

The Higher Worlds meet the Lower Criticism New Scholarship on Rudolf Steiner

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Rudolf Steiner. *Rudolf Steiner: Schriften über Mystik, Mysterienwesen und Religionsgeschichte*. Edited, introduced and commentated by Christian Clement. Vol. 5 of *Rudolf Steiner: Schriften – Kritische Ausgabe*, edited by Christian Clement. Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, 2013. lxxx + 377 pp. ISBN 978-3-7728-2635-1.

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When Rudolf Steiner died in 1925, he was a prominent public figure in Germany. Whether celebrated or castigated – or, more often, puzzled over – Steiner was somebody who called for comment. Obituaries and memorials appeared across the spectrum of the German press, from the *Börsenzeitung*, the Wall Street Journal of the Weimar Republic, to the Socialist newspaper *Vorwärts*, from the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* to the *Frankfurter Zeitung* to the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*. Even the *New York Times* saw fit to mark the passing of “Dr. Rudolf Steiner, Theosophist.”¹

¹ “Dr. Rudolf Steiner, Theosophist, Dies – Leader of Anthroposophical Movement Succumbs in Berne at 65 Years,” *New York Times* (March 31, 1925). Copies of obituaries from the German press can be found in the files of the German Federal Archives: Bundesarchiv Berlin NS5/VI/40345. I would like to thank Christian Clement, Helmut Zander, Egil Asprem,

This degree of public attention at the time of Steiner's death stands in conspicuous contrast to his somewhat obscure origins. Born in 1861 on the periphery of the Habsburg Empire, even his exact date of birth is a point of some contention. By the time he became well-known to a larger audience, Steiner was viewed above all as an esoteric teacher and the founder of the Anthroposophist movement, an attempt to renew and expand the Theosophical tradition in Germany and abroad. The *London Daily Express* captured the typical image of the time, referring to him as "Dr. Rudolf Steiner, the mystic occultist."²

But Steiner's early career followed a different path. After studying at the Technical College in Vienna, he established himself in the 1880s and 1890s not as an occult thinker but as a journalist and editor with literary, scientific, and philosophical interests. The "Dr." in his name referred to a doctorate in philosophy received in 1891. Steiner worked for years at the Goethe archive in Weimar, editing Goethe's texts on the natural sciences. In 1897 he moved to Berlin to edit the *Magazin für Litteratur*. He made several unsuccessful attempts to find an academic position. Shortly after the turn of the century, Steiner found his way to well-heeled Theosophical circles in Berlin, joining the Theosophical Society at the beginning of 1902. Within a few months he was named General Secretary of the German branch of the Theosophical Society, an office he held until breaking away ten years later to found the Anthroposophical Society.³

Steiner's swift transition from independent free-thinker to esoteric leader has never been easy to explain, one of many details about his intellectual development that have proved challenging for scholars studying Theosophy and Anthroposophy. That is one reason why the new critical edition of selected Steiner texts, arranged and edited by Christian Clement, carries so much promise. By offering careful textual comparisons between the various editions

Alicia Hamberg, Michael Eggert, and Ansgar Martins for critical discussion of the issues examined here.

² *London Daily Express*, April 11, 1921. The brief article, filed from Berlin by an unnamed "Daily Express correspondent," claims that "Steiner's followers for the most part belong to the richest and most important families" in Germany. Other contemporary sources observed that Anthroposophy "seems to have attracted its following largely from the cultured middle-classes, young intelligentsia, physicians, students, artists, and officials, those classes most directly affected by the cultural crisis of post-war Europe." Paul Means, *Things that are Caesar's: The Genesis of the German Church Conflict* (New York: Round Table Press, 1935), 112.

³ Thorough biographical information is available in Heiner Ullrich, *Rudolf Steiner: Leben und Lehre* (Munich: Beck, 2011), Miriam Gebhardt, *Rudolf Steiner: Ein moderner Prophet* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2011), and Helmut Zander, *Rudolf Steiner: Die Biografie* (Munich: Piper, 2011).

of Steiner's major published works, Clement's project marks a significant step forward in scholarly engagement with Anthroposophy and its ideological origins. It also highlights the ongoing difficulties inherent in any attempt to bridge the gap between esoteric and academic standpoints.

