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## The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries

In one brief lecture, it will be possible to cover only the barest essentials of the Eleusinian Mysteries. This ancient cult goes back to pre-Hellenic times; revived in the same period as the cult of Dionysus, it knew such a flowering that wherever Greeks lived its praises were sung; and a thousand years later, when Christianity put an end to the Mysteries of Eleusis, Greek life itself seemed to have sunk into the grave with them. This cult, which for centuries preserved so solemn a dignity that critique and irony scarcely dared to question it, will, more than any other—if we can raise even a little the veils of mystery surrounding it—throw light on the relation between pre-Hellenic man and the godhead.

We shall not concern ourselves with details for their own sake, but seek rather to answer two questions: What was the specific character of these mysteries? And what benefit did the believers who flocked to Eleusis from all parts of the Greek world expect from them?

The answer to the second question seems at first sight very simple. The so-called Homeric Hymn to Demeter, our oldest literary document pertaining to the Eleusinian Mysteries, tells that they were established by the goddess herself and that those who took part in them could look forward to a far better lot in the afterworld beyond the grave. "Blessed," it calls them; Pindar likewise calls them "blessed," and Sophocles "thrice blessed." These "beatitudes" run through all antiquity down to its tragic end. But this was not men's only reason for giving thanks to the Eleusinian goddess. Her unique favors included the promise of agricultural fertility, the ennoblement of human life, the cultural gifts which overcame the bestial in man. The goddess, said Isocrates at the beginning of the fourth century B.C., gave us two things when she came to Eleusis: first the fruit of the field, to which we owe our transition from an animal to a human life; and second the rites, par-

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icipation in which makes us look with joyful hope upon the end of life and upon existence as a whole. And, he continues, the city of Athens (to which by then Eleusis had long been joined) communicated both of these to all others in the most magnanimous way, so that all partook in full measure of its religious and agricultural blessings. The same is attested by the most authoritative voices of later centuries. In an oration delivered in 59 B.C., Cicero, introducing a deputation from Athens, declared that it was this city in which "humanity," religion, and agriculture had originated, and from which these sublime gifts had been carried to all countries. We know that the presentation of an ear of wheat plays a central role in the mysteries. The first grain is said to have been sown and harvested on the plain of Rharus, in Eleusis. There was the threshing floor of Triptolemus, the old Eleusinian hero, to whom, as we see in many friezes, the goddesses themselves gave the first grain, bidding him to diffuse its blessing throughout the world. This agrarian element plays so large a part in the Eleusinian tradition that until recently scholars felt tempted to explain the whole Eleusinian mystery on this basis. And indeed, no interpretation can be taken seriously that does not seek to relate the mystery and the high hope it called forth to the miracle of growth. But the nature of this relation is a great question, and I do not believe that any of the answers so far given has been satisfactory.

Let us first consider the principal goddesses of the Eleusinian cult. They are, as everyone knows, Demeter and her daughter Kore, "the maiden," or Persephone. Here we can disregard the other Eleusinian deities, except for Pluto, king of the underworld, who abducted Persephone and made her his wife. Searching for her vanished daughter, Demeter came to Eleusis; there she found her, there she made her peace with the gods and gave to men the holy mysteries and agriculture. This is the narrative of the Homeric Hymn. Despite her Greek name, Demeter is indubitably descended from a pre-Hellenic culture, as we can see by many usages and conceptions connected with her religion, particularly her Arcadian cults. In Thelpusa, she was called Erinys, "the Angry One"; it was believed that, in the form of a mare, she was mounted by the stallion Poseidon, from which union she bore a daughter with a secret name and the accursed steed Areion;<sup>1</sup> and in Phigalia, there was a similar legend concerning Demeter Melaina, whom a wooden statue represented as a woman with the head of a horse, holding in one hand

<sup>1</sup> Pausanias, 8, 25.

a dolphin, in the other a dove.<sup>2</sup> She was worshiped eminently as the giver of grain, but other fruits and blossoms were considered among her gifts and she was associated also with the growth of man, to whom after death she was a mother, receiving him in her womb, the womb of the earth. In Attica the dead were said to "belong to Demeter." It is easy to understand that women should have played an important part in the cult of this goddess. Persephone, who passes as her daughter, is identified as pre-Hellenic by her mere name, which also assigns her unmistakably to the realm of the dead, and Homer has indeed made her known to all as queen of the dead.

