

THE RETURN OF PERSEPHONE

by L. Svetlana of Feraferia, 1971, edited by Jo Carson

In happier millennia of ancient Greece (approximately 1700 BC to 300 AD) a refined thread of sacral awareness flourished like a sisterhood of starry blossoms midst dry, stony fields of rising masculine consciousness. At Eleusis, in the mysteries of Demeter and her daughter Persephone, humanity unfolded perhaps its most tender and humane dream of life here and hereafter. Carl Kerényi tells us that for Pagan Greeks “mystical” referred to the “atmospheric sensuous quality of a nocturnal feast”, and not, as in later mysticism, to man’s exit from the world (in which he as an individual is alone) to achieve union of his whole being with the universal One.

For the ancient Greek the mysteria, specific festivals in honor of gods and goddesses, celebrated the natural genesis of life out of darkness and that mysterious and ineffable quality of nature, called the *Arreton*. At Eleusis the *mystai* (uninitiated) entered into the darkness and experienced the unutterable as *Arretos Koura*, the Ineffable Maiden, the sacred open secret at the core of existence. Once more we must conjure up this affirmation of the natural world order through feminine images of deity – conjure it from our depths, and imbue it with new energy and contemporary form, if we are to save our planet and restore it to pristine beauty.

Several especially significant factors expressed in these Greek festivals must be considered in contrast with elements of patriarchal religion and its secular derivatives – such as modern science, materialism, utilitarianism, myopic pragmatism, etc, which have led us to our present exploitation and befouling of the earth. The religion of Eleusis worshiped the forces originating in earth, forces which suggested the darkness before birth and the darkness after death, as exemplified respectively by Demeter and Kore. In Christianity this rootedness in holy earth is implicitly denied; with the help of St. Paul the flesh is degraded and the primacy of an other-worldly heaven of eternal light affirmed. Similarly most Eastern religions dismiss this world as *maya* or mere illusion and encourage a search for Nirvana, the eternal light of the Void. The Mother and Daughter are abandoned, and with their abandonment our poor planet is thrown upon the mercy of ravagers and plunderers.

Paganism in general always affirmed the creative life force in terms of nature as encountered by

humanity in the outside world and in our own immediate being; but only in a few instances has there been a realization of the transformative element of being as exemplified by the Filial Feminine. The experience of this transformative feminine element was elaborated in the cult of Eleusis. Persephone as Queen of the Dead and Bearer of Rebirth guaranteed personal immortality to the mystai who experienced her epiphany in the Telesterion (place of seeing) at Eleusis – a personal immortality rooted in the realm of Pluto, giver of earthly riches. Demeter and other mother goddesses guaranteed continuity of the life cycle, but it was up to Kore, the Holy Daughter, the Ineffable Maiden, to bestow eternal life upon the individual.

Christianity's attempt to assure such immortality failed because it depended strictly on the male logos, on dogma, so that finally abstraction took the place of living experience, and authentic human living collapsed. The tendency toward abstraction was further promoted by the universalistic inclination of Christianity – anyone who believed could belong, anywhere at anytime. The Eleusinian cult, as well as other Pagan cults, were regional – their myths were based on local theomorphic manifestations, and the ecstasy they offered could only be experienced at a particular place and time.

In order to participate in the mysteria at Eleusis the celebrant had to speak Greek and be innocent of murder. They did not have to declare allegiance to any beliefs or promise to live in accordance with prescribed rules and regulations. There was no contractual agreement with the deities, no threat of eternal damnation for departure from a code, no admonishment to love this or that deity exclusively. The experience was given gratuitously, no strings attached. The reverse is true of Christian faiths. Other patriarchal religions also necessitate either living in accordance with “the law” or submitting to rigid self-restraint and self-denial, as in Buddhism.

What realizations for a new relationship to the world and the cosmos are implicit in these characteristics of the Eleusinian mysteries? First, the only approach to life that will restore the well-being of our damaged planet and prevent future abuse must be rooted in a sacred awe for the eternal mysteries of nature. Secular approaches and “solutions” are not sufficient to maintain eco-psychic balance between the body of mankind and the greater land-sky body of earth. Our daily life must be imbued with appropriate mythopoeic images that sustain and elaborate our ties with greater nature.

Abstract religious principles sever these connections with Mother Earth, and lead to denigration of the mysterious and the dark forces of the universe. Clarity and light have no meaning save as qualities contrasted with mystery and darkness. And since we have denied all things mysterious and dark, we must once again know and re-evaluate the experience of being encompassed by night and the subterranean – if we are to be made whole psychically.

