in Steiner research: How much of a break is there between Steiner the philosopher and Steiner the occultist? To what extent did Theosophy influence and shape Steiner's trajectory, as he sought to define his own anthroposophical school? What are we to make of the mix of concepts from German idealism, Theosophy, the works of Goethe, and the Christian theological canon that are all evident in Steiner's work, even in his most esoteric texts?¹

These questions have become particularly controversial due to the attempt of different interest groups to provide a "pure" picture of Steiner, one that is comprehensible in light of some prototype like "the philosopher", "the occultist", or "the spiritual teacher". From apologists and sceptics of Anthroposophy, to philosophers, theologians, and historians, diverging agendas have sought to make Steiner a "good guy" or a "bad guy" relative to their own respective narratives. Thus, the presence of theosophical conceptual structures in Steiner's later work has been cast as a threat to some anthroposophists, who need an original yet respectable thinker as the founder of their movement. Anthroposophists have, for this reason, tended to emphasize the continuity with earlier philosophical and religious traditions, while sceptics make the most of the link with occultism and Steiner's failure at securing stable employment in

¹ These questions have been brought to the fore once more in critical responses to the previous volumes of SKA. For representative summaries of the issues (and different takes on them), see the two lengthy review essays recently published in *Correspondences*: Peter Staudenmaier, "The Higher Worlds meet the Lower Criticism: New Scholarship on Rudolf Steiner," *Correspondences* 3, pp. 93-110; David W. Wood, "Exoteric & Esoteric: Methodological Reflections on Vol. 7 of the Rudolf Steiner Critical Edition," *Correspondences* 3, pp. 111-126.

academia. This polemical situation has frustrated those scholars whose interests are purely historical, concerned with charting and understanding the ideational world of a remarkably interesting – and quite influential – historical figure.

The only way of getting to the bottom of these questions is to consider Steiner's "transitional" period in detail – that is, the years between roughly 1901, when his involvement with Theosophy deepened, and 1912, when he eventually broke ties with international Theosophical Society and its leader, Annie Besant, and formed his own Anthroposophical Society – taking most of the German theosophists with him. Steiner entered this long decade as a freelance journalist, lecturer, and independent scholar, unsuccessfully in search of academic employment, and emerged from it as a full-blown "occult teacher" in control of a large organization of esoteric seekers. In social and professional terms, this was a marked transition. But the period also represented a notable shift in terms of the material that Steiner wrote, where he published it, and to whom it was directed.

While Steiner's foray into the esoteric world had begun already with the books on mysticism in 1901 and 1902 (available in volume 5 of the SKA), it is the texts of the present volume that offer the master key to Steiner's occult transformation. In fact, this important volume documents not one, but *two* transitions in Steiner's career. *Theosophie* is Steiner's own exposition of theosophical doctrine, documenting his embrace of occultism and Theosophy as he understood it in 1904. *Anthroposophie* (1910) documents a second shift, albeit a gradual one, in the development of an independent doctrine of Anthroposophy. Precisely because these works were developed in the context of a deep and somewhat tense engagement with theosophical milieus and ideas, these two texts allow us to locate Steiner within the history of modern Western esotericism – especially the Theosophical current – and to assess the originality of his ideas as well as his borrowings, overlaps, and disagreements with other figures of the era. My job as a historian of esotericism is to provide some of this broader context.

Steiner in the History of (Post-)Theosophy

From the perspective of the history of occultism, the late Steiner is a post-theosophical author.² On this perspective, Steiner stands in the company of other such figures internationally; authors who were influenced by Theosophy during its expansive second generation (ca. 1891–1930s)³ only to break away from its main institutions and form new syntheses of ideas, practices, and organizations stamped with their own creativity.⁴ Examples of such authors include Nicholas (1874–1947) and Helena Roerich (1879–1955) in Russia and the Baltic, a host of authors in the United States, notably Alice Bailey (1880–1949; founder of the Arcane School and the Lucis Trust), Guy W. Ballard (1878–1939) and Edna Anne Wheeler (1886–1971; founders of the I AM Activity), and Edgar Cayce (1877–1945; the “Sleeping Prophet”). Arguably, one might also include “perennialist” or “traditionalist” authors in Continental and Central Europe, notably René Guénon (1886–1951),⁵ and the reluctant messiah of second-generation Theosophy, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) – who went on to become an independent spiritual teacher operating out of Ojai, California, influencing the burgeoning New Age movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite all their obvious differences, these figures all wrote in an environment where second-generation Theosophy was something one had to respond to as an occultist (or writer on “spirituality”), and from a position of acquaintance (if not agreement) with key works by Blavatsky, Sinnett, Besant, Leadbeater and the rest. Thus, “post-theosophical” is a historical categorization that says something about chronology and influence; not

² See for example Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer, “Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy,” in Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 113-134.