How did Demeter come by this daughter? What does the close bond between her and a daughter signify? For though every god has his father and mother, there is no other example of so close a relation between mother and daughter. Even Athene, who sprang forth from the head of Zeus, is not so much of a daughter to her father as Persephone to her mother. It seems likely she was regarded as a kind of duplication or continuation of Demeter. But the fervor of their love reminds us of those great nature goddesses who are linked with a beloved: Aphrodite with her Adonis, the Great Mother with her Attis, the Babylonian Ishtar with her Tammuz, the Egyptian Isis with her Osiris. All mourn the sudden death of their beloved; and since his death and resurrection are seen as a symbol of the death and reawakening of the earth's vegetation, the analogy to Demeter's adventure seems complete. But this comparison overlooks a difference which increases in importance the more we examine it. The *mater dolorosa* with whom Demeter has been compared mourns for her son; Aphrodite, Cybele, Ishtar, Isis, and others mourn for their beloved, their husband, their brother. But Demeter mourns for a daughter who resembles her and gives the impression of a double. The character of this relation is very different from that of the others. Despite apparent parallels, it is ultimately unique, requiring a very special explanation.

But the story of Persephone herself also represents a riddle. As she is playing in the meadow with other divine maidens, as she bends down in delight to pick the lovely narcissus, the god of the underworld bursts suddenly forth from the earth in his chariot. He seizes her and carries her down to the underworld. She becomes his wife, but subsequently he is compelled to release her for certain months of the year and send her back to the upper world. From time immemorial this story has been associated with vegeta-

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8, 42.

tion, particularly with grain. At a relatively early date, when substances were designated in poetic diction by the names of the gods under whose protection they stood, ground wheat was called Kore and wine Dionysus.<sup>3</sup> But what death in nature can here be meant, and what does the marriage with the king of the dead signify? In recent times the old notion that Persephone was the seed wheat, which must die in the darkness of the earth in order to be resurrected as a seedling, has quite rightly been rejected. Ernst Haeckel expressed his indignation at the Apostle Paul for illustrating man's spiritual destiny with the remark that the seed must die before it could live. No tiller of the soil can ever have thought that he was planting seed in a grave where it must go through death. If any image was appropriate here, it was a sexual one, and many ancient peoples did indeed understand plowing and sowing in this light. Thus the myth of Persephone cannot be interpreted in this way, quite aside from the fact that her marriage with Pluto and her enduring rule over the dead would still remain unexplained. Recently, an extremely artificial explanation has been attempted. According to this version, Persephone was the threshed grain that was preserved in underground vessels, from which, in due season, the seed was taken. Since this underground supply of grain constituted the wealth of the house, it was quite understandable that Persephone should have been associated with Pluto, the god of the riches under the earth, and since he was at the same time the lord of the dead, she automatically became queen of the dead, particularly as the dead were buried in similar vessels beneath the earth; her resurrection, finally, was originally nothing other than the opening of the grain bins at the sowing season.<sup>4</sup> I do not believe that this explanation will find many friends.

Far more convincing is the notion that the rape of Persephone refers to the annual disappearance of vegetation, whether in the parching heat of summer or in the cold of winter. The mourning of other goddesses seems to have this significance. But here we encounter a strange circumstance which, surprisingly, has never been noted. And this leads us to the central point.

In the myths which we have compared with that of Persephone the earth loses its fertility when the god descends to the underworld. "Since Queen Ishtar went down to the underworld," says the Babylonian legend, "the bull no longer mounts the cow," etc. The goddess vanishes into the depths,

<sup>3</sup> Eubulus and Antiphanes, in Athenaeus, III, p. 108 c, and X, p. 449 c.

<sup>4</sup> Nilsson, after Cornford.

and fertility with her. There is a direct correspondence. But this is by no means the case in the Greek myth. Here, as the Homeric Hymn relates, Demeter wanders about for many days, seeking a trace of her vanished daughter. When finally she learns from Helios that Hades has taken her for his wife with the consent of Zeus, she is consumed with anger against the lord of Olympus. She no longer desires to live among the gods but decides to go among men. In the shape of an old woman, she comes to the palace of the king of Eleusis, where she is received with honor and offered food and drink. She remains silent and refuses all sustenance until Iambe succeeds in making her laugh with her jests. The spell is broken. The queen gives her a potion which Demeter, since her mourning prohibits wine, orders mixed of special ingredients—it is the very same as that later given to the initiates at Eleusis. Then the queen confides her youngest child to the old woman's care. The boy prospers miraculously in the hands of his divine nurse, who attempts to make him immortal, but her magic is undone by the anxious mother's curiosity. Demeter now gives herself to be recognized as a goddess and demands that a great altar and temple be built for her. No sooner is this done than she hides in her sanctuary, far from all gods, immersed in mourning for her lost daughter. Only then does she cause a terrible drought to descend on the land for a whole year. The human race would have perished, the gods would have been deprived of all offerings, if Zeus had not brought about a reconciliation based on the understanding that Persephone might spend a part of the year with her mother, but that she would remain forever the wife of Pluto. Thus the disappearance of the earth's fertility does not at all coincide with the disappearance of the goddess who supposedly personified the grain. In fact, it occurs considerably later, induced by the angry mother's vengeance. The same version prevails in the famous chorus of Euripides' *Helena* (1301ff.). Here Demeter, enraged at what has been done to her, withdraws into the mountain wastes and permits nothing to grow on earth, until at last the gods manage to appease her sorrow. In this chorus, Demeter is called the "mountain mother," that is to say, is equated with the "Great Mother," the "mother of the gods." A recently discovered Epidaurian hymn tells a similar tale concerning the "mother of the gods," except that the motif of the ravished daughter is lacking.<sup>5</sup> Here the "mother of the gods" dwells in the mountain solitudes and refuses to