This leads us to the mystery of death, and the need for a new variation of the Persephone myth. For the Aquarian Age the emphasis on a Daughter Goddess, rather than on a Great Mother, is of great importance for several reasons. First, the quest for personal immortality, already a poignant issue with the ancient Greeks, remains a pressing issue today; and the emergence of the Kore as feminine archetype of transformation was in response to that quest.

Second, the beliefs centered about the Great Mother were for the most part connected with the vegetation cults for which continuity of the group, not the individual, was primary. The Great Mother gives and takes impersonally, alternating archetypically between the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother. Her maternal womb/tomb makes demands upon her children – they do her bidding or else she may not bestow upon them the goods of earth. Insufficient knowledge of agricultural, horticultural and arboricultural methods in an unfavorable environment would throw a group of relatively simple people upon her mercy. But in a favorable clime, with growing awareness of the processes of food production and with subsequent inner psychic expansion and greater ability for sublimation (to make sublime – in terms of artistic enrichment and creation), a more delicate and loving image of the female emerges.



The Mother Goddess becomes more humane through her love for her daughter; the youthfully graceful and beautiful daughter evokes tender concerns from the Mother. When the Daughter is lost Demeter weeps – She cares (“care” is etymologically related to “Kore”). When the human community begins to care for the individual, we gain a soul that warrants eternal life. Even

though we die, we are reborn. This empathy and care that arose in the human psyche was not extensive enough in the Greek world. With some notable exceptions, war, slavery, animal slaughter, and the like were condoned.

Today our very survival and that of the whole world depends on this ability to empathize being extended to include all forms of life and all land forms as well. The Divine Maiden, the Holy Daughter, carried this message: wilderness is sacred, the wild within as well as the wild without is sacred. Only a freed eros will care for the magnificence of nature.

Hence, the Magic Maiden restores beliefs in life as well as death. Today our polluted environment and our death-denying estranged psyche are expressions of the negation of the feminine in both its maternal and filial aspects. We have disturbed the birth-death cycle and the ecological balance of thousands of biomes throughout the globe in our anti-Mother campaign; our life and death have become meaningless and devoid of value because we have suppressed the transformative feminine urge for beauty and caring sensual fulfillment. Our senses sour as populations soar. We are bombarded by ugliness never before known on earth. The forces of repressed "Thanatos and Eros" combine to produce existential evil – a triumph of psychopathic cruelty, indifference, electro-mechanical sterility, and cybernetic nothingness.

A third important factor of the ancient mysteries that should characterize the coming religion is local or regional emphasis. But, as with all other qualities mentioned so far, a new aspect of regionalism must be evolved: the region that is to be a source of myth and inspiration is the landscape of that particular type known as a biome. Whereas ancient Paganism took nature for granted, the new Gaian consciousness will, with acute awareness and cognition, weave specific aspects of regional nature into its very fibre. On a basis of generalization alone no depth of feeling or rapport with life is possible. To love all life, all plants, all animals, is a sterile concept if taken by itself; in practice it will lead automatically to distortion unless it is rooted in the particular environmental surround of the individual and her/his social group. The feeling of unity with landscape and region in their varied pattern of biomes is very difficult to experience nowadays because of the experiential static produced by our urban environment; but the culture to come may forsake the city for an organically structured yet sophisticated orchard-centered existence. (editor's note: see [Permaculture](#) and [Earthships](#) for related ideas.)

Here are some visions of the ideal: Centralization will take place only on a small scale, as in the case of small gathering places for the exchange of hand-crafted goods and ideas. A somewhat greater degree of centralization will take place on the rare occasions of high sacred events and celebrations. These may occur in conglomerates of indoor and outdoor temples in the tradition of megalithic culture, but also in novel forms appropriate to the new life style.

Finally, empathy and erotic liaison with the immediate environment, and astrally with the greater environment, will create self-regulating communities in which current legal and political systems will have been outgrown. If difficulties arise, seeresses and seers will be consulted in ultimate recourse to clarify issues and recommend appropriate action. The faerie spirit, light and graceful, so much in keeping with the Kore quality, will permeate the entire social-cultural atmosphere. In this world we will approach Love and Death through the child-like nature of the Numinous Nymph, who promises fulfillment of youthful dreams in which the wild and the humane co-mingle to form Paradise – an organic living togetherness without bloodshed. This could be life's impetus to evolve beyond predator control of excess population. Persephone promises us continuous rebirth if we work for the continuous rebirth of our planet.