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“A Touch of the Spiritual World”

An Anthroposophical Core in the Life and Work of Kersti Bergroth (1886–1975)

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## Introduction

Despite a career lasting more than sixty years and with more than seventy published novels, Kersti Bergroth (1886–1975) remains nearly unknown as an author to Finnish readers of today. Nor was she familiar to me until recently, when my attention was caught by the title of a novel by Bergroth in a secondhand bookshop. At the time, I was mapping the influence of the seventeenth-century Swedish spiritualist and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg in Finnish literature. The authors I had looked at so far with regard to Swedenborgian traits had all been male and active during the nineteenth century. The title of Bergroth’s novel is *Eläviä ja kuolleita* (*The Living and the Dead*; 1945). In the novel she refers explicitly to Swedenborg, and it also appears to contain a number of Swedenborgian themes: the doctrine of correspondences; a world divided into material, spiritual, and divine realms; and communication with the spirits of the dead. Thus by a serendipitous incident, my attention was caught by a female, twentieth-century author who was obviously familiar with Swedenborgian ideas.<sup>1</sup> In reading Kersti Bergroth’s novel, however, I soon began to think about other questions beside those relating explicitly to Swedenborg and his influence.

The narrative of the novel is quite simple: A young woman is living an isolated and ordinary life, in a small and tidy home with her husband. After a brief illness, the husband dies, and the young woman starts to work on her doctoral dissertation on Goethe and Schiller. She also becomes involved with a new man, who in the course of the narrative marries another woman. On the surface, not much is happening; what matters is mostly occurring within the minds of the characters. The narrative epitomizes spiritual growth as something ultimately ordinary and common. The novel was published right after World War II but does not refer to current events in any way. Yet the simplicity and clarity of the text are

fascinating. After reading the novel, I decided to further explore Bergroth's life and personality and to look at her writing more generally. The way toward possible answers led to Anthroposophy, the spiritual path followed by Kersti Bergroth. Other, larger questions also arose: What is it about the Anthroposophical world view that inspires the (female) artist? Second, how are Anthroposophical ideas absorbed into a work of art? And finally, were there other female artists within Finnish Anthroposophical circles?

## A Tension between Art and Faith

Kersti Bergroth was a productive and versatile author who wrote novels in both Finnish and Swedish; she also wrote plays, essays, causeries, fairytales, youth novels, novels of light entertainment, travel books, aphorisms, film scripts, poems, and memoirs, using various pseudonyms for different genres.<sup>ii</sup> The language of her childhood was Swedish, but the children of the family received a Finnish education due to their parents' adherence to "Fennomania" in the linguistic and cultural conflicts of the era. The family lived in the multicultural city of Vyborg, where Finnish, Swedish, German, and Russian were all spoken, and they spent their summer holidays on the Karelian Isthmus, an area connecting Finland and Russia, where the local population spoke a rich and expressive Karelian dialect. Bergroth wrote her first novels in Swedish. From the 1920s onward, she wrote mainly in Finnish, in some plays also making use of the Karelian dialect. She also wrote poems in German and translated works of fiction from German and English into Finnish.<sup>iii</sup>

Bergroth's novels were never bestsellers, but she had her own, devoted group of readers, and most of the critics honored her wit and wisdom. Bergroth did not experiment with style or structure; her skills were in the description of the human mind and in the use of dialogue. Her purpose was "to reflect life as it is manifested in relationships between human beings," as one editor of her works put it.<sup>iv</sup> Choosing a career as a professional writer at a young age, she turned out to be a prolific writer; this means that her production is not only multifaceted but also of uneven quality.<sup>v</sup>

Bergroth was an author whose attitude toward the world and toward other human beings, as reflected both in her life and in her writings, had been shaped by Anthroposophy, the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. This also makes her a nuanced author, struggling with questions of dependency (as to a spiritual authority) and ingenuity (as to her own originality as an artist) in conveying ideas in her novels.<sup>vi</sup> Bergroth herself denied that she ever openly declared Anthroposophical principles in her novels. She also maintained a strict divide

between her artistic work (published under her own name) and other literary works (published under pseudonyms). This predicament, to be both an artist (a professional writer) and a committed Anthroposophist, creates a tension in her life and work.