<sup>5</sup> Paul Maas, "Epidaurische Hymnen," *Königsberger Gelehrte Gesellschaft, Geisteswissenschaftliche Klasse, Schriften* (Berlin), IX (1933), 134ff.

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return to the gods unless she is given a share of the whole world, half of the heavens, half of the earth, and a third of the sea. Her demand is granted, for in the end she is called "Great Mistress Mother of Olympus." If Demeter, as we have seen, is equated with her, this is no arbitrary notion. If nothing else, the ancient image of the horse-headed Demeter Erinys in Phigalia, holding in her hands the dolphin and the dove, discloses a goddess of cosmic proportions. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, moreover, the same is said of Hecate, who seems related to Persephone by the name of her father, Perses, and who in the Eleusinian myth and cult is closely associated with Demeter (cf. the Hymn): she too has a share in heaven, earth, and sea.

Thus we recognize a primeval myth of the earth mother, or mother of the gods, in which, angry, she demands her rights. In Arcadian Thelpusa she is called Erinys, "the Angry One," sharing this name with the terrible goddesses of malediction and vengeance. Here her anger is directed primarily toward Poseidon, who has ventured too close to her.<sup>6</sup> Another motive for her anger is the rape of her daughter Persephone, and here as elsewhere, the gods must make a great concession to her. Kore may now spend a part of the year with her mother above the earth, but she must return regularly below and she remains forever the queen of the dead. In this she differs from all those gods who seem to symbolize the flowering and fading of nature. Clearly, her journey to the underworld cannot have reference to the grain, since growth does not cease as a result of her disappearance; rather, it is an act of vengeance on the part of the offended mother. And even more cogent proof is to be found in another circumstance, to which we shall now turn our attention.

According to the original myth, the grieving Demeter may have withered trees, grass, and flowers—but not the grain, for before the disappearance of Persephone there was no grain. The form of the myth preserved in the Hymn, which minimizes the agrarian element, has quite obscured the context in this crucial point. The most important literary and pictorial versions tell us plainly that seed and harvest were given to men only after Persephone's descent into the underworld. Accordingly, all those who regard Persephone as a symbol of the grain start from a totally false assumption. Persephone is not the grain, and she cannot be likened to the gods of dying and nascent nature. If she had any such meaning, how could she be queen of the underworld? The myth shows her picking flowers with other divine

<sup>6</sup> Pausanias, 8, 25.

maidens on the Nysæan meadows—the Prince of the Dead seizes her and carries her off to the depths, where in future she will share his rule over the shades. What else is this but an image of the ancient and widespread belief that the divine being who rules over the dead formerly lived on earth and then vanished one day to a mysterious and remote realm, over which this being has reigned ever since?

But from the point of view of agrarian religion, we must note that this sorrowful descent of the virginal Persephone *precedes* the introduction of grain raising. Only since Persephone has been wedded to Pluto, only since she has been Queen of the Dead, has there been harvesting and sowing. Death is prerequisite to the growth of the grain.

We have already indicated that Demeter herself is not alien to the dark realm. This connection is particularly clear in the cult and myth of Demeter Chthonia in Hermione.<sup>7</sup> This is also shown by the epithets given to Demeter in Arcadia: Erinys, “the Angry One,” and Melaina, “the Black.” And it should be recalled that, according to Spartan law, mourning for the dead ends on the twelfth day with a sacrifice to Demeter. But the realm of the dead comes far closer to us in the figure of her daughter Persephone. Here we find a powerful intuition that seems extremely strange to modern thinking, while to early peoples it was as natural as if existence itself had spoken to them. And among many so-called primitive peoples, it still forms the basis of important usages and myths. The substance of this intuition is that generation and fertility, and particularly the growth of grain, are indissolubly bound up with death. Without death, there would be no procreation. The inevitability of death is not a destiny decreed by some hostile power. In birth itself, in the very act of procreation, death is at work. It is at the base of all new life. In the Bible, procreation, birth, and agriculture as well occur outside of paradise and appear only after death has been decreed for man. Certain primitive peoples of today still preserve a tradition—which is symbolically enacted at regular festivals—that a mythical woman had to die in order that the grain might spring from her dead limbs; and that only by initiation into her death can man become potent and life be renewed.<sup>8</sup>

