Reading Rudolf Steiner

Transforming the dead trace of meaning back into living meaning in the texts of spiritual science

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This essay explores the sometimes difficult process of reading the texts of Rudolf Steiner. Why and how is Steiner challenging to read? The reading of Steiner through the lens of modern philosophical hermeneutics is examined and, finally, Steiner's own advice on reading his anthroposophy is explored.

> If only it were said more succinctly! In ten pages. To me, people who write whole books are more and more puzzling… Of course, I have only read portions of the book [*Theosophy*] because its banalities soon made it unenjoyable.
>
> *- Paul Klee*

> I knew Dr Steiner only in passing and often sought in vain to read some of his books. They remained absolutely intolerable, if only because of their dreadfully bloodless language.
>
> *- Herman Hesse*

> I expect that I am not the only one to regret that you have decided to begin this publication *[Individuality]* with these remarks by Rudolf Steiner which were more or less taken from a lecture and left in a very miserable and unsatisfactory state – far beyond any linguistic form.
>
> *- Rainer Maria Rilke*

The above remarks from Klee, Hesse and Rilke make clear their reactions to reading Rudolf Steiner. These quotes are offered here not as isolated comments, nor for dramatic effect. Instead, attention is drawn to them precisely because they represent often quite typical responses to the reading of the texts of Rudolf Steiner. Of course these remarks do not represent the whole picture, and one can equally find complimentary remarks in favour Steiner's linguistic style, in particular praising his clarity of thought and logically structured arguments. However, there does exist a sizeable audience for whom the reading of Steiner, either of his books or his transcribed lectures, is not always a straightforward or trouble-free experience.

DEAD LEAVES ON THE PAGE

The problems of Steiner's linguistic style are symptomatically summed up in the book *The Will to Art* (1996) written by the historian Beat Wyss. In a chapter entitled 'The Goetheanum, Metamorphosis of a Poem'

Wyss asserts that: "Steiner's written lectures lack the life of charismatic speech; the words lie on the page like dead leaves,[1] windblown across our path. The message behind the stilted redundancy of the sentences is deciphered by the uninitiated with great difficulty. Steiner's language remains evocation; its task is to summon the truth, only to vanish in the light when the truth appears." (cited in M. Sam, p.17)

Wyss' criticisms, aimed here at the transcription of Steiner's lectures, merit further examination, for the same critique could equally be said to apply to Steiner's monographs. For Wyss' metaphors of "dead leaves" and "vanishings into the light" actually reveal a very tangible philosophical problem, and one that Wyss himself articulates. Wyss, like any reader, senses and therefore wants to find and access 'the message behind' the words. He wishes to understand or 'decipher' the meaning of the author. This notion of finding the message behind the words, of understanding the deeper meaning and in doing so deciphering a text is known as the branch of philosophy known as hermeneutics.[2]

Steiner was very clear that he himself wrestled with putting into language the results and method of his anthroposophy, and also of the creative tension that this might potentially evoke in the reader: "If someone now wants to come to anthroposophy, I would have to say that he must relearn the language in a completely new way."

Hermeneutics is the theory and method of text interpretation, and it will be explored more fully later in this essay. For now it would be good to at least remark that, with regard to the difficulty of language, Steiner himself was not unaware of the challenges of reading his works. Steiner was very clear that he himself wrestled with putting into language the results and method of his anthroposophy, and also of the creative tension that this might potentially evoke in the reader. "If someone now wants to come to anthroposophy, I would have to say that he must relearn the language in a completely new way" (cited in Sam, p.21). Clearly, Steiner felt that he was attempting to bring something new with his anthroposophy and that to do this justice a new approach to language was needed: "What must be created there with language is something new." (cited in Sam, p.21)

THE JOLT OF THE NEW

The birthing of the new, whether it be ideas, approaches or perceptions, will inevitably require a new mode of communication. It is apparent that Steiner was aiming for just such a new mode of communication

1 In relation to the theme of death and thinking it is useful recall what Steiner writes in the addendum to the 1918 edition of *The Philosophy of Freedom*: "The difficulty of grasping thinking in its essence by observing it consists in this: when the soul wants to bring it into the focus of attention, this essence has all too easily already slipped away from the observing soul. All that is left for the soul then is the dead abstraction, the corpse of living thinking." (1995, p.155) Steiner frequently employs the analogy of the corpse when referring to thinking. For example see his lecture of 30 September 1922, Dornach (Supersensible Influence in the History of Mankind, Supersensible Influence: Lecture 5).

