

ELEUSIS

*Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel*¹

The mystic philosopher Hegel dedicated this poem to his friend Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin in August 1796. The two had first met at the Tübingen Seminary in 1788, and had remained in contact. Rich in mystical symbolism, the poem expresses the importance of the ancient mystery schools to these eighteenth century philosophers and literary figures.

Oh! If the doors of your sanctuary should
 crumble by themselves
O Ceres, you who reigned in Eleusis!
Drunk with enthusiasm, I would
shiver with your nearness,
I would understand your revelations,
I would interpret the lofty meaning of the
 images, I would hear
the hymns at the gods' banquets,
the lofty maxims of their counsel.
Even your hallways have ceased to echo,
 Goddess!
The circle of the gods has fled back to
 Olympus
from the consecrated altars;
fled from the tomb of profaned humanity,
the innocent genius who enchanted them
 here! —
The wisdom of your priests is silent, not one
 note of the sacred
initiations preserved for us—and in vain
 strive
the scholars, their curiosity greater than their
 love
of wisdom (the seekers possess this love and
 they disdain you)—to master it they dig
 for words,
in which your lofty meaning might be
 engraved!
In vain! Only dust and ashes do they seize,



Statue of Hegel at the Rathaus in Stuttgart. Photo © 2009 by Ecelan, Wikimedia Commons.

where your life returns no more for them.
And yet, even rotting and lifeless they
 congratulate themselves,
the eternally dead!—easily satisfied—in vain
 —no sign
remains of your celebration, no trace of an
 image.
For the son of the initiation the lofty
 doctrine was too full,
the profundity of the ineffable sentiment was
 too sacred,
for him to value the desiccated signs.
Now thought does not raise up the spirit,
sunken beyond time and space to purify
 infinity,
it forgets itself, and now once again its
 consciousness
is aroused. He who should want to speak
 about it with others,
would have to speak the language of angels,
 would have to experience the poverty of
 words.
He is horrified of having thought so little of
the sacred,

of having made so little of it, that speech
 seems to him a
 sin, and though still alive, he closes his
 mouth.
 That which the initiate prohibits himself, a
 sage
 law also prohibits the poorest souls: to make
 known
 what he had seen, heard, felt during the
 sacred night:
 so that even the best part of his prayers
 was not disturbed by the clamor of their
 disorder,
 and the empty chattering did not dispose
 him toward the sacred,
 and this was not dragged in the mud, but
 was entrusted to memory—so that it did
 not become
 a plaything or the ware of some sophist,
 who would have sold it like an obolus,
 or the mantle of an eloquent hypocrite or
 even
 the rod of a joyful youth, or become so
 empty
 at the end, that only in the echo
 of foreign tongues would it find its roots.
 Your sons, Oh Goddess, miserly with your
 honor, did not
 carry it through the streets and markets, but
 they cultivated it
 in the breast's inner chambers.
 And so you did not live on their lips.
 Their life honored you. And you live still in
 their acts.
 Even tonight, sacred divinity, I heard you.
 Often the life of your children reveals you,
 and I introduce you as the soul of their acts!
 You are the lofty meaning, the true faith,
 which, divine when all else crumbles, does
 not falter.

Translation from Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: the Place of Negativity*, translated by Karen Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7-9, © 2006 University of Minnesota Press, http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/Agamben_language.html.



Remains of the main entrance to the Sanctuary at Eleusis. Note the grooves in the stone floor where the doors to the temple opened and closed thousands of times over the millennia. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

ENDNOTE

¹ Georg Hegel, *Eleusis*, in Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, translated by Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 6-9. Available at [http://content2.wuola.com/contents/nappan/Documents/Agamben,%20Giorgio%20-%20Language%](http://content2.wuola.com/contents/nappan/Documents/Agamben,%20Giorgio%20-%20Language%20)

*Our origins are Egyptian,
 Brahmanic, issued of the Mysteries
 of Eleusis and Samothrace, the
 Mages of Persia, the Pythagoreans,
 and the Arabs.”*

– Michael Maier, seventeenth
 century physician and
 alchemist when speaking
 about the Rosicrucians