This then is the core of the myth of Persephone, to which the Eleusinian Mysteries attach. Man receives the fertility which is indispensable to him

<sup>7</sup> Pausanias, 2, 35, 4ff. and elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. E. Jensen and H. Niggemeyer, eds., *Hainuwele: Volkserzählungen von der Molukken-Insel Ceram* (Frankfort on the Main, 1939).

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from the hand of death. He must appeal to the Queen of the Dead. And this he can do; for here in Eleusis her divine mother mourned for her, here she returned to her mother, and here the goddesses created agriculture. But they did more. They provided also for the destiny of man himself: Demeter gave them a rite and a vision through which they might gain certainty that a happy lot awaited them after their death. How Demeter takes man under her protection after his birth is shown in the story, related in the Homeric Hymn, of the Eleusinian prince who thrived so prodigiously under her tutelage; her favor to man is evinced by her epithet "Kourotrophos" and many other circumstances which we need not mention here. But her daughter went down into the realm of the dead and there became queen. It is she who reigns there below. Small wonder that these goddesses should have promised superabundant grace in this world and the next to those whom they received into their mysteries!

But what was enacted in these mysteries, what befell the initiates?

"Eleusis is a shrine common to the whole earth," said Aristides in his discourse on Eleusis, in the second century A.D., "and of all the divine things that exist among men, it is both the most terrible and the most luminous. At what place in the world have more miraculous tidings been sung, where have the dromena called forth greater emotion, where has there been a greater rivalry between seeing and hearing . . .?" And he speaks of the "ineffable visions" which, as he says, "many generations of fortunate men and women" have been privileged to behold. We have many such utterances. We must therefore take care not to belittle these mysteries, as many tend to do, by reducing them to the level of agricultural rituals, offering only a metaphoric consolation. But we must also take care not to resurrect the sad ruins of the shattered mystery cult in the image of our own religious life and lapse into the tone of certain edifying but absurd modern interpretations.

We have by far the most information concerning what interests us least: the rituals of purification and initiation preceding the supreme and crucial act. There are ample pictorial representations of this ritual, which cannot have formed part of the sacrosanct secret tradition. The preparatory acts of purification need not concern us here. And if we go into some detail about the ritual of initiation, which is known to us through the famous passage in Clement of Alexandria, it is solely because some recent writers have regarded it as a key to the authentic meaning and content of the mysteries. In this



passage the mystes is quoted as testifying to the acts which he had performed: "I have fasted, I have drunk the potion, I have taken [something] from the chest, and after acting, laid [it] in the basket, then taken [it] out of the basket and [put it] into the chest." The first two points are perfectly clear. The mystes, like Demeter herself, has fasted and drunk the sacred potion, the ingredients of which are listed in the Homeric Hymn. The mystes makes himself like the goddess. This is obvious and throws no little light on the initiation into the mysteries. But the following! How many men have racked their brains over the meaning of these words! What fantastic hypotheses have been devised to explain them! What was taken from the chest we are not told, nor do we learn the nature of the activity to which the word "ἐργασάμενος" refers. The ethnologist Felix Speiser<sup>9</sup> has recalled the rites of primitive peoples, in which the novice, by way of initiation into farm labor, must ritually perform its essential actions. He then develops the theory that what the Eleusinian chest contained was seed wheat; the mystes tells us that he took seed from the chest and sowed it in the field. This explanation is at least more compatible with the meaning of the word than the others. However, it can be neither confirmed nor refuted; it merely shows that we know nothing. An older explanation met for a time with great approval; indeed, it seemed so convincing that writers began to take it for granted, soon forgetting that it represented not a tradition but a very daring hypothesis. The context in which Clement cites the ritual formula seemed to imply that the "action" to which the mystes refers was of an obscene character. This, to be sure, was an error in interpretation,<sup>10</sup> but it made it possible to associate with the Eleusinian Mysteries also a notion familiar from other contexts, the notion of mystical rebirth as a child of the godhead. Albrecht Dieterich presumed that the object taken from the chest and in some way manipulated by the mystes was a phallus. This, however, met with the objection that Demeter was after all a female deity. Alfred Körte was therefore much applauded when he announced that it must be a female sexual symbol. Now everything seemed as clear as day. By touching the "womb," as the sexual symbol was called, the mystes was reborn; and since such an act must after all have constituted the climax of the mysteries, Ludwig Noack went so far as to assume that the hierophant