2 The origin of hermeneutics lies in the Greek word ἑρμηνεύω (hermeneuō, "translate, interpret"). However it is perhaps more interesting to consider the folk etymology of hermeneutic which can be traced back to the Greek deity Hermes. Hermes was the messenger of the gods and the inventor of language and speech; he mediated between the gods and men and was also the god of transitions and boundaries. As such Hermes lends himself perfectly to the function of 'deciphering' and of reading the 'message behind' the words. It is also worth noting in passing that Hermes is the trickster god, the one who can be mischievous and playful.

throughout many of his projects and initiatives and perhaps, pertinent to this essay focusing on text, this is why it can be problematic encountering his written opus. This challenge of creating something new is brought home by the poet Ingeborg Bachmann:

> Reality will always be met with a new language where a moral, cognitional jolt occurs - not where an attempt is made to make a new language per se, as though language itself could drive home knowledge and reveal to us some experience, neither of which we had. When language is only tinkered with so that it feels like new, it soon takes new revenge and exposes the intent. A new language must have a new way of moving, and it only has this new gait when a new spirit inhabits it.
>
> (cited in Sam, p.23)

Could what Bachmann has articulated here be the real challenge of penetrating Steiner's writings? Could it be perhaps, that a new spirit inhabits it? That it is an attempt at a new language that has a new way of moving? A survey of Steiner's idiosyncratic approach to syntax does indeed yield evidence of this.[3] (Sam, 2007)

With regards to the 'cognitional jolt' that Steiner's 'new syntax' offers, the following example from *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* can be considered. Compare these two examples translated into English of the opening sentence of the book:[4] "The capacities by which we can gain insights into higher worlds lie dormant within each one of us" (1994a, p. 22) and "There slumber in every human being faculties by means of which he can acquire for himself a knowledge of higher worlds." (2011) The latter more accurately renders Steiner's original and purposively constructed syntax.[5] Does the first translation seem accented more on just imparting the information? Can a subtle cognitional jolt be felt in the second rendering? The reader is invited to reflect on the experience of reading both translations, and to experience where the subtle differences appear. What does each text evoke?

Taking this notion of experience further, it is remarkable how many times in Steiner's foundational written works that the word 'experience' occurs.[6]