Clement is a former Waldorf school teacher who left his native Germany for an academic career in the United States. After earning his PhD in German Literature at the University of Utah, he is currently associate professor of German Studies at Brigham Young University. The new Steiner edition arose out of Clement's work creating and maintaining the Rudolf Steiner Online Archive, a German-language website designed to make Steiner's texts accessible to a broader readership. In interviews with Anthroposophist media, Clement – who is not an Anthroposophist himself – has forthrightly discussed his sympathetic approach to Steiner. This places him in a productive but conflicted position on the boundary between esoteric and scholarly discourses, an ambivalence reflected in the editorial project itself.

The series of Steiner texts in the projected eight volumes of the *Rudolf Steiner Kritische Ausgabe* include works from Steiner's pre-1900 philosophical period as well as central titles from his mature Theosophical and Anthroposophical teachings. The two volumes under review here are the first to appear; eventually they will form volumes 5 and 7 of the overall set. Each features a distinct pair of works: volume 5 consists of Steiner's 1901 book *Mysticism at the Dawn of the Modern Age* and its 1902 successor *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, while volume 7 centers on Steiner's seminal esoteric text *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, originally published in 1904, as well as its lesser-known sequel *The Stages of Higher Knowledge* from 1905. The edition as a whole is being published in cooperation between the Rudolf Steiner Verlag, the official Anthroposophist custodian of Steiner's collected works, and the distinguished Frommann-Holzboog publishing house, whose origins date to the early eighteenth century. This fact alone is a sign of the new edition's pioneering character; it indicates both a novel openness in parts of the Anthroposophist leadership, and a willingness within established German philosophical circles to engage with Steiner's works. Clement's ability to bring these two worlds together is no small achievement.

Reactions from within the Anthroposophical milieu have been decidedly mixed. Some Anthroposophists have denounced Clement as the agent of an anti-Steiner conspiracy, while others have praised the project for bringing Steiner's writings to a new generation of readers in a textually reliable format. Scholarly responses, though sparse so far, have been equally equivocal, commending Clement's impressive editorial labors while questioning some of

his interpretive assumptions.⁴ In his role as initiator and coordinator of the project, Clement has been admirably straightforward in dialogues with critics and supporters alike, depicting his efforts as an attempt to respect Steiner's self-conception while making his work more palatable to modern philosophical readers. At times, this involves a desire to vindicate Steiner philosophically.

How well does this approach work? From a historical as well as a philosophical perspective, the results are uneven. The edition itself is handsomely produced and eminently practical. For each selected text, Clement has gone to the trouble of assembling every version published during Steiner's lifetime, clearly marking all textual variations in the manner of a standard critical edition. This makes the volumes extremely useful for any philosophically informed and historically attentive engagement with Steiner's ideas and their development over time. Moreover, Clement has attempted to track down the original source for every passage Steiner quotes from other authors – a formidable task in light of Steiner's frequent failure to identify his sources – as well as passages where Steiner appears to paraphrase earlier publications. This procedure reveals just how much Steiner borrowed from previous authors, often without attribution. It also underscores a contentious question raised in prior research by other scholars: did Steiner plagiarize from existing texts? Was he trying to pass off others' work as his own, or was he careless and hurried, or was he stitching together disparate elements in ways that weren't meant to be deliberately deceptive?

Though it is true that Steiner's practice was not compatible with the scholarly norms of the time, Clement points out that this was not really his aim in the texts in question.⁵ The post-1900 Steiner, in transition to full-fledged occultist, had little incentive to follow academic conventions. His books on mysticism from 1901 and 1902 grew out of invited presentations to Theosophical groups. He did not present those works as scholarly treatises, but saw his role basically as a synthesizer, drawing together a range of sources in order to provide an accessible narrative to his new-found Theosophical audience. Clement shows that the sources Steiner borrowed from were often secondary works offering broad overviews of large philosophical and historical fields.⁶ Steiner's method does not expose him as an inveterate plagiarist; it reveals him as an eager speaker and writer looking to put his stamp on the fin de siècle interest in mysticism.

⁴ Clement has collected more than two dozen reviews of the first two volumes at the website he has created to accompany the project: www.steinerkritischeausgabe.com. The next volume is scheduled to appear in late 2015.

⁵ *Schriften über Mystik*, xxx–xxxii.

⁶ See *Schriften über Mystik*, xxxi, as well as Clement's thorough *Stellenkommentare*, 234–339.