<sup>9</sup> "Die eleusinischen Mysterien als primitive Initiation," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (Berlin), LX (1928), 369.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ludwig Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin, 1932), p. 81.

displayed this "womb" to the congregation in a blaze of light and that, beholding it, the initiates could no longer doubt their beatific lot as children of the goddess. It is difficult to report such notions without a smile. In recent years it has been soundly argued that the touching of the "womb" by the mystes, a performance which some writers have described in the crudest colors, would point rather to a marriage with the goddess than to a rebirth out of the goddess. But this "womb" is an invention, based on no evidence whatsoever. On closer examination, the traditions invoked in favor of this hypothesis fail to support it. The whole theory of rebirth in the Eleusinian Mysteries, so often and solemnly repeated, is utterly without foundation. And what is more: if it did bear the slightest semblance of truth, it would raise a great difficulty. For then the ritual to which the obscure words of Clement's formula refer would embody the highest goal of the mysteries—namely, rebirth. But if there is any point upon which all witnesses agree, it is that the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries was not a ritual, or anything which the mystes did or physically experienced, but a *vision*.

The supreme rite is called *epopteia*. All the beatitudes refer to it and to it alone. "Happy is he who has seen it!" says the Homeric Hymn, directly relating the vision to the assurance of a favored lot in the other world. As all witnesses agree, everything was a preparation for this vision.

What can it have been, the mere display of which, even accompanied by solemn words, had power to create so deep an impression? The state of mind of the mystai beholding it has often been described. For a long while hope alternated with fear and dread, until at length the most blissful certainty flooded their hearts. The experiences of that sacred night, from whose darkness suddenly the most brilliant light burst forth, have often been evoked as a metaphor for the terrifying darkness through which the beginner in philosophy must make his way before the night of uncertainty vanishes and the sun of truth shines upon him. In his treatise *On the Soul*, Plutarch compares death and its terrors, which are suddenly transformed into the beatitude of the soul freed from suffering, with the emotion and transfiguration of the mystai who, once they have beheld the sublime vision, no longer doubt that they alone are blessed, while the others, those who have not been initiated, are damned. What can they have seen?

This we shall never know. But we can form an idea of the kind of thing that was revealed to them; and this is more important than concrete details, which would themselves require an interpretation.

No drama can have produced such an effect unless the audience had the certainty that it was no mere play, but a real event. And the truth, disclosed to the *mystai* by images, signs, or words, must have been something absolutely new, astonishing, inaccessible to rational cognition. This is almost self-evident. And yet it has often been forgotten. For scarcely any of the hypotheses so far conceived take it into account.

An episode in the myth of Herakles makes it clear that the certainty attained in Eleusis had reference, among other things, to man's destiny in the other world. Before descending into the underworld in search of Cerberus, Herakles has himself initiated in Eleusis.<sup>11</sup> In Euripides,<sup>12</sup> he even says, after vanquishing the hound of hell and returning from Hades: "I succeeded because I had seen the sacred actions in Eleusis." He had good fortune in the underworld. Here again, the vision is designated as the decisive experience. During the sacrosanct action the *mystes* is passive; he receives no teachings, but is put into a state which is not subject to natural explanation. Aristotle<sup>13</sup> says expressly that the *mystai* were not meant to learn anything, but to suffer an experience and to be moved.

Now we have a relatively trustworthy report concerning certain of the things that met the eye. The Roman bishop Hippolytus tells us that the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries consisted in the display of an ear of wheat. We have no reason to doubt this statement; it fits in perfectly with the myth of the origin of agriculture, which is inseparable from the Eleusinian Mysteries. The ear of grain was the gift of Demeter, and from Eleusis it was transmitted, along with the principles of agriculture and the precepts of human culture, to the rest of mankind. But what does this display signify, and what effect can it have produced? "The immense life-giving power of the earth mother," we are told, "was impressed immediately upon the souls of the *mystai*"; "it presumably was thought to guarantee the expectation of a new life under the earth, acquired in the sacrament of divine filiation" (Körte). But what new certainty could be conferred by a sight which was as familiar to everyone as an ear of grain? And moreover, "Nature's inexhaustible generative power," symbolized, according to Noack, by the ear of wheat, did not inspire ancient man to confidence in his own fate, but rather to melancholy and resignation. Throughout ancient poetry we find the lament that the sun rises and sets, that the flowers die and reblossom, but not man. It was the Christians who first looked upon the death and

11 Apollodorus, 2, 122.

12 *Madness of Heracles*, 613.

