

Goethe's The Mysteries—An Interpretation

Part 2

STANZAS 3 TO 10, INCLUSIVE. BROTHER MARK SEEKS THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE ROSE CROSS

FOLLOWING THE BROADCAST of the invitation to the Wisdom Feast which Goethe gives in the first two stanzas of *The Mysteries*, we are introduced to a pilgrim, by name Brother Mark, who has arrived at the foot of the mountain range, searching for the monastery headquarters of a Brotherhood which he knows is situated among its summits.

Who is this pilgrim, sent on a sacred mission by one brotherhood to another, arriving at the foot of the steep mountain somewhere in Germany? from where, and by whom sent?

The answer to these questions is not yet to be revealed. Goethe says only that the journey has been undertaken from the most exalted of motives. Weary from the day's long journey, the poem tells us, Brother Mark arrives, on a beautiful evening, at the foot of a high mountain, staff in hand after the manner of a holy pilgrim.

He has been travelling on foot; he is tired and hungry. He longs for a little food and drink, and a hospitable roof to shelter him for the night, for the sun is already descending toward the west and his goal is not in sight.

He has, it seems, wandered off the beaten track and must clamber through wooded gorges where there is neither footbridge nor road. But at last he thinks he discerns the faint traces of a footpath through the thickets, which he hopes will lead him up out of the gorges and to the summit of the steep

mountain that stands before him.

We think here of another poet who, writing of his descent into the Inferno, said:

*In the midway of this our mortal life
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
From the path direct.*

Had Goethe read Dante's *Divine Comedy*? It cannot be doubted. Dante says that he was "midway of this our mortal life"—that is, about thirty-five or thirty-six years of age—when he wandered off his course. Goethe does not tell us the age of the pilgrim, Brother Mark, but we surmise that he is a young man, even a very young man. Can he be, perhaps, a type of the young Goethe himself?

The faint path which he has stumbled upon in the thickets winds steadily upward, circling craggy mountain faces, up which Mark must climb, until at last, pausing to look back, he sees himself uplifted high over the valley, for the whole mountain slope lies below him. He has come by a steep and direct way, a difficult way which turned and twisted up the mountainside, and yet has brought him speedily out upon a high place. On the West he sees the sun magnificently throned between dark clouds sinking toward the horizon. Shadows have already fallen into the deeply wooded gorges over which he has climbed. How beautiful, how friendly, the sun shines again for him now, here on the heights!

Yet darkness is not far away, and he turns to survey the upward path: There the summit, the peak itself, stands stark against the evening sky. He summons strength to essay the final height, hoping

that he has reached the end of his journey and will soon receive the reward of his labors. Now, he speaks to himself, now must it be discovered if any human beings dwell near this place.

When he turns to continue climbing, the clangor of bells resounds upon his ears. As one newborn, says the poet, he stands, hearkening to the sound, and looking down in the direction whence the bell-sound has come, his quiet eyes light with pleasure as he sees close by a green valley, softly cradled among the peaks.

Then, all at once, he sees a beautiful building lying in a green field before the woods; the last level rays of the setting sun fall upon it, as if in tryst, as if to point it out to him. He hastens through the dew-wet meadow toward the monastery which, says the poem, "lightens toward him," seems to beckon him, lying there lit up by the shafts of the setting sun. (Or perhaps we are to understand that the lamps are being lit within the monastery.)

Here is the end of his journey, this quiet, tranquil place. He knows it. His spirit is filled with calm and hope. The portal is shut but (presumably) as the sun dips lower behind the peak, its beams touch and illuminate a mystery-filled symbol which is raised high above the closed portal.

The symbol is familiar, for indeed it is the cross of Christ; yet this is not the cross as he has known it heretofore. He stands and ponders, whispering low the words of prayer which well up in his heart. He asks himself, What meaning has this Sign to convey? He is unaware of the setting sun as he stands lost in thought; nor does he realize that the pealing of the bells has ceased.

He muses: The Sign, which is here so magnificently erected on high, stands to all the world for consolation and hope. How many thousands of souls have pledged themselves to this Sign! How many thousands of human hearts have ardently implored its aid! This is the Sign that has brought to nothing the power of death; the Sign that has shone forth on so many victory-banners over battlefields, one understands the poet to mean, where men have fought and conquered in its Name. A very stream of comfort and refreshment flows through Brother Mark's weary limbs, as he casts

down his eyes in prayer.