In addition to providing a rich textual basis and thoroughly researched annotations, the new edition includes extensive introductory and contextual material framing Steiner's works. These sections constitute a substantial portion of the edition; Clement's introduction to volume 7, for example, is nearly as long as the entire text of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds* itself. It is here that Clement's own perspective plays a crucial role. His combination of sympathy and critical acumen works relatively well with Steiner's texts from the transitional period just after 1900, when the future esoteric leader was moving toward Theosophy; the two books collected in volume 5 document this shift. But the same volume also includes a number of notable missteps. Perhaps the most striking is Clement's reliance on a set of ostensible transcripts of Steiner's original 1901–02 lectures to Theosophists that formed the basis for *Christianity as Mystical Fact*.⁷ The documents Clement cites are not in fact transcripts of Steiner's original lectures, but ex post facto constructs assembled out of fragmentary notes taken by a Theosophist who was present at the lectures. Though Clement does not mention it, the documents in question were evidently composed several decades after Steiner's death.

The issue at stake here is not merely one of textual integrity – Clement invokes the dubious source in his introduction and commentary, not in the apparatus accompanying Steiner's published text – but one of conceptual and historical accuracy. In the published version of *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, Steiner makes no mention of central Theosophical concepts such as karma and reincarnation. This is not surprising, since Steiner at this stage was still in the process of familiarizing himself with Theosophy's teachings. According to Clement, however, the supposed 'transcripts' refer continually to reincarnation and thus show that Steiner was thoroughly immersed in Theosophical concepts at the time. This claim is unfounded. What the 'transcripts' reveal are the esoteric preoccupations of the Theosophist who compiled the notes; they are not a reliable indication of Steiner's own views in late 1901 and early 1902, which are instead spelled out in book form in *Christianity as Mystical Fact*.

Why does this matter? Clement's ill-considered references to the purported 'transcripts' form part of a larger argument: Like many Anthroposophists, Clement posits a fundamental continuity between Steiner's pre-1900 philosophical works and his post-1900 esoteric teachings. Clement's underlying argument represents a more sophisticated version of a longstanding trope in Anthroposophical discourse, one that presents Steiner as the inheritor and

⁷ *Schriften über Mystik*, xxx, xxxiv, xli–xlii, xliv, xlix–li, lviii–lix, lxiv–lxviii, 288, 296–98, 299–302, 309, 316–18, 329, 332–34, etc.

fulfillment of the legacy of German Idealism. This notion, though often overblown, is not inherently implausible; Steiner's early philosophical works were indeed steeped in the traditions of German Idealism, and a number of classical Idealist thinkers gave serious attention to esoteric themes. Hartmut Traub's monumental 2011 study *Philosophie und Anthroposophie* examines these connections in great detail and offers illuminating insight into the development of Steiner's early thought. Other scholars, such as historian Helmut Zander, have emphasized the discontinuities in Steiner's work before and after the turn of the century.⁸ The continuity thesis faces several significant obstacles. Aside from the strikingly divergent character of Steiner's works from different points in his life, his published comments on Theosophy during the 1890s – the decade immediately before his embrace of Theosophical precepts – were unremittingly negative.⁹

Nonetheless, the ongoing scholarly debates over Steiner's intellectual development address a challenging question that does not accommodate easy answers but calls for sustained and careful interdisciplinary analysis. Proponents of the continuity thesis will eventually have to confront the pronounced discrepancies between Steiner's early philosophical writings and his later esoteric teachings. Those discrepancies are essential to understanding the formation of Steiner's ideas and the changes in his worldview over time. Attempts to discount or downplay the differences between the earlier and later Steiner, in the hope of harmonizing those differences into one putatively integrated whole, fail to reflect the complexity of his thought. They do not do justice either to Steiner's early philosophical project or to his later esoteric cosmology, and consequently misjudge the relationship between the two. Clement's edition makes it possible for readers to put together a detailed chronological account of these shifts and changes across Steiner's works, even if some of Clement's own conclusions are open to question.

⁸ Hartmut Traub, *Philosophie und Anthroposophie: Die philosophische Weltanschauung Rudolf Steiners – Grundlegung und Kritik* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2011); Helmut Zander, *Anthroposophie in Deutschland: Theosophische Weltanschauung und gesellschaftliche Praxis 1884–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007). Ulrich Linse offers an original interpretation which departs from both Traub's and Zander's perspectives; cf. Linse, "Libertäre und theosophische Strömungen," in *Handbuch Fin de Siècle*, eds. Sabine Haupt and Stefan Würffel (Stuttgart: Kröner, 2008), 218–37. For an Anthroposophist account see Robin Schmidt, *Rudolf Steiner und die Anfänge der Theosophie* (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 2010).