13 Fr. 15.

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regeneration of nature as a consolation for man.<sup>14</sup> And if, finally, we bear in mind that the mystery of rebirth is a modern invention, this explanation collapses entirely. Several writers have rejected it in recent years. But what remains then? Martin P. Nilsson, the Swedish historian of religion, comes to the conclusion: "The sacred ear of grain, harbinger of the future harvest, gave the eoptes the certainty of recurrence, of indestructibility not only in the vegetable kingdom, but also in the world of men"; the certainty, that is, that though man must die he will survive in his progeny. Truly a precious revelation, that communicates with such sacrosanct solemnity what every noninitiate had known since time immemorial. Such an explanation does not cast light on the mysterious, but merely negates the mystery.

Ludwig Deubner suspected that we are dealing not with any simple natural act, but with a miracle.<sup>15</sup> Hippolytus tells us not only that an ear was displayed but that it was cut, that it had previously been harvested "in silence" and then was shown. Both context and grammar require us to understand Hippolytus' words in this sense. And we must indeed conclude that a mysterious act, a kind of magic, was performed. Deubner believes that a magic formula (*ἴε κῦε*) was uttered: "And behold in this season when no grain grows"—for it is autumn—"an ear of grain has grown." He has in mind a pious fraud: a single ear of wheat has been left standing in the plain of Rharus and is now mowed to be displayed to the faithful. This idea is certainly unacceptable. But there can be no doubt of the miraculous nature of the event. The ear of wheat growing and maturing with a supernatural suddenness is just as much a part of the mysteries of Demeter as the vine growing in a few hours is part of the revels of Dionysus. And the veneration of the Mysteries by such men as Sophocles and Euripides is hardly compatible with the easy notion of a fraud practiced by the priests. We find the very same plant miracles in the nature festivals of primitive peoples. The ear of wheat suddenly grown, silently harvested and displayed to the *mystai* is then really a revelation and pledge of the goddess, who first gave this fruit to mankind through the Eleusinians. More than that: it is an epiphany of Persephone herself, her mythical *first* recurrence in the shape of the grain, after her descent to the realm of the dead. We need not ask what thoughts and hopes the *mystes* associated with an epiphany of this sort. It transported him into the realm of miracles, into the presence

14 See for example, Minucius Felix, 34, 11.

15 *Attische Feste*, p. 86.

of the great goddesses themselves in the moment when they bestowed the ear of grain upon men. And here we have the meaning of the display; this alone can account for the beatific certainty conferred on the mystes by what he saw.

The central motif of the mystery vision was doubtless Demeter's grief over the rape of her daughter and the transformation of her laments into rejoicing when Persephone reappeared. Isocrates suggests this unmistakably, though with the necessary reticence, when he speaks of the important services rendered Demeter by the Eleusinians when she came to them in search of her daughter—services concerning which "one must keep silent in the presence of the profane."<sup>16</sup>

We readily believe Clement of Alexandria when he assures us that Demeter and Kore had become the characters in a mystical drama, solemnizing by torchlight the wanderings of Demeter, the rape of Persephone, and the grief of the goddesses. There are still other witnesses who confirm this. We need not dwell on them, but shall cite only Lactantius, because he compares the Egyptian representations of the lament of Isis for her lost Osiris with the mysteries of Demeter and declares explicitly that Persephone was sought at night with torches and was found again in the end amid rejoicing and a blaze of light.<sup>17</sup> What particulars of the myth—the rape, the quest, the mourning, the reconciliation with the gods, the reunion of the goddesses, the gift of agriculture, which various witnesses associate with the mysteries—were really enacted in this sacred night, can no longer be determined with certainty. But this is of secondary importance.

There has been no end of speculation regarding the manner in which such events may have been represented. Scholars have been puzzled no little by the fact that the Telesterion's forest of pillars must have made it difficult if not impossible for the mystai sitting along the walls to follow a dramatic action. Actually we must put aside the whole idea of a drama. The proceedings were assuredly of the greatest simplicity. An indication of this is that the Eleusinian account books<sup>18</sup> do not, among their many items, include a single entry which could possibly refer to the production of any sort of stage play. If we can determine the true nature of what took place here, the questions of outward form will answer themselves. For lack of reliable witnesses, we shall not inquire into the part played by mimes, choruses,

<sup>16</sup> *Panegyricus*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Epitome Institutionum Divinarum*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. L. R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* (Oxford, 1896-1909), Vol. III, p. 182.

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dances, etc., or seek technical explanations for the sudden change from awesome darkness to dazzling light. We shall be quite content if we can gain some little knowledge of the general nature of what was shown and account in some measure for the profound emotion it called forth.