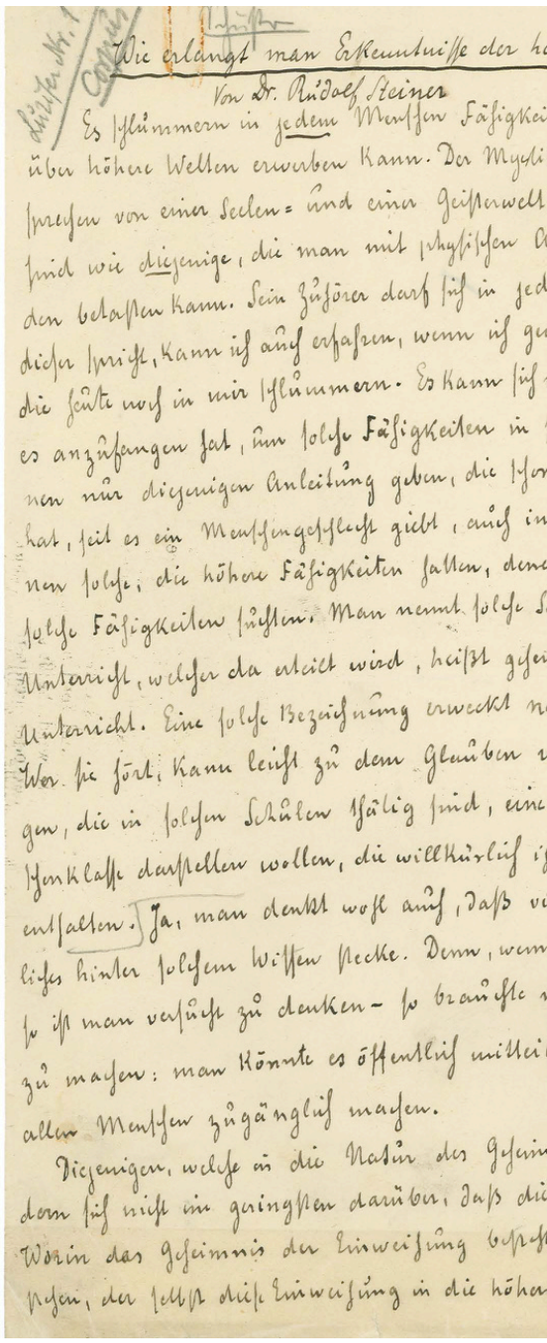
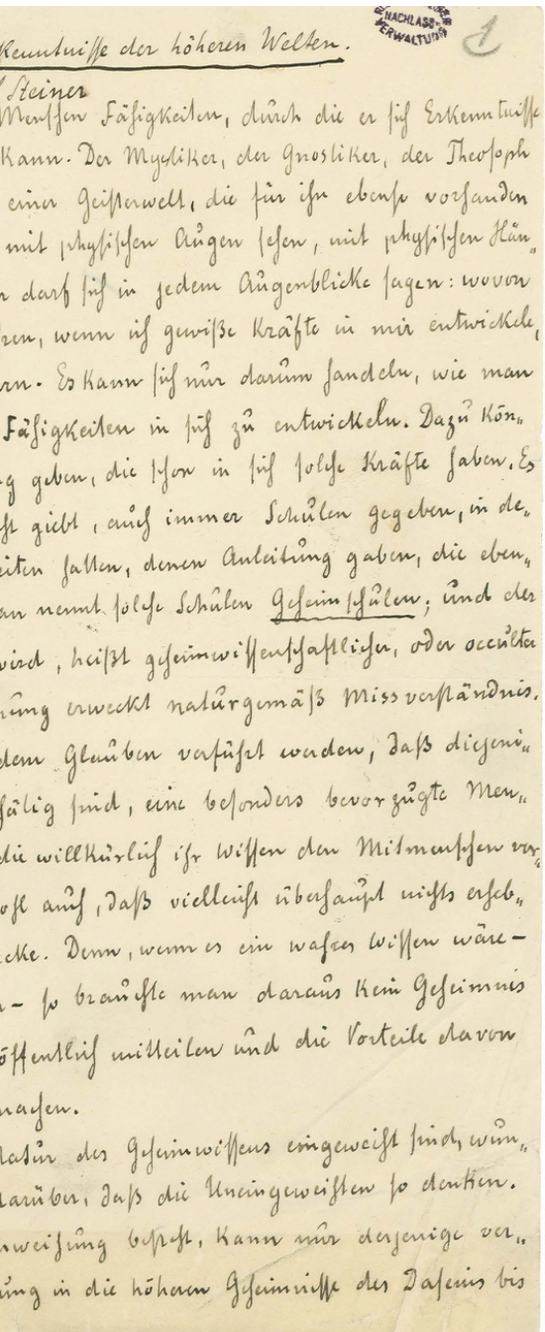


Figure 1: **Steiner's manuscript of *Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?* Source: Rudolf-Steiner Archiv at the Goetheanum.**

3 The problem of Steiner's syntax, even for native German speakers, is apparent. Proof of this is to be found in an initiative undertaken in 2001 to rewrite *Occult Science: An Outline* into a more modern and more easily understandable German for readers so interested.

4 The original German reads "Es schlummern in jedem Menschen Fähigkeiten, durch die er sich Erkenntnisse über höhere Welten erwerben kann." (*Wie erlangt man Erkenntnisse der höheren Welten?*) This is the first line of the MS page reproduced below.