⁹ See e.g. Steiner's scathing critique, "Theosophen," published in his *Magazin für Litteratur* in 1897 and reprinted in Steiner, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Literatur 1884–1902* (Dornach: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1971), 194–96.

The two books that make up volume 5 show Steiner's initial foray into mysticism, but they are not mystical texts themselves. They hint at an author working his way from Haeckel toward Blavatsky, and exhibit Steiner's customary combination of the occult and the scientific. The centerpiece of volume 7, on the other hand, is Steiner's foundational esoteric tract *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, a manual for students of the occult seeking access to the Higher Worlds promised by esoteric doctrine. According to Steiner, the path he outlined offered verifiable knowledge of these Higher Worlds, available to anyone willing to follow his stages of initiation. The book's opening lines declare:

There slumber in every human being faculties by means of which he can acquire for himself a knowledge of higher worlds. Mystics, Gnostics, Theosophists – all speak of a world of soul and spirit which for them is just as real as the world we see with our physical eyes and touch with our physical hands. At every moment the listener may say to himself: that, of which they speak, I too can learn, if I develop within myself certain powers which today still slumber within me.¹⁰

While Steiner's transitional texts from 1901 and 1902 are often well suited to Clement's sympathetic approach, his reading of *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* is much less persuasive. The latter book represents the first full-fledged presentation of Steiner's mature esoteric epistemology and is one of the canonical works of Anthroposophy. In later editions of the book, Steiner went to considerable lengths to distance his message from his Theosophical predecessors. Much of Clement's interpretation follows this line, even though the material collected in volume 7 abundantly demonstrates the extent to which Steiner drew on previous Theosophical works. In his introduction and commentary, Clement is particularly concerned to dissociate Steiner from Blavatsky. Thus, large stretches of the volume read like an attempt to rescue Steiner from himself, to salvage a philosophically respectable variant of German Idealism from his bold explorations of the Higher Worlds.

Part of this strategy appears to be anchored in a basic misconception about the nature of Western esotericism and the origins of Theosophy. Clement strongly underscores the modern and Western character of Steiner's esoteric form of meditative self-knowledge, something that is unremarkable from a historical point of view. But Clement's assessment in several places suggests a naïve understanding of allegedly Eastern models and their Western

¹⁰ Rudolf Steiner, *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its Attainment* (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1961), 5.

proponents.¹¹ This is a point that has bedeviled other commentators keen to distinguish Steiner from his Theosophical precursors and contemporaries; the argument often depends on the notion that there was something genuinely ‘Eastern’ about Blavatsky’s syncretic project in the first place. It overlooks the fact that Theosophy itself was already thoroughly modern and Western before Steiner came along.

This point indicates the most remarkable omission in a volume of more than 600 pages: the lack of any sustained engagement with the ample scholarship on Western esotericism. Aside from Zander’s historical research, which largely serves as a foil for Clement’s own arguments, and the excellent studies by Traub and Baier, Clement does not discuss any of the extensive literature on these topics. There is no mention of the highly relevant research from Wouter Hanegraaff or Olav Hammer, to choose two of the more significant examples, or even the specific studies of Steiner’s esoteric epistemology by Wolfgang Schneider, Heiner Barz, Alfred Tremml, Julia Iwersen, or Heiner Ullrich.¹²

¹¹ Clement does draw on the pioneering research by Karl Baier, and frequently cites Baier’s *Meditation und Moderne: Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), but seems to have neglected the broader scholarship on this topic. Relevant studies include Jörg Wichmann, “Das theosophische Menschenbild und seine indischen Wurzeln,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 35 (1983): 12–33; Christine Maillard, “*Ex oriente lux*. Zur Funktion Indiens in der Konstruktion der abendländischen esoterischen Tradition im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert,” in *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*, ed. Andreas Kilcher (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 395–412; Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the *Western* in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 17–36; Christopher Partridge, “Orientalism and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2015), 611–25.