Let us turn to the central point. We owe our most important record of the sacred night to Apollodorus of Athens; the person of its author raises it above all suspicion. In the moment when Kore was called, he reports, the hierophant struck the so-called *ἡχείον*, a kind of bronze gong.<sup>19</sup> The context leaves no doubt that the kingdom of the dead had burst open. For immediately afterward we are told that a similar gong was struck at the death of the Spartan kings. This suggests age-old rituals which have been preserved in Eleusis and in Sparta as well. The striking of the gong recalls Oriental and particularly Chinese funeral rites.

Persephone was summoned from the depths in other Greek cults. In Megara visitors were shown a rock to which Demeter was said to have summoned up her ravished daughter, and according to Pausanias,<sup>20</sup> the women of Megara still performed a corresponding rite. Dionysus was also evoked at his festival. "Come, lord Dionysus . . .!" called the sixteen women of Elis. And of course he came. And in Eleusis Kore came too, in answer to the call. She rose from the dead. She appeared. This is proved, if proof is still needed, by a newly found papyrus text, in which Herakles declares that he has no need to be initiated, because he himself, in his descent to the underworld, has seen everything that the Mysteries have to offer. He speaks of the sacred night and says finally: "I have seen Kore."<sup>21</sup> The queen of the underworld is present. And Demeter, of course, as well. Demeter with her grief, her lament, her search and rediscovery. What other gods and spirits were there we do not know. Concerning the chief Greek shrine of Isis (that goddess who is so close to Demeter that Foucart felt obliged to derive the Eleusinian cult from Egyptian sources), Pausanias<sup>22</sup> tells us that once when the festival was at its climax, a frivolous intruder entered the temple and found it "all full of spirits (or gods)." And as he told his story, he fell dead.

Various other things are related more or less clearly about the Mysteries,

<sup>19</sup> Scholiast on Theocritus, 2, 36 (Theocritus, Bion, Moschus, ed. Theophilus Kiessling, London, 1826, Vol. II, p. 41).

<sup>20</sup> In I, 43, 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Papiri della Reale Università di Milano*, Vol. I, ed. A. Vogliano (Milan, 1937), p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> In X, 32, 17.

and it would be tempting to examine these reports, first, of course, as to their credibility. Asterius tells us, for example, that the hierophant went down into a subterranean chamber, where he wedded the priestess of Demeter. Clement also writes that the hierophant performed a marital act, and Tertullian speaks explicitly of an act of violence against the priestess of Demeter, in repetition of what was done to the goddess. This cohabitation can only refer to the rape of Demeter by Zeus, which is mentioned by Clement himself and in a gloss to Plato. It seems startling, however, that Zeus should suddenly enter into the Eleusinian myth, and that the mother's mourning for her ravished daughter should be disturbed by a forced union with the god. But, little as we may understand it, this does belong to the myth of Demeter. At Thelpusa in Arcadia it was related that while she was searching for her daughter, Poseidon followed her and possessed her by force and trickery; this angered her, and that is why the Arcadians called her Erinys, "the Angry One";<sup>23</sup> the same story is told of the "Black" Demeter in Phigalia.<sup>24</sup> And now Clement, in a passage on Eleusis,<sup>25</sup> speaks of Demeter's rage after being embraced by Zeus. According to the Arcadian myth, a divine child resulted from this rape. Hippolytus<sup>26</sup> tells us that the hierophant solemnly announced the birth of a ζερός κοῦρος, and we might be tempted to connect this with the divine rape, as many have done. But the notion that the newborn child really represented the "reborn" mystes—see Dieterich, Körte, and Noack—is absolutely arbitrary and fantastic. In an agricultural cult there is nothing unusual about the enactment of a divine marriage. In the sun dances of American Plains Indians such an act forms an intrinsic part of the cult festival and a detailed account of this rite<sup>27</sup> is instructive in more than one respect. But it must be admitted that this aspect of the Mysteries raises too many imponderables; we prefer to drop the whole point. Whatever may have taken place, it assuredly did not (despite Clement's assertions) form a part of the vision. And, as we have said, it is to the vision that all the beatitudes refer. Asterius does indeed remark in very general terms that the whole congregation expected its salvation from what took place in the subterranean chamber, but to this we can attach no great significance.

We must go into all these secondary matters in order to understand the

<sup>23</sup> Pausanias, 8, 25.      <sup>24</sup> 8, 42.      <sup>25</sup> *Protrepticus*, II, 15-16.      <sup>26</sup> 5, 8.  
<sup>27</sup> George A. Dorsey, *The Arapaho Sun Dance* (Field Columbian Museum, 75; Anthropological Series, Vol. IV; Chicago, 1903).