³ See Catherine Wessinger, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” in Hammer and Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013).

⁴ For a survey of post-Theosophy, see especially Hammer and Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*.

⁵ Guénon’s explicit view of Theosophy was markedly negative; however, his own system is unthinkable without Blavatsky. On the complicated relationship between Theosophy and Traditionalism, see especially Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

necessarily a term of identification that these authors would themselves agree to, nor does it imply a fixed set of beliefs that each member necessarily hold.

Post-theosophical authors show variable degrees of involvement with Theosophy on an organizational level – and vast differences in their willingness to acknowledge a theosophical influence. For example, Steiner, Bailey, and the Roerichs were all directly involved with the institutions of the Adyar Theosophical society, while Edgar Cayce never seems to have been tied to a Theosophical organization and, despite the obvious theosophical flair of his “clairvoyant revelations” about Atlantis, reincarnation, karma and related topics, denied borrowing from any former source whatsoever.⁶ To the scholar of occultism, the issue of how a certain author fashioned his or her relation to Theosophy is primarily evidence of how historical actors draw boundaries and position themselves in a discourse where claims to knowledge, authenticity, and spiritual authority are contested.⁷ Rejecting a theosophical influence, or explicitly attacking self-defined theosophists as “shallow”, or even as agents of modern “counter-initiation” (as in the case of Guénon), does not necessarily exclude an author from post-Theosophy. Instead it is a clear sign of the continued influence of Theosophy in their intellectual environment. Neither does it matter that the author draws on other sources as well, or contributes novel elements. Indeed, the mixing together of different elements circulating in occult milieus,⁸ coupled with an often quite convenient “source amnesia”,⁹ are central to the dynamics of doctrinal innovation in occultism. This was, of course, already the case with Blavatsky, who borrowed extensively from extant scientific, occult,

⁶ See e.g. Shannon Trosper Schorey, “Sleeping Prophet: The Life and Legacy of Edgar Cayce,” in Hammer and Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), 142-145.

⁷ On this, see especially Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 27-46.

⁸ In a sociological sense, this is a key characteristic of what Colin Campbell has called the “cultic milieu”, which is now generally recognized as the sort of cultural underground in which modern esoteric ideas are produced and disseminated. See Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularisation,” *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972), pp. 119-136. For a newer appreciation of this theory, see Christopher Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary,” in Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), pp. 113-133.

⁹ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 180-181.

and philosophical sources (sometimes reproducing text verbatim) while presenting the final result as “ageless wisdom”, or the authoritative words of hidden masters.¹⁰

In general terms, a mode of innovation driven by availability, situational relevance, and individual creativity means that regional variations on similar themes typically emerge in occultism due to local differences in circulating material and diverging emphases shaped by different political and social contexts.¹¹ Thus, American post-Theosophical authors tend to draw heavily from the so-called “new thought” movement and Christian Science, with their near-solipsistic emphasis on “mind-creates-reality” idealism,¹² whereas the Roerichs’s “Agni Yoga” movement, born from a context of Russian imperialism and revolution, displays much more of a geopolitical emphasis and a fascination for Central-Asian traditions.¹³ Steiner, on his part, shows a special interest for “Teutonic” mysticism and the German philosophical canon, as well as a growing nationalist emphasis in the wake of the Great War.¹⁴ All of this is to say that “post-Theosophy” is a broad set of currents, each with its local flavour and specific emphasis. When we locate Steiner within this broader historical trend of a fractioning and diversifying theosophical current, we are interested in how he innovated on theosophical elements and how these innovations are related both to Steiner’s own intellectual and biographical trajectory and to broader contextual concerns relevant to the social, cultural, and political context in which

¹⁰ On Blavatsky’s sources in *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, see now Tim Rudbøg, *H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy in Context: The Construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism* (PhD dissertation, University of Exeter, 2012).