¹² Compare Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Siegfried Oppolzer, “Anthropologie und Pädagogik bei Rudolf Steiner,” *Paedagogica Historica* 2 (1962): 287–350; Alfred Tremml, “Träume eines Geistersehers oder Geisteswissenschaft? Die Erkenntnistheorie Rudolf Steiners,” *Zeitschrift für Entwicklungspsychologie* 10 (1987): 17–24; Heiner Ullrich, “Wissenschaft als rationalisierte Mystik: Eine problemgeschichtliche Untersuchung der erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlagen der Anthroposophie,” *Neue Sammlung* 28 (1988): 168–94; Wolfgang Schneider, *Das Menschenbild der Waldorfpädagogik* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991); Heiner Barz, *Anthroposophie im Spiegel von Wissenschaftstheorie und Lebensweltforschung* (Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1994); Julia Iwersen, “Epistemological Foundations of Esoteric Thought and Practice,” *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* 3 (2007): 3–44; Tore Ahlbäck, “Rudolf Steiner as a Religious Authority,” in *Western Esotericism*, ed. Tore

This is an unfortunate missed opportunity to relate discussion of Steiner's work to the growing body of scholarship on esoteric and occult currents more generally, and it has important consequences for Clement's reading of Steiner. Paradoxically, many of Clement's annotations to Steiner's text seem fundamentally at odds with Clement's stated conclusions.¹³

Similar dynamics arise at other points in volume 7, sometimes in reaction against standard textual procedures. An otherwise minor example illustrates the problem. Discussing Steiner's appropriation of the fictional figure of the "Guardian of the Threshold," introduced in an 1842 novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Clement writes that "critics" of Anthroposophy have raised the "accusation" that Steiner adopted this figure from Bulwer-Lytton's literary work.¹⁴ But this has nothing to do with criticism, much less with accusations; it is a simple statement of Steiner's source. Bulwer-Lytton used a variety of names for the figure – "Dweller of the Threshold," "Haunter of the Threshold," and so forth – and in German translations the phrase "Hüter der Schwelle" soon established itself, sometimes in feminine grammatical form.¹⁵ The phrase appeared in references to Bulwer-Lytton in German occult periodicals in the 1880s, and Steiner himself explicitly cited Bulwer-Lytton's novel in *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*,¹⁶ where the phrase is used to describe two important beings encountered in the course of the occult pupil's path of initiation.¹⁷

Ahlbäck (Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 2008), 9–16; Andreas Kilcher, "Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism," in *Hermes in the Academy*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 143–48; Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer, "Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy," *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 113–33. Clement also does not cite Egil Asprem's study *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), which includes a detailed and incisive treatment of Steiner's *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, but Asprem's book appeared just a year before Clement's volume.

¹³ See, for example, *Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, xxix, xxxiii, cxi, cxiv–cxv, 241, etc.

¹⁴ *Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, 319.

¹⁵ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *Zanoni* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1842); *Zanoni: Ein Roman* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1842); the current Anthroposophist edition is *Zanoni: A Rosicrucian Tale* (SteinerBooks, 1989).

¹⁶ See *Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, 145

¹⁷ German Theosophist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden referred to Bulwer-Lytton's "Hüter der Schwelle," in Hübbe-Schleiden's journal *Sphinx*, an important early esoteric periodical, in 1887: Hübbe-Schleiden, "Zöllners Zurechnungsfähigkeit und die Seybert-Kommission," *Sphinx: Monatsschrift für die geschichtliche und experimentale Begründung der übersinnlichen Weltanschauung auf monistischer Grundlage* (November 1887): 321–28. Steiner readily acknowledged the link between his own references to the Guardian of the Threshold and its earlier literary instantiation,

Contrary to Clement's claim that Bulwer-Lytton's fictional creation and Steiner's esoteric figure have "virtually nothing in common,"¹⁸ the parallels are unmistakable. Joscelyn Godwin describes Bulwer-Lytton's "Dweller of the Threshold" as "a hideous personification of one's past thoughts and evil tendencies, which even if not perceived lures the aspirant towards disaster."¹⁹ These parallels are unsurprising in light of Bulwer-Lytton's involvement in proto-Theosophical milieus and the novel's overt Rosicrucian references. Godwin characterizes Bulwer-Lytton as a "pivotal figure of nineteenth-century occultism."²⁰ Steiner borrowed other elements from the Victorian novelist, such as the notion of "Vril" as an occult force. As Julian Strube has shown in his thorough study of the Vril myth, Steiner played a key role in promoting this idea in Germany.²¹

Clement's discussion overlooks this crucial context. Detailed research by Theodore Ziolkowski and others has established the importance of such literary borrowings for modern esoteric thought.²² The re-purposing of literary sources for devotional and meditative functions, as well as their refashioning as forms of scripture, testament, and doctrine, has been a prominent feature of

writing that "Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni* contains in novel form a description of the Guardian of the Threshold." (*Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, 159)

¹⁸ *Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, 320

¹⁹ Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 128.