Bergroth challenges novels written with an ideological purpose; for her, they are not “True Art.” Hence Anthroposophical themes are discernible in her writings only indirectly, tacitly; there is an Anthroposophical core or vein running through her work, but no direct proclaiming of its principles; what matters is the author’s originality and individuality. As an author, she was not interested in external or material facts; she does describe ordinary everyday life, but she contemplates the spiritual dimensions of the characters, their inner world, especially their spiritual growth and development. When she describes a crisis in the life of a character, it always functions as a threshold or stepping stone, allowing that character to move onward or upward along a spiritual path.

Kersti Bergroth first joined the Theosophical Society at the age of 26 in 1912, but she later came to describe Theosophy as an occult, magic heresy. In 1924, Bergroth joined the Anthroposophical Society (which had been founded in the previous year) and became an active member. During the following decades, she also made several visits to the headquarters of the society at the Goethenaum in Dornach, Switzerland, and met Rudolf Steiner.<sup>vii</sup>

Bergroth was not alone in finding her way to Anthroposophy from the Theosophical movement or its influence. Her mentor, Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, had a background in the Theosophical Society himself, and when the movement reached Finland at the turn of the twentieth century, it attracted and inspired a number of artists and writers. New spiritual and religious movements usually reached Finland via Sweden; one common denominator for Finns adopting new ideas at the time was that they were usually Swedish speaking. This was the case with Theosophy as well. Most of the early Theosophists were male, but there were also some active female members.<sup>viii</sup> In 1912, Rudolf Steiner, at the time still a member of the Theosophical Society, visited Finland and delivered lectures both at the local Theosophical Society and to a wider public on occultism and on the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*.<sup>ix</sup> That same year, Bergroth joined the Theosophical Society and began to study Theosophical texts, mainly the writings of Annie Besant.<sup>x</sup> This reading made her more inclined to accept and support the writings of Rudolf Steiner, as the language and concepts were familiar. During the early years of Anthroposophy, I assume this to have been the most common way to become an Anthroposophist: the path ran from Theosophy to Anthroposophy. But there were other ways as well, as the following brief vignettes of two

contemporary female authors will show.

A pioneer of modernist literature, the distinguished Finnish poet Edith Södergran (1892–1923) devoted her last years to the writings of Rudolf Steiner. Södergran reached Steiner by way of her immersion in German idealism, in particular Goethe, Kant, Schiller, and the philosophy of Nietzsche; she was deeply attracted by his concept of the *Übermensch* and the character of Zarathustra. At the peak of her Nietzschean period, Södergran was introduced to Steiner by a friend living in the same village, the Anthroposophist Dagmar von Schantz (1864–1936). Although Södergran did not turn into an Anthroposophist, Steiner became her mentor and guide, one who succeeded in bridging the gap between the real and the transcendent, between nature and spirit. Södergran suffered from tuberculosis and spent her last years isolated and in extreme poverty. For both Södergran and Bergroth, the spiritual science of Steiner became a path to “True Christianity.”<sup>xi</sup> In concluding his study of Södergran, Jan Häll notes that Steiner’s most significant influence on her was “as a guide to an inner reorientation that precedes the late poetry and constitutes its basic preconditions.”<sup>xii</sup> Södergran moves in her poetry from a Nietzschean philosophy to a Steinerian one, with its broader implications of a Goethean “natural piety” and thus of a more positive valuation of life. In this philosophy, art and religion, life and poetry, nature and spirit become inseparable entities.

Another pathway to Anthroposophy can be seen emerging out of social networks and encounters with individuals already versed in spiritual science. The Finnish upper-class couple, Olly (1881–1956) and Uno Donner (1872–1958) became familiar with Steiner’s ideas through friends and through their frequent travels in Europe. Olly (née Sinebrychoff) had grown up in a privileged upper-class environment, with an education emphasizing the classical *Bildung*; this included the mastery of several European languages, including Russian along with German, French, and English. In Dresden, where she resided to improve her German, she met her future husband, the successful businessman Uno Donner. After the First World War, the couple settled in Dornach and made personal contact with Steiner himself. At Steiner’s request, Uno Donner founded the Finnish section of Anthroposophical Society in 1923 and served as its chairman until 1932. After their marriage, the couple settled down on the Gerknäs estate in Lohja, where they lived until 1944. At Gerknäs, Olly devoted herself to writing, publishing several books of prose and poetry. They also introduced both Anthroposophical agricultural methods (biodynamic farming) and medicine (homeopathy) to Finland. Olly and Uno Donner spent their last years at an Anthroposophical clinic at Arlesheim in Switzerland.<sup>xiii</sup>