¹¹ For a demonstration of this point on a global scale, see Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, *Occultism in a Globale Perspective* (Durham: Acumen, 2013); cf. also Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism”, *Correspondences* 3, pp. 55-91.

¹² See especially Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹³ See e.g. Markus Osterrieder, “From Synarchy to Shambhala: The Role of Political Occultism and Social Messianism in the Activities of Nicholas Roerich,” in Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemester, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (eds.), *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions* (Munich: Kubon & Sager, 2011), pp. 101-134.

¹⁴ For my take on this, see Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 501-513.

he was writing. This core scholarly interest has to some extent been lost in the polemical squabbles over continuity and discontinuity between Steiner's "philosophical" and "occultist" period. Clearly there is both; the real issue is how his particular trajectory helps explain the profusion of novel occult ideas scattered across his post-theosophical writings.

Post-Theosophical Elements: Comparative Remarks

A comparative approach may therefore be helpful. While all post-theosophical authors appear to have an interest in topics such as karma, reincarnation, clairvoyance, and subtle bodies, we can also discern some interesting differences in emphasis. Perhaps the most notable is that, while authors such as Bailey, the Roerichs, and Ballard and Wheeler put an enormous emphasis on the notion of "Ascended Masters" as a source of higher knowledge, and had a strong eschatological focus on a coming "New Age" (especially visible in Bailey, as a grandmother of the New Age movement, and taken to an apocalyptic extreme in Mark and Elizabeth Clare Prophet's post-Theosophical Summit Lighthouse movement, which gave birth to the apocalyptic Church Universal and Triumphant in 1975¹⁵), Steiner was not particularly interested in either of these concepts. Instead, as the subtitle of the present volume suggests, Steiner's innovations on theosophical doctrine was primarily connected to its *anthropology* – that is to say, its teachings on the constitution of human beings and the hidden potentials that are implied by such occult physiologies. Connected to this emphasis is another important contrast: While most post-theosophical authors tend to wax abstract and at length about cosmological cycles and metaphysical systems, much of Steiner's theosophically-inspired writings focus on esoteric *epistemology* – that is to say, on how one can achieve "knowledge of the higher worlds" rather than on what these higher worlds look like and how they came to be.

¹⁵ See e.g. Michael Abravanel, "The Summit Lighthouse: Its Worldview and Theosophical Heritage," in Hammer and Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013).

This is of course not meant as an absolute distinction, since there is much pontification of abstract doctrine in Steiner as well.¹⁶ However, if we look at the composition of Steiner's short introduction to Theosophy, an emphasis on esoteric anthropology and epistemology and a relative lack of interest in grand cosmological theories is evident. The book starts by striking an epistemological chord in the introduction, delves into the subtle composition of the human being in chapter one, continues through the cycles of birth, life, death and reincarnation, goes on to discuss cosmological distinctions of separate "worlds" only in connection with the development of the body, soul, and spirit (thus still rooted in "anthropology" rather than "cosmology" proper), before ending with a chapter on "the path of knowledge". Thus, *Theosophie* points the way to Steiner's perhaps most influential instructional text, *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?*, which can be found in SKA's volume 7, rather than to the particular "findings" about life on Atlantis or the cosmic-anthropogenic processes that Steiner himself wrote about in works such as *Aus der Akasha-Chronik* or *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*.

Having made this remark, we should ask how Steiner's thoughts on these anthropological and epistemological issues relate to broader developments in the history of occultism. While Clement has much more to say about this in his substantial and thorough introduction, I will nevertheless take the opportunity here to reflect on Steiner's role in the historical development of theosophical conceptions of the human body and the attainment of "higher knowledge".