²⁰ Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 195. See also Bruce Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 12, 26, 56; Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 44, 54, 133, 267; Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 76, 84, 88; Jeffrey Franklin, "The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton," in Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 123–41.

²¹ Julian Strube, *Vril. Eine okkulte Urkraft in Theosophie und esoterischem Neonazismus* (Munich: Fink, 2013), 77–79, 94–95.

²² Theodore Ziolkowski, *Lure of the Arcane: The Literature of Cult and Conspiracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); see the discussion of Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* on 116–20. Cf. James Webb, *The Occult Establishment* (La Salle: Open Court, 1976), 497–515; Bettina Gruber, ed., *Erfahrung und System: Mystik und Esoterik in der Literatur der Moderne* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997); Priska Pytlík, *Okkultismus und Moderne: Ein kulturhistorisches Phänomen und seine Bedeutung für die Literatur um 1900* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005); Jeffrey Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Michael Novian, *Von Ariern und Aliens: Völkische Weltanschauung in der Science-Fiction-Literatur vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Marburg: Tectum, 2013); Jan Stottmeister, *Der George-Kreis und die Theosophie* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014).

emergent spiritual approaches for a long time. It was an especially important element in the modern occult revival out of which Anthroposophy emerged. By ignoring this background, Clement misses another significant way in which Steiner helped shape the contours of Western esotericism in the modern era.

These lapses notwithstanding, volume 7 does provide important material on the Theosophical origins of Steiner's esoteric work, against the grain of Clement's own interpretation. He acknowledges Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater as sources for *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* and devotes pages to tracing Steiner's gradual appropriation of Theosophist concepts.²³ He also offers insight into the shift in tone from Steiner's turn-of-the-century works to his mature esoteric pronouncements.²⁴ What is missing is a broader sense of the fin de siècle intellectual atmosphere, in Germany as elsewhere, which left such a deep impression on Steiner's subsequent writings.²⁵

Steiner was hardly a unique figure around the turn of the twentieth century; there were many others searching for 'higher worlds' in various ways, whether through science or through initiation or through contemplative practice. Understanding Steiner's specific contributions to this search means

²³ *Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, xxxvi–xxxvii and xlvi–xlvii.

²⁴ Contrasting *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* to the 1901/02 texts from volume 5, Clement writes: "Hier spricht nicht mehr eine Stimme, die ein kritisches Publikum durch Argumentation von der eigenen Position zu überzeugen versucht, sondern eine solche, welche die Autorität eines Wissenden für sich in Anspruch nimmt und als Lehrer zu Schülern spricht, d.h. zu Menschen, die den 'Pfad der Erkenntnis' schon beschreiten und insofern bereits für sich eine Vorentscheidung über die Validität des Vorgebrachten getroffen haben" (*Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, xxvii). Steiner's contemporary Hans Freimark was more blunt, offering a vivid first-hand description of his speaking style: "Steiner liebt die hohenpriesterliche Gebärde, in seinen Vorträgen und in seinen Schriften. Es ist nicht ohne Eindruck, wenn auf der Rednerbühne der hagere Mann die dunkelglühenden Augen zur Decke richtet, das strähnige schwarze, in die Stirn fallende Haar mit einer ruckenden Kopfbewegung zurückschleudert und die gelblichen schlanken Hände wie segnend hebt. Diese Pose hat Stil. Und ihr entspricht seine Stimme, die von suggestiver Eindringlichkeit ist und die die wunderbaren Tatsachen, die er erwähnt, seinen Zuhörern in einer Weise nahebringt, die man nicht überzeugend nennen kann, wohl aber als überredend bezeichnen muß." Hans Freimark, *Moderne Theosophen und ihre Theosophie* (Leipzig: Heims, 1912), 40.

