

Fernando Pessoa

There were three reasons why, in the pagan religions,

the essay on INITIATION

There were three reasons why, in the pagan religions, certain truths, or things thought to be truths, were delivered only in secrecy and apartness, by initiation. The first reason was a social one: it was thought that those certain truths were unfit for delivery to any man, unless he was in a certain measure prepared to receive, and that they would have disastrous social effects if they were made public, for that would mean that they would be misunderstood. «Etiamsi revelare destruere est. . .» The second reason was a philosophic one: it was thought that, in themselves, such truths were not of a kind that the common man could understand, and that mental confusion and therefore unbalance in conduct would result from their being uselessly communicated to him. The third reason was, so to speak, a spiritual one: it was thought that such truths, being truths of the inner life, should not be communicated but suggested, and that the suggestion should be impressive, it had to be girt round with secrecy, that it might be felt to be valuable, with ritual, that it might impress and astonish, with symbols, that the candidate be forced to work out his own way, by striving to interpret the symbols, instead of thinking himself full of knowledge, if communication had been made by dogmatic or philosophic teaching.

I do not say that these three reasons stood clear, either severally or together yet divided thus, in the minds of the ancients, priests or laymen of their religions. But I do say that, if not by direct intelligence, then at least by intuition, they based their religions on this divisional scheme.

The religions of the ancients, and preeminently so the pagan religions of Greece and Rome, which are those that most concern us, since our minds are their children, were divided into three forms. There was a social form, the cultus, which was of the man as citizen. There was an individual form, the poetry, which was of the man as non-citizen; the cultus duly fulfilled, he could interpret to himself the gods as he chose and elaborate their legends as he

best thought fit. And there was a secret form, initiation, which participated in secrecy of the characteristics of both: it was individual, because (even when initiation is collective, as it was in the great pagan Mysteries) it is always the individual who is initiated and not the group; it was social, because initiation was communicated in ritual and ritual is social.

Which with the Christians is rarely linked or fused with poetry as it was with the pagans. (We will not understand the middle ages until we understand that theology was their poetry, that the lack of poetry then was but the presence of poetry under another form).

All religions, however, are in the same state as the great pagan religions. The three forms of religion will be found, one way or another, in all. In the Christian religions, for instance, we have the public cult, be it highly ceremonial, as in the Roman Church, or poor to nakedness, as in the extreme Protestant dissensions; we have the individual religion, meaning the personal reflection on the dogmas and formulae of faith, and this is theology where (with the pagans) it was rather poetry; and we have the inner life of the Christian, which is his initiation, for in the Christian religions initiation is considered as given by Christ alone mystically, not by any priest or hierophant ritually or ceremonially. In other words — the exacter meaning of which will be understood later —, pagan initiation moved towards Magic, as all ritual initiations do, Christian initiation moved towards Mysticism, as do all meditative initiations; it will also be seen later that there is a third type of initiation.

Whatever be the number of grades, outward or inward, in the scale of ascent towards Truth, they may be considered as three — Neophyte, Adept and Master. In reality the grades are ten — four under Neophyte, three under Adept and three (so to speak) under Master. There are really five under Neophyte, but the first grade is not numbered. There are also two intergrades, falling between the first and second, and the second and third orders, and these are unnumbered too. The unnumbered grades are grades of probation whereas the others are, each within its measure, grades of attainment.

The Neophyte, throughout the grades which this expression describes, is essentially a learner; his way is towards the completion of knowledge in the outer sphere. In the Adept, throughout his three steps, there is a progress in

the unifying of knowledge with life. In the Master there is, or is said to be, a destruction of the unity thus attained in virtue of a higher unity.

A comparison with simpler things will, I think, render this clear. Let us suppose that the writing of great poetry is the end of initiation. The Neophyte stage will be the acquisition of the cultural elements which the poet will have to deal with in writing poetry — being, grade by grade and in what seems to me to be an exact analogy: (0) grammar, (1) general culture, (2) particular literary culture, (3) The Adept stage will be, drawing out the analogy in the same manner: (4) the writing of simple lyrical poetry, as in a common lyric, (5) the writing of complex lyrical poetry, as in (7) the writing of ordered or philosophical lyrical poetry, as in the ode.

The Master stage will be, in the same manner: (8) the writing of epic poetry, (9) the writing of dramatic poetry, (10) the fusing of all poetry, lyric, epic and dramatic, into something beyond all these.

Three remarks will occur to the reader of this literary analogy. The first is that one can be a poet without the Neophyte grades, an Adept of the first Adept grade without even «taking» the first Neophyte one. The second is that, the progression stated throughout does not correspond to what usually happens in life, be it that of a poet or of any other man. The third is that a fusing of all poetry, lyric, epic dramatic, into something beyond all three is an attainment passing understanding.

I have made the reader make these remarks that I may, by replying to them, complete the analogy with an explanation. As to the first remark. The first Adept grade is indeed the first real grade of real initiation. A simple mystic, who fuses his faith and his life, has attained to the beginning of real initiation, whereas the perfected neophyte, in whom faith (or knowledge) and life are still separate, has not attained it. But if the spontaneous Adept has reached the Fifth Grade without having passed the first five (which include the Zero grade) he will be kept standing for a long time at the entry of the Middle Chamber, where the first grade of adeptship may conveniently be said to be «placed». To pass to the Sixth Grade he will have to come back, in a sense, to the beginning.

s. d.

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