Subtle bodies and knowledge of other worlds: Two contributions to the history of modern esotericism

Theosophy has made a deep impact on the anthropological and epistemological assumptions of "alternative" spiritual movements up to the present day. Central to these broadly shared assumptions are the notions of "subtle bodies" and of "clairvoyance", both of which underwent significant revision and standardization

¹⁶ See for example the extensive cosmogonies, anthropogonies, and esoteric historiographies in other works from this period, such as *Aus der Akasha-Chronik* and *Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss*, which stand as counterpoints to Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* and are published in volume 8 of the SKA series.

in the works of second-generation theosophists, notably Besant and Leadbeater. These are also two key areas where Steiner pitched in with some original contributions that have had a continued influence beyond the anthroposophical movement *stricto sensu*.

Theosophical teachings on subtle bodies gradually came into shape over the movement's first three decades.¹⁷ Starting with Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877), they were originally rooted in Neoplatonic models operating with a threepartite anthropology; the physical body contained a mediating "sidereal", "astral", or "etheric" body (all of which are synonyms, in this context), which enveloped the divine soul, or *augoeides*. Variations on this theme is found in late-classical authors such as Proclus, Iamblichus, Plotinus, and Porphyry, and provided the basic framework for early theosophical conceptualizations. However, the number of bodies would increase as Theosophical authors started exploring Indian sources. The first clear example is found in an 1881 article in *The Theosophist*, where A. O. Hume (1821–1912) reveals knowledge purportedly stemming from the "master" Koot Hoomi, operating with a sevenfold system of subtle bodies.¹⁸ This template was elaborated further by Alfred Sinnett (1840–1921), in his influential book, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883). On the version popularised by Sinnett, the physical body consists of two parts, the *rupa*, or material body, and the *prana* or *jiva* body, which mediates vital force to living things. These are joined by a series of subtler bodies: The astral (*linga sharira*), *kama*, *manas*, and *buddhi* bodies, crowned by the *atma*, or pure spirit body.¹⁹ This arrangement was canonised in Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* (1888).

However, a conceptual as well as a terminological switch took place soon after Blavatsky's death, at the hands of Annie Besant. In a serialized article entitled "Man and His Bodies", first published in the journal *Lucifer* from February 1896 and appearing as a book later that year, Besant set out to simplify and streamline the language for the seven subtle bodies – and to emphasize what

¹⁷ See Asprem, "Pondering Imponderables: Occultism in the Mirror of Late Classical Physics," *Aries* 11.2 (2011): 129-165.

¹⁸ For an analysis, see Julie Hall, "The Septaparña: The Meaning and Origins of the Theosophical Septenary Constitution of Man," *Theosophical History* 13.4 (2007), 5-38.

¹⁹ See Sinnett, *Esoteric Buddhism* (Boston & New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1893), 60-75.

she considered to be clear connections with the cutting-edge science of the day: ether physics. While she retained the Sanskrit terms of the higher bodies, Besant now made an effort to find English terms for the lower ones, in order to “remove from our elementary literature the stumbling-block to beginners of a Sanskrit terminology”.²⁰ This effort was particularly directed at the two bodies that would presumably be of most direct relevance to new students: the *sthûla sharîra*, now simply the “physical body”, and the *linga sharîra*, now translated as the *etheric double*. The latter switch is important, because it allowed Besant to forge links to the physics of ether and electromagnetism, which operated with quite analogous concepts, like the existence of “imponderable” etheric counterparts to tangible physical objects, responsible for mediating electromagnetic activity.²¹ By proxy it also connected theosophical teachings on subtle bodies with emerging theories in psychical research,²² providing further possibilities for scientific validation – itself a major objective of second-generation Theosophy.²³

As Clement shows in his introduction,²⁴ Steiner’s views on the subtle bodies built on and contributed to this shifty development in the theosophical current. The influence of Besant’s “scientized” schema from 1896 is visible in *Theosophie*; for example, Steiner adopts her talk of the “etheric body” as the name of the “vital body” (previously known as “prana” in Sanskrit terminology) and separated it from the “astral”. However, there are also some notable differences. Although Steiner draws on the theosophical septenary, he still prioritizes the older (Neoplatonic) threepartite distinction of man, which he gives as “body”, “soul”, and “spirit”. The septenary is subsumed to this more basic schema, and only invoked when needed to make finer distinctions within the categories of the physical or the psychical. Eventually, however, Steiner ends up

²⁰ Besant, “Man and His Bodies”, 390.