5 There is obviously a German to English translation issue to be explored but this lies beyond the scope of this essay.


Kenntnisse der höheren Welten.
Steiner
Menschen Fähigkeiten, durch die er sich Erkenntnisse
kann. Der Mystiker, der Gnostiker, der Theosoph
einer Geisterwelt, die für ihn ebenso vorhanden
mit physischen Augen sehen, mit physischen Hän-
darf sich in jedem Augenblicke sagen: wovon
ren, wenn ich gewisse Kräfte in mir entwickele,
rn. Es kann sich nur darum handeln, wie man
Fähigkeiten in sich zu entwickeln. Dazu kön-
g geben, die schon in sich solche Kräfte haben. Es
ht giebt, auch immer Schulen gegeben, in de-
iten hatten, denen Anleitung gaben, die eben-
an nennt solche Schulen Geheimschulen; und der
wird, heißt geheimwissenschaftlicher, oder occulter
ung erweckt naturgemäß Missverständnis.
dem Glauben verführt werden, daß diejeni-
hälig sind, eine besonders bevorzugte Men-
die willkürlich ihr Wissen den Mitmenschen ver-
oft auch, daß vielleicht überhaupt nichts erheb-
cke. Denn, wenn es ein wahres Wissen wäre –
– so brauchte man daraus kein Geheimnis
öffentlich mitteilen und die Vorteile davon
machen.
Natur des Geheimwissens eingeweiht sind, wun-
darüber, daß die Uneingeweihten so denken.
nweihung besteht, kann nur derjenige ver-
ung in die höheren Geheimnisse des Daseins bis

In *An Outline of Esoteric Science* 'experience' appears over 300 times; in *How to Know Higher Worlds* it appears over 250; in *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path* and *Theosophy* it appears over 150 times in each book. The invitation to the reader in Steiner's works to experience the text couldn't be clearer, and the key to accessing the experience can be found in Steiner's own recommendations. Steiner remarked that only that which is "experienced is understood." He also invited the reader to find "living one's way into" the text, and to do so in an "intimate" way. But what does this mean and how can it be approached? What can lead the reader to this boundary or place of transformation where the inner experience of the text is evoked?

THE DEAD TRACE OF MEANING

It is time to turn to hermeneutics, and in particular to focus on modern philosophical hermeneutics as pioneered by Martin Heidegger's pupil Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer argued for a hermeneutics in which an understanding and a coming to light of meaning is emergent for the reader through engagement in a text. As such Gadamer sought to throw light on how meaning comes about, how meaning appears, and also on the relationship of meaning to understanding. For Gadamer "it is universally true of text that only in the process of understanding them is the dead trace of meaning transformed back into living meaning" (quoted in Bortoft, 2012). This process of transforming dead meaning into living meaning is the heart of what is at stake here. For without it the words of a text will always 'lie on the page like dead leaves,' with what they promise to disclose likely to 'vanish in the light.' But how is this transformation to be brought about? What is the process of understanding and what does it ask of the reader?

Let us follow Gadamer closely here. Perhaps the first question to ask is: what is a 'process of understanding' that might adequately allow 'the dead trace of meaning [to be] transformed back into living meaning?' To elaborate this question I propose to take the reader on a journey through that which Gadamer proffers, and do so with the help of the work of Henri Bortoft. In his profound work *Taking Appearance Seriously: The Dynamic Way of Seeing in Goethe and European Thought*, Bortoft (2012) looks through the lenses of Goethean Science, phenomenology and hermeneutics in order to re-evaluate the experiencing of the world in relationship to the self, and the finding of meaning in this ongoing activity. Of particular relevance to this essay are Bortoft's insights into meaning, understanding and language, and the following hermeneutic insights into the textual 'process of understanding' are deeply indebted to Bortoft.