Praying, he feels anew the salvation flowing from the holy Sign; he feels anew the faith of half the world; but now, he feels within himself something more, a power penetrating every atom of his being. It is as if a whole new sense has flowered within his mind, awakened by the Sign which stands here upraised before him. Once more he contemplates the cross, his attention focusing now on the garland of roses which presses against the center from every side; and he puts the question: ***Who added to the cross the wreath of roses?***

There they cling in a thick cluster of ruby petals, so that it looks as if the hard and rigid wood of the cross were soft and burgeoning with life, as if the dead wood had burst forth into these living roses! Do we see here an oblique comparison of the Rose Cross with Aaron's rod that budded, or with the blossoming thorn of Glastonbury, which was taken from the Holy Land as a dry staff and planted in England, where it blossoms on Christmas Eve?

Take note that Brother Mark's question is not: Who added to the cross the rose, or roses? but: Who added to the cross the *wreath* of roses

Several great families of Europe possessed coats-of-arms which included roses, cross, and star, separately or together; and when these families endowed schools or colleges, these also were allowed the privilege of using the family emblem, or a variant of it, which thus constituted a sort of "seal" of noble or kingly approval.

The family of Valentin Andreas (who, it is said, claimed in a posthumously published article that he had written the *Fama Fraternalitatis* at the age of sixteen)* has as its coat-of-arms the St. Andrew's cross (X) with four roses, one in each angle of the cross. The golden rose of Eleanor of Aquitaine descended to her son Richard Lion-Heart, which he combined with the red cross of St. George; and later we come upon the red and white roses of Lancaster and York directly descended from this. Families in Italy, as well as in Germany, whose coats-of-arms bore the rose insignia in one form or another, might also be mentioned. The rose symbolism implicit in Dante's *Paradiso* is too well known to need discussion here, but it is well to

note that the *Fama Fraternitatis* first appeared as an appendix to the 1614 edition of Boccalini's satiric work *The Universal Reformation of Mankind*. Because Martin Luther had included rose and cross in his coat-of-arms*, which was therefore the principal insignia of the Reformation, the Catholic hierarchy looked upon all Rosicrucians as "Lutherans"—as Andreas assuredly was. The *Confessio Fraternitatis* appeared in 1615, and the last of the three Manifestoes, the *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, in 1616, the year of Shakespeare's death.

Three years after Shakespeare's death there appeared in England a work published by Robert Fludd, in which he described the Rose Cross as the plain Latin cross with a rose at the center, standing upon a pyramid of three steps. This seems to have been adapted as the emblem of a new Rose Croix Degree of Masonry about the middle of the eighteenth century, coinciding with the period of Goethe's birth.

But why do we now find the wreath added to the cross? "Who added to the cross the wreath of roses?"

Observe that the German word for wreath or garland is *kranz*, which also means crown; and we see that Goethe may have had in mind the famous Book M ("On the Secret Forces of Nature"), translated by Father C.R.C. from the Arabic, according to the legend. The book is supposed to have been lost, but we learn that John Heydon, another English Rosicrucian, in his book *The Wise Man's Crown or, Glory of the Rose Cross*, published in 1664, says that this work is a faithful copy of the Book M belonging to Christian Rosenkreuz.

A new wave of Rosicrucianism swept Europe in 1710 and crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the New World; and we can observe its European flowering in the young Wolfgang von Goethe, who was born in 1749, and whose youth thus paralleled the new dynamic and revolutionary impulse emanating from the ancient Order. It is precisely in the wreath, or the Book M, that the key to Goethe's work is to be found; and not only Goethe's work but that of all succeeding messengers of the Rosicrucian Order of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most of whom did not announce them-

selves as such but are known by their fruits.

The rose-garlanded cross appears first in world literature in Goethe's *The Mysteries*, heralding not merely the dawn but the bright day of a new scientific-spiritual revelation.

As our pilgrim, Brother Mark, gazes in rapt contemplation of the mysterious emblem high uplifted before him, winds from the peak drive the hovering silver clouds across the heavens, and against their motion the cross and roses seem to be moving, to be flying, upward!