²⁵ For context see Helmut Zander, "Der Himmel auf Erden? 'Jenseits'-Konzepte um 1900 und die Traditionen einer monistischen Eschatologie," in *Das Jenseits: Facetten eines religiösen Begriffs in der Neuzeit*, ed. Lucian Hölscher, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 138–51; Renko Geffarth, "Äther, Urlicht, Relativität: Weltformel und 'wahre Erkenntnis' um 1900," in *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*, ed. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 440–60; Bernhard Kleeberg, "Gedankenexperimente, Kontrafaktizität und das Selbstverständnis der Wissenschaften um 1900," *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 38 (2015), 7–14.

assessing his work not just in relation to earlier generations of German Idealist philosophy but also in the context of comparable esoteric endeavors in the years immediately prior to Steiner's Theosophical turn – figures such as Franz Hartmann or Carl Du Prel, who anticipated central components of Steiner's mature esoteric outlook.²⁶ Without taking this context into account, sympathetic readings of Steiner run the risk of wishful thinking, in a fruitless effort to re-cast Steiner's later esoteric teachings as an extension of his early philosophical works. That sort of reading will only appeal to those already committed to Steiner's principles.

In an odd way, Clement's comments sometimes seem to sense this restricted audience, even as his project strives to transcend it. Though he does not make use of the rich scholarship on modern occultism, he regularly draws on Anthroposophical secondary literature. He is particularly indulgent toward the work of Lorenzo Ravagli, a prominent Anthroposophist and editor of *Erziehungskunst*, the chief journal of the Waldorf movement. Ravagli's writings are typical of the effort by Steiner's followers to defend their esoteric worldview against external scrutiny.²⁷ His publications are Anthroposophical apologies marked by an aggravated tone toward scholars who study Steiner, above all Zander. Astonishingly, Clement at times places Ravagli's polemics against Zander on the same level as Zander's scholarship.²⁸ Indeed Clement himself often has a notably difficult time taking Zander's research seriously, and frequently portrays Zander as a critic of Steiner rather than a historian of Anthroposophy.²⁹ This fundamental misconstrual runs throughout both volumes, and significantly vitiates Clement's analysis.

Despite the insights that Clement brings to Steiner's *Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, his overall interpretation remains unconvincing. His approach is too imbued with Anthroposophical assumptions and his conclusions fit too

²⁶ See e.g. Franz Hartmann, *Ein Abenteurer unter den Rosenkreuzern* (Leipzig: Theosophisches Verlagshaus, 1899); Hartmann, *Unter den Adepten. Vertrauliche Mittheilungen aus den Kreisen der indischen Adepten und Christlichen Mystiker* (Leipzig: Lotus Verlag, 1901); Carl du Prel, *Die Philosophie der Mystik* (Leipzig: Günther, 1885); du Prel, *Die monistische Seelenlehre: Ein Beitrag zur Lösung des Menschenrätsels* (Leipzig: Günther, 1888).

²⁷ Lorenzo Ravagli, "Zander und die Anthroposophie," *Erziehungskunst* (December 2007): 1373–76; Ravagli, *Zanders Erzählungen* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2009); Ravagli, "Polemischer Diskurs: Die Anthroposophie und ihre Kritiker," in *Rudolf Steiner: Seine Bedeutung für Wissenschaft und Leben heute*, ed. Peter Heusser (Stuttgart: Schattauer, 2014), 332–52.

²⁸ E.g. *Schriften über Mystik*, xxxiv, or *Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, lxxii

²⁹ Examples include *Schriften über Mystik*, lxy, and *Schriften zur Erkenntnisschulung*, lxxiii, lxxx, and 319.

neatly with Anthroposophical expectations. But it has also exposed a rift within the Anthroposophist movement, with Steiner's more conspiratorially inclined followers convinced that Clement's project forms part of a nefarious plot to sacrifice Anthroposophy's esoteric truths at the altar of academic respectability. Less myopic admirers of Steiner, meanwhile, have greeted the edition with enthusiasm, appreciating its potential for widening the appeal of Anthroposophist ideas. If the former fear that Steiner will be neutralized by scholarly niceties, the latter understand the promise of a refurbished and reinvigorated Steiner clad in the prosaic garb of philosophical Idealism.³⁰