THE SCENARIO

And so, I wish now to put in front of the reader the following scenario which elaborates the theory and practice of the finding of meaning in a

6 For example in *Knowledge of Higher Worlds* Steiner writes: "If we read this book closely, so that reading it becomes an inner experience, we will not only come to know its contents, but different passages will also evoke different feelings." (2011, p. 5)

text, also with some of the epistemological pitfalls that await the reader. Sometimes epistemology, the way of inquiring into how one knows what one knows, can have the unfortunate philosophical side effect of leaving the inquirer more confused than when they started. This is certainly not the desired effect here and our example will be quite concrete and to the point. So the scenario I proposed is a simple one: that of sitting down to read and understand a text by Steiner.

When the reader sits down to read a text by Steiner it is quite customary to be holding in the mind some undeclared questions. The questions go something like this: what is the author trying to say? Or, what does the author mean here? This search for meaning may seem like an obvious observation and statement. It is surely just common sense that if one is reading a text written by Steiner that one wants to understand what the author means. However, what escapes the attention here is the implicit mode of inquiry. For the very approach of asking 'what does Steiner mean?' initiates a subtle separation of subject and object. This subtle separation occurs when the reader, as subject, endeavours to find out what the author's text, as object, means. The establishing of this separation of subject and object has the consequence that any ensuing interpretation or understanding will be filtered through the unobserved lens of this dualism.

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THE UNOBSERVED LENS

This unobserved lens actually comes to be instilled in one's thinking through a rather sound train of logic: a text is brought into being through an author (in this case Steiner) having thoughts and ideas and expressing them in words. Steiner, as the author, must have had something in mind when writing the text. Logically, if one reads a text by Steiner one wishes to find out what he means or is trying to say. In this way one sets out to recover meaning from the author's text. It follows that the effort to understand the text then becomes an epistemological endeavour to retrieve meaning. As an image one could say that the reader, as the seeker-after-meaning, stands on one side of a river, and Steiner's meaning stands on the other.

The setting out on the path of the retrieval of meaning is beset with the subtle epistemological flaw of having separated subject and object. For the premise of this inquiry is that what the author means, or is saying, exists as a finished entity. As a finished entity its meaning is therefore invariable and not subject to change. Following this line of thought one arrives at the conclusion that the meaning of the author can only be understood through reproducing that meaning in the reader's experience. In other words, the meaning of a given text by Rudolf Steiner needs only to be replicated in the mind of the reader so as to be understood. The trap with this approach is that the reader's understanding is reduced to being a reproduction of the author's meaning.

A pressing question arises: is there an approach to reading a text that is non-dualistic? Asking such a question leads to philosophy and methodology of

phenomenology.[7] Through a phenomenological approach one can begin to enter into the experience of understanding the meaning of a text. With such an approach the text is not rendered finished and completed. Instead, what is accomplished through a phenomenological approach to understanding is a reorientation of the attention. One's attention shifts from the searching for meaning in an invariable end-product to participation in the event of understanding.

RELOCATING MEANING

The fundamental effect of this reorientation is a relocation of meaning. Previously meaning was to be found in the finished object, in this case a Rudolf Steiner text. Now however, meaning is metamorphosed into an event, or a happening of understanding. If this event of understanding can be accomplished then one's attention is located prior to the split of subject and object, prior to the severance of meaning and understanding.

From the ground thus covered it should be apparent that in reading a Steiner text in a dynamic mode there can be no preformed and finished meanings in the text.

Through the reorientation of attention one has in effect passed from 'meaning' as a noun, to 'meaning' as a verb. I would like to put forward that this act of the reorientation of attention is one way of understanding what Steiner refers to as 'living thinking.' When this living thinking is applied to the reading and studying of Steiner's written works then one is engaged in a creative practice of reading anthroposophy. The reorientation of thinking shifts attention away from meaning as an object to meaning as an event, or the happening of meaning. In the case of meaning as an object, meaning is conceived as being static. All that can be deduced from reading in this mode is information. In the case of meaning as an event, meaning is conceived as being dynamic, as being fluid. Such a dynamic mode of reading Steiner allows for the dead trace of meaning to be transformed back into living meaning.