It was through their notable wealth and munificence that the first Chair in Comparative Religion in Finland was established at the Åbo Akademi University, along with the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History. It is also known as the Steiner Memorial Library, as its original core consisted of a large Anthroposophical collection. Today the life, career, and work of Olly Donner have been more or less forgotten and await scholarly attention.

These biographical notes may help us place Kersti Bergroth within a specific intellectual and cultural setting during the early decades of the twentieth century. The following discussion is based primarily on her novels (those published under her own name and included in the collected works, *Teokset I–V*, 1952–53) and her published autobiographical narratives (1942, 1971, 1973).

## Public and Private: Autobiographical Narratives

The contents of Bergroth’s autobiographical writings—*Oma muotokuva (Self-Portrait; 1942)*, *Alkusoitto (Overture; 1971)*, and *Löytöretki (Voyage of Exploration; 1973)*—are in part overlapping. In her memoirs, novels, and even in interviews, Bergroth actually recycles her memories and transforms her life into a personal myth. She recounts and re-recounts crucial episodes of her life so as to shape a truth, or a particular kind of truth, that she wants to communicate. The recurring images and patterns may reveal the identity of the writer to the reader—or they can veil the author’s “real” life and thus protect it from the public.<sup>xiv</sup>

In her autobiographical narratives, Bergroth resists the structure, form, and conventions of classic autobiography; the narratives are fragmented and discontinuous. At the same time, however, they reiterate the conventions of the religious autobiography: her conversion to Anthroposophy is described by Bergroth as a turning point in her life; everything that preceded it is merely an “overture” before real life—“discovery”—begins. Bergroth also predominantly applies a thematic rather than a chronological approach; she casts light only on those aspects of her life that she wants her readers to know about, while other, perhaps more interesting parts and elements of her life remain in shadow. What is significant to her are the spiritual circumstances into which she was born, as well as impressions of significant experiences and events in her early life.

In her memoirs, Bergroth lets us know that she is following her memory, as she describes impressions from her past in the way memory actually works: it evokes brief glimpses, sights, scents, and thoughts from the past in an arbitrary order. The narratives in her

memoirs do not constitute a solid entity or continuity. Rather they consist of separate units, different themes, and impressions. The last one especially (1973) falls apart toward the end; the last chapters consist mainly of lists of names, short fragments, or intermittent references. The 87-year-old author still had a lot to say, but she no longer had the strength or ability to articulate it. As Paul John Eakin puts it, it is “our life in time and our mortality that generates much of the impulse to write autobiography.”<sup>xv</sup> Bergroth expresses this, somewhat enigmatically, as follows: “But I suppose that the stars are beginning to see that the time has arrived to call me back to the place whence I departed long ago to the center of this mysterious human life. Perhaps the time will come to me also, constantly set alight once more, beginning over again, that I want to say, with Portia in Shakespeare: ‘my little body is a weary of this great world!’ When that moment arrives, I shall depart gratefully, ready to accept new gifts of happiness, sorrow and work.”<sup>xvi</sup> In her memoirs and interviews, Bergroth keeps her private life to herself. In so doing, she follows the example of her mentor, Rudolf Steiner. During his last years, Steiner did write an autobiography, after being requested to do so. Like Bergroth later, he mostly concentrates on his childhood years, on his connections with contemporary philosophers and scientists, and on his spiritual development. Readers are not told, for example, about his marriages: “To be sure, it has always been my conviction that in many provinces of life the personal elements give to human action a coloring of the utmost value; only, it seems to me that this personal element should manifest in the way in which one speaks and acts, and not through conscious attention to one’s personality.”<sup>xvii</sup> As Bergroth in turn puts it, “But my later experiences in life are really most appropriately expressed in my books. They belong to private life, as do those of other people, and are therefore so to speak classified as secret.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Bergroth rejects any suggestion of her experiences in terms of religious conversion. She similarly rejects intimations of Anthroposophy as (her) religion. At the same time, however, she describes her “awakening” as a realization and sudden understanding of the existence of a spiritual world and as becoming convinced by the ideas of Rudolf Steiner. All her autobiographical writings take the point of view of the Anthroposophist, as reflections of events and conditions that predicted, impelled, or opened up the way for her toward an Anthroposophical world view. In her *Self-Portrait*, she declares that her intention was to write a portrait that “shows the reader the picture of her spirit, the picture of herself,” “a saga that was told to her in the veiled language of the gods—her own life.”<sup>xix</sup> While authors’ autobiographies usually recount the story of how the narrator became a writer, Bergroth does not even touch on the subject or on her ways or methods of writing. Rather, she describes