²¹ Asprem, “Pondering Imponderables,” 136-42, 145-8. For a survey of the centrality of ether to contemporary physics, see Bruce J. Hunt, *The Maxwellians* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

²² See also Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 208-25.

²³ See Asprem, “Theosophical Attitudes towards Science: Past and Present,” in Hammer and Rothstein (eds.), *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 405-428.

²⁴ **Add page numbers.**

with a *fourfold* division in *Anthrophosophie*, the seeds of which are, as Clement observes, visible already in the first edition of *Theosophie*. One of Steiner's contributions to post-theosophical occultism, then, is to standardize teachings on the subtle body into physical, etheric (associated with life force), astral (associated with emotion, feeling, and imagination), and the higher, spiritual "I" (associated, among other things, with abstract reasoning, rational thinking, and spiritual awareness). This partition is much easier to map on to intuitive (and rather Aristotelian) ontological categories (mineral, plant, animal, human) than the Platonic three and Theosophical seven, and it has become central to anthroposophical teachings on a wide range of subjects – including the developmental structure of Waldorf pedagogy (following the presumed development of the four bodies in the growing child), the principles of eurythmic dance (synchronizing the physical and etheric bodies) and even biodynamic farming. Thus, Steiner's writings on this subject also exemplifies the implementation of theosophically-derived subtle body teachings into domains of a practical import.

Comparing Steiner's and Besant's writings on subtle bodies also gives a clue to a much more basic epistemological difference. When Steiner talks about the etheric body that is characteristic of living things (e.g., separating a plant from a crystal), he is careful to note that it has *nothing to do* with "the hypothetical ether" of the physicists. This statement stands in stark contrast to Besant's attempt to equate the two concepts. In fact, it illustrates a marked difference in how Steiner and Besant viewed the sciences, and especially the relation between natural science and "spiritual science". Besant represented an attitude of "open-ended naturalism" characteristic of Anglophone occultism (and psychical research) in this period, which stressed a fundamental unity of science and a strict continuity in the natural world.²⁵ In practice this meant that there is no clear separation between the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual, and that essentially the same methods can be used across the domains. Steiner's outlook, by contrast, reflects the epistemological critiques characteristic of post-Kantian German idealism, which were generally not so well understood or

²⁵ On this concept, see Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 79-80, 299-304, 431-437.

outright rejected in Anglophone academia (and occultism).²⁶ Thus, in a way reminiscent of Swedenborg,²⁷ Steiner writes that man is simultaneously an inhabitant of three separate worlds – the physical, the psychical (soul world), and the spiritual – knowledge of each requires entirely separate methods, even separate “organs” of perception. It is entirely illustrative, then, that in the very first sentence of *Theosophie* Steiner quotes Fichte as his authority on the necessity of developing a new “inner sense tool” in order to perceive a new world.

Conclusion

Comparing the writings collected in this volume to the theosophical writings that Steiner drew upon, on the one hand, and to the writings of other post-theosophical authors, on the other, gives us a better impression of Steiner’s role in the history of modern occultism. It is the role of a populariser, who simplifies and adapts an overly cumbersome and heady system into a practically useful and memorable one, translates it into the vernacular, and implements it in a broad array of practices that have later been taught and spread through the international anthroposophical movement. But it is also the role of a philosopher, who adapts the occultist material to harmonize with a very specific intellectual context. Steiner and the British occultists do not just superficially cite different authorities; when Darwin, Huxley, Tyndall and Spencer are replaced by the likes of Goethe, Fichte, Schopenhauer, and Schiller, something happens with the content as well. Steiner’s anthroposophy, then, is a reworking of theosophical occultism through the lens of German idealist philosophy, just as much as the theosophical sources bear the stamp of Victorian scientific naturalism.²⁸ Steiner’s theosophical works, then, stands as an important *comparandum* for scholars

²⁶ On this tradition, see especially Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1801* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

²⁷ See Hanegraaff, *Swedenborg, Oetinger, Kant: Three Perspectives on the Secrets of Heaven* (Chester, Penn.: The Swedenborg Foundation, 2007).

²⁸ For a more detailed version of this argument, see my comparison of Steiner with another British occultist, Aleister Crowley, in Aspren, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 481-533.

interested in understanding the regional variations and adaptations of modern occultism.

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