A COMPLETELY NEW SPHERE

From the ground thus covered it should be apparent that in reading a Steiner text in a dynamic mode there can be no preformed and finished meanings in the text.[8] Instead what is encountered is the new and the creative. Indeed, Steiner's whole epistemology rests upon the foundation of the creative capacity of knowledge that each individual bears within themselves:

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7 Phenomenology sets out to explore the simple yet very elusive nature of what actually appears in our consciousness. As such it is centred on one's own lived experience. The invitation of phenomenology is to become aware of what is appearing in one's consciousness at any given moment, and to raise what is appearing in one's lived experience into cognitive experience.

8 The reader is directed to Georg Kuhlewind's book *Working with Anthroposophy*, in particular the first chapter entitled 'The Character of Spiritual Science'. Kuhlewind argues that in spiritual science "We can read and understand a text only from above: we must leave behind the literal level of the individual letters in order reach the words; and, likewise, we have to leave behind the level of the words so as to reach the meaning of the sentence. It is in the reading, understanding consciousness that meaning arises. Meaning is not a thing."

> The object of knowledge is not to repeat in conceptual form something which already exists, but rather to create a completely new sphere...
>
> (2002, p.7)

On the path of knowledge that Steiner sets out there is no place for duplication. Duplication only arises from the separation of subject and object.

Steiner is very much at home in Bortoftian hermeneutics when he envisages that his written works could act as a leaven for the 'metamorphosis of [the reader's] inner experience of ideas' (2006, p. 330) and as such a stimulus for an inner awakening. This awakening occurs when one begins to cultivate a living, fluid and organic approach to finding meaning in the reading of Steiner, when one enters into the experience of the event of understanding of anthroposophy. As Steiner reflected at the end of his life: "[Anyone] who reads the first expositions in my book Theosophy without the impression of an inner experience, so that he or she does not become aware of a metamorphosis of his or her inner experience of ideas . . . can only arrive at a rejection of the book." (2006, p. 330)

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IMMERSION AND ABSORPTION

Entering into the event of understanding is referred to by Steiner as immersion.

> If you read accounts of the sense-perceptible world, you read about them, but if you read accounts of supersensible facts in the right way, you immerse yourself in the stream of spiritual existence ... Immersing yourself in this content kindles impulses in your own soul which then lead to the corresponding supersensible facts.
>
> (1997, p.27)
>
> Those who have the self-discipline to immerse their thoughts in spiritual science can be sure that this will eventually lead to the ability to perceive for themselves.
>
> (1994b, p.179)

From this perspective reading is an activity undertaken for formation rather than information.

The word immersion evokes the element of water and Steiner often pointed to the formative capacity of this element. When one engages in the process of immersive reading one transitions from the state of earth bound information and data to the more mobile, fluid and living element of water. The movement from earth to water is again confirmed by Steiner's use of the term 'absorption' in his written works. It is by means of 'meditative absorption' of the ideas of spiritual science that the inner development of the individual can be quickened. "In fact,

all the other methods taken together will not get us anywhere if one does not also absorb the teachings of the esoteric researcher." Further, "These teachings are drawn forth from the living 'inner word,' from 'living inspiration,' and therefore they themselves are spiritually alive. They are not just words. They are living forces." (1994a, p.48) The event of absorption is the point at which the truths of spiritual science become meaningful for us. Indeed one might even say that it is through absorption that one can recognise the truths of spiritual science as individualised truths.

SUMMARY

In summary, the writings of Rudolf Steiner, whether they are monographs or transcriptions of lecture cycles do present the reader with some obvious challenges. Perhaps the main challenge that has been identified here is the challenge for the reader to relocate themselves in relation to the text. This relocation requires a shift of attention, and the holding of a tension for the becoming of understanding and meaning in the reading of Steiner.

Steiner's invitation is to become conceptually creative with one's thinking, to the point of what might be called co-creating with the text, and to enter through immersion into the texts of anthroposophy. Steiner himself wrote that an "Anthroposophical book should be an awakener of the life of the spirit in the reader, not a certain quantity of information imparted. The reading of it should be an experiencing with inner shocks, tensions, solutions." (2006, p. 330) It is hoped that this essay assists in some small way towards a re-reading of Steiner's texts.

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