A historical approach yields a different story. The search for greater forms of knowledge and spiritual experience beyond the confines of established religion and academic science was a fundamental element of the modern German occult revival. Many of the people drawn to this milieu were highly educated and steeped in German cultural traditions, including the classics of Idealist thought. A large proportion of them came from the ranks of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated bourgeoisie. Steiner's background in Idealist philosophy facilitated his remarkably rapid transition to a leading role within the German Theosophist movement. He offered, in effect, exactly what his audience wanted to hear: familiar Theosophical themes presented in the idiom of German high culture, with ample invocation of figures like Fichte and Schelling and Goethe. What Theosophy promised was a "synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy," in Blavatsky's famous phrase, and Steiner was well positioned to provide just that, packaged in ways that appealed to German Theosophists in particular.³¹

After his post-1900 esoteric turn, Steiner emphasized the traditions of German Idealism in a wide range of contexts, such as enlisting them for patriotic purposes in the early years of World War I. Facing this historical situation need not detract from what was innovative in Steiner's thinking. But it is a useful reminder that grand narratives about the unfolding of Spirit in the mode of German Idealism were by no means unique to Steiner, whether before or after his Theosophical turn. This is another reason to pay attention to the

³⁰ Recent signs from mainstream Anthroposophist publishers indicate that the anti-Clement faction enjoys considerable support among Steiner's English-speaking followers; see e.g. the new translation of one of the more scurrilous attacks on Clement by Pietro Archiati, a prominent Anthroposophist in German-speaking Europe: Archiati, *Spiritual Science in the Third Millennium: Intellectuality versus Anthroposophy* (Forest Row: Temple Lodge Press, 2015), distributed by SteinerBooks.

³¹ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (London: Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888).

specific features of Steiner's individual texts and heed the particular arguments they make. Thus, for all its flaws, it is essential to recognize the enormous service that Clement has done for all scholars studying Steiner, whatever their interpretive orientation.

The critical edition provides a new basis for future research on Theosophy and Anthroposophy. At its best moments, Clement's familiarity with the philosophical context raises the quality of his analysis far above the level typically found among Steiner's followers themselves. For that very reason, it merits critical attention and debate. And its most debatable aspects go to the heart of Clement's project as a whole. The approach he adopts in the first two volumes all too often reduces the later Steiner to an extension of the earlier Steiner. It cannot account for the fantastic profusion of new ideas that defined Steiner's public pronouncements after his embrace of esotericism in 1902. The explosion of creativity that marks Steiner's post-1900 esoteric works has no precedent in his earlier works. It is not just a sudden shift in tone and style and format, but a profound innovation in content. The fluidity of his categories, the imaginative range of his ideas, the willingness to flaunt established modes of knowledge and challenge conventional conceptions of the world – including recognized philosophical models and existing intellectual frameworks – all signal a fundamental departure from his previous approach to understanding reality. The esoteric Steiner after 1900 was engaged in a daring new project, one that diverged in the most elemental ways from what came before.

For any academic with a sympathetic attitude toward Steiner, it is appealing to re-cast his mature esoteric years as a smooth continuation of his early philosophical explorations. That version of Steiner is comforting and familiar, readily compatible with the premises of the modern academic world. It assimilates Steiner's esoteric teachings into recognizable academic categories. But this approach does not let Steiner's esoteric texts speak for themselves. It does not allow his mature thinking to unfold according to its own categories and its own promises, which were quite different from conventional academic standards. It does not give Steiner's esoteric ideas the breathing room they deserve, the chance to develop on their own terms, to follow their own path. It renders these ideas docile and reassuring rather than provocative and unsettling.

In trying to make Steiner more agreeable to a twenty-first century academic readership, Clement has hollowed out the most challenging and most difficult parts of Steiner's teachings. But it is these very parts that make Steiner such an interesting historical figure. The Steiner we are left with, in Clement's version, is flattened and tamed. The historical Steiner was much more disruptive and

much more ambitious. To lose sight of that unruly side of Steiner, in the hope of streamlining and updating his message, does not do justice to the acute ambiguities in his thinking. Even sympathetic observers must at some point acknowledge this dimension. Though the sanitized Steiner makes a more attractive candidate for admission to the academy, he is scarcely recognizable in an esoteric setting.

For better or worse, that is the Steiner we need to understand. Rather than rehabilitating or legitimating Steiner, the proper starting point for scholarly engagement is the more demanding project of comprehending Steiner. Whatever its interpretive shortcomings, the painstaking textual work that Clement has put in to this new edition make it an invaluable resource for any scholar studying Steiner. It is also a sign of how far scholarship on Steiner still has to go in coming to terms with this enigmatic figure.

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