Out of the midst of the wreath, from the central point of the cross, a sudden beam of light shines forth. This is no ordinary light, no reflected beam of the sun or any such mundane thing. It is a stream of living light, sacred, holy, and it is threefold, flowing from the central point, pressing out from the central point, in three separate beams. Goethe does not say that these three beams form a triangle; but they do, obviously, represent the divine Trinity, and in sacred art the Trinity is always represented by the triangular halo: "Goal is Light." And we recall the custom of writing Christian Rosenkreuz's initials thus: C.: R.: C.:

*The Cross stood densely hung about with roses!
Who added roses to the Cross?
The garland of roses swelled, spread on all sides
To surround the hard wood with softness.*

*Light silvery clouds soared,
Rose upward with Cross and roses,
And from the center sprang holy life—
A threefold ray from a single point.*

Of course we may, if we want to be very prosaic and literal-minded, suppose that Goethe is describing a lamp or lantern which thus sends out its patterned beams into the gathering desk; and indeed, in Rosicrucian legend the Ever-burning Lamp of Father C.R.C. is very much in evidence, symbolical at a glance of the unquenchable fire of Truth.

Here, however, there is something more added. This is the placement of the Light at the midpoint of the cross, at the central point, within the wreath.

Philosophically, the point refers to the Monad,

from which all creation presses outward into manifestation from increate spirit. The metaphysics of this symbolism would require a treatise to itself. Suffice it to say that mathematically all of the geometric figures are in a sense “pressed out” from the “point,” which has position but no magnitude; the point becoming the line, the line the plane, the plane the solid. The point pressed out in every direction becomes the sphere. The point, circle, and sphere represent God, whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.

The point is also, in humanity, the Virgin Spirit, commonly termed the Monad in all modern philosophy, which is triune in essence, just as Deity is, in whose image it is made. In the Kabbala the point is the Yod, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is called the Workman of Deity, the “Seed” of creation. It is no more than a tiny bent flame on a microscopic stem. In the Pythagorean Tetractys, the “dot” is this same Monad which equates to the Yod.

*But not a word surrounded the image
To give the mystery sense and clarity.
In the gathering dusk growing gray and grayer,
The pilgrim stood, pondered, and felt himself
raised up.*

By no words is the holy symbol surrounded to bring sense and clarity to the mystery. There it stands, raised high up over the portal, the threefold beam of living splendor pouring out of the Central Point, where the arms of the Cross intersect the upright. What significance has this point for the Rosicrucian student today? It is precisely here that the single white rose is placed upon the Rose Cross for esoteric and healing exercises, in the center of the red rose garland which hangs upon the cross.

The value of this becomes clear in the light of what was told by a certain student who said that, on an evening when the healing meeting was being held at Mt. Ecclesia, he sat meditating, in the manner directed, on the Rose Cross which hangs on the west wall of the Chapel. Suddenly the white rose disappeared from his mental view and he found

himself gazing into a brilliant light, like a searchlight, which sent out its beams into mental space, reaching toward infinity. This student had not read *The Mysteries*, either in the original or in translation, but the symbol spoke for him as it had spoken for Goethe more than a century before.

Goethe does not, it is true, mention the Star, which is conspicuous in the modern emblem; but this is implicit in the beams of splendor emanating from the Central Point, for it is at once apparent that in the modern emblem the golden rays of the Star are in fact shooting out from the Center.

There is no writing, no inscription, nothing to indicate the significance of the emblem as Brother Mark sees it, and this reminds us of Plato’s words “...about the subjects I seriously study...there does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like

other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter nourishes itself.”

Goethe furnishes no further details of the ancient emblem than those here described. He does not describe the color of the cross, which one must assume is simply “woodcolor” from what is said. The garland or crown is described, but with no specific number of roses mentioned; and there is some possibility that ‘he envisioned the rose plant twining about the entire cross, although the roses cluster about the intersection of the arms, or Central Point.

Raised high above the portal of the monastery, the emblem would be the last to receive the rays of the sun as it sank behind the mountain peak.

Such is the Mystery which Brother Mark reverently contemplated as the twilight grew ever deeper and greyer about him.

At last, when already the high stars are turning their bright eyes down to him, he knocks at the door. (Continued) □

—Ann Barkhurst