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meaning and effect of the supreme rite. The gods are called, the gods are present. And what gods! When the modern scholar comes to this point, he usually thinks no farther. He easily explains the amazement of the enraptured mystai on the basis of delusion and priestly artifice. But anyone who has ever witnessed a great Oriental cult rite, as for example the Chinese evocation of Confucius, knows that in this sphere our rational concepts are not adequate. The simplest settings and actions here produce an overpowering effect on all present. At the crucial moment, when the sublime spirit that has been summoned prepares to appear, when the great drum begins to beat, first slowly and solemnly, then more and more rapidly, and finally in a breath-taking rhythm—even the most enlightened observer no longer doubts the real presence of the supernatural. But here in Eleusis there was more. The privileged initiates stood in an essential relation to the event they were to witness. They had been brought closer to the goddess by the preceding ritual, the fasting, the drinking of the potion, and so on; a bond had been forged between her and them. They had been taken into the myth, as it were, and in this stupendous moment the myth became reality.

What, then, is myth?—An old story, lived by the ancestors and handed down to the descendants. But the past is only one aspect of it. The true myth is inseparably bound up with the cult. The once-upon-a-time is also a now, what was is also a living event. Only in its twofold unity of then and now does a myth fulfill its true essence. The cult is its present form, the re-enactment of an archetypal event, situated in the past but in essence eternal. And the moment when this myth is realized is the festival of the gods, the holy day, recurring at a fixed interval. On this day the whole memory of the great ancestral experience is again true and present. The gods are at hand, as they were at the beginning of time, not only as majestic figures demanding reverence, but as what they are: supreme realities of the here and now, primal phenomena of the movement of being, creating and suffering powers of the living moment which also encompasses death. Without death there can be no life; without dying, no fertility. The stupendous moment has returned, the moment when the young goddess was ravished by darkness, when the divine mother sought her, mourning and lamenting her, until she learned that she was Queen of the Dead and would remain so; but she rises up again and with her the grain, to which men owe their civilization. And the mystai are witnesses of this event, which in essence is not a play, but divine presence, realized myth. Persephone is present, for



mankind, for the congregation, in the great moment that time has brought to pass. And she will be present again for every single man when the moment of death has come, that terrible festival of the death night, with which the Eleusinian Mysteries have so often been compared.

It would be rash even to attempt a concrete picture of what was beheld in such a moment. And since such an attempt would be an evaluation of the Mysteries, the scholar must learn to see that it is absurd to suppose we can understand anything so great by the mere application of philological method and a little modern psychology. It is as though we were to attempt a scientific approach to the world's great works of art. No doubt those men who were familiar enough with the authentic myth to experience the moment in its eternal quality and immediate divinity experienced other and higher emotions in calling the godhead than we can conceive of today. Before we moderns pass judgment on the ancient world, we should remember the words written by Hegel in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Mind*:

His [man's] spirit shows such poverty of nature that it seems to long for the mere pitiful feeling of the divine in the abstract, and to get refreshment from that, like a wanderer in the desert craving for the merest mouthful of water. By the little which can thus satisfy the needs of the human spirit we can measure the extent of its loss.<sup>28</sup>

The Eleusinian mystes lived the miracle of intimacy with the goddesses, he experienced their presence. He was received into the sphere of their acts and sufferings, into the immediate reality of their sublime being. His famous vision was no mere looking on. It was sublimation to a higher existence, a transformation of his being. What wonder then that the beholder of this vision should have been confident of a higher destiny in life, and in death, where Persephone was queen!

And is that not a rebirth? A meaningful perspective opens when we consider the ancient cult in this light. In all likelihood, the Eleusinian Mysteries were not originally secret, or at least no more so than the religious festivals of other archaic peoples and of primitive peoples today. We may regard them as a great example of that cult of the gods which goes back into pre-history and extends far beyond the Greek world; and in them we can discern that original religious spirit which we may call a spirit of rebirth, though in a sense not usually associated with that word. In the cult, the human community meets the godhead. They were taken into its sphere, just like those

28 Tr. J. B. Baillie (New York, 1931).

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primeval ancestors who were known to have enjoyed the most beautiful intimacy with the gods<sup>29</sup> in the Golden Age when men still lived in paradise. Now, with the beginning of the festival, with the coming of the gods themselves, that wonderful age was back again, the myth was present and fully real; the congregation entered into the myth, became again as the primal ancestors, the "golden" race, who were said to have been happy and "beloved of the blessed gods."<sup>30</sup>

Here there was no need of the crude sensuality and ritual of the later mysteries. And it must be admitted that the idea of rebirth that we encounter in Eleusis is not inferior to any other. Perhaps on serious reflection, we shall find its meaning very great and its truth all the more profound in that it does not make man dependent on the favor of any single power, but links him through a higher presence with the great movements and moments of a divine cosmos.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 35, fr. 82; Pausanias, 8, 24; and elsewhere.

<sup>30</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 120.