how she became an Anthroposophist—although she rarely uses this actual term.

## The Path toward Anthroposophy

Kersti Bergroth was born and spent her childhood in the city of Vyborg (Viipuri), and her early impressions of this place dwelt in her mind for the rest of her life. Until the city was incorporated into the Soviet Union after the Second World War, Vyborg was the third largest and by far the most international city in Finland. Bergroth was greatly influenced by Vyborg's cosmopolitan milieu, and she often returns to the city in her literary works.<sup>xx</sup> Bergroth's father and mother both belonged to distinguished families of the clergy and the intelligentsia. They also took part in the Pietistic revival movement of the late nineteenth century. Pietism meant to them, according to Bergroth, a serious approach to questions of life and death and an ongoing search for true Christianity. This also implied that within the movement young priests, with their wives, reflected on their attitude toward worldly activities such as art and science—and gave up both for the sake of their faith. As Kersti Bergroth declares, “Only the love of spirit was allowed as true love.” In her last years, she expressed her gratitude to her religious forefathers for bestowing on her the rare gift of trust or faith in a spiritual world.<sup>xxi</sup>

The religiosity of Bergroth's parents was both strong and visible. Bergroth writes, “The religiosity of my father was the most beautiful I have ever seen. It was neither a mere comfortable confidence, nor a world-view as such. It carried all the distinguishing marks of great human love. It was shocking, and so sacred that it was secret.”<sup>xxii</sup> Even though in her student years Bergroth had rejected religion and had fought against her parents' faith, she later confessed that she was privileged: already as a child she had been shown the “Promised Land,” as “a model and image.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

In 1904, at the age of 18, Bergroth began her studies in aesthetics, French, and art history at the University of Helsinki, where she lived and spent her time with the Swedish-speaking elite. Many of Bergroth's friends defended skeptical, agnostic, or atheist views, paired with a contemporary mood of the meaninglessness of life. After graduating in 1910, Bergroth published her first novel, *August* (1911). In 1914 came the novel *Aptit* (*Appetite*) and in 1916, *Sixtus*. The novels describe the intelligentsia of Helsinki, displaying a somewhat pessimistic world view. Bergroth belonged to a literary group named *Dagdrivare*, a gathering of the young, urban, and decadent generation of idlers. At the time Bergroth also began to publish, under the pseudonym of Mary Marck, a well-remembered popular series of youth

novels, dealing with a school class in the 1910s, which has been reprinted as recently as the 1980s.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In 1912, Kersti Bergroth married Samuel Hagelin (1877–1917), a lecturer in Latin and Swedish at the Lyceum in Helsinki. Hagelin was not a public personality—his social network was confined to relatives, close friends, and pupils—and he suffered from tuberculosis, for which reason the couple spent long periods in Europe in efforts to improve his health. They had no children, and the marriage ended after five years with the death of Hagelin. Their close relationship and Hagelin’s subsequent suffering and death evidently had a deep impact on Bergroth. It was during this period of turmoil and crisis, shortly before or after her husband’s death, that Bergroth encountered the world of Rudolf Steiner, an event she describes metaphorically in her next novel *Urbans väg (Urban’s Way)* in 1919. In her last autobiographical work, Bergroth recall these events: “But during the time of the great, beautiful calm of my marriage, an unexpected flower blossomed forth in my soul, the quiet ripening of which I had not foreseen.” After her awakening, the language of Bergroth’s writings changes to Finnish; this is concurrent with the beginning of Finnish independence, an era marked by intense nationalism.<sup>xxv</sup>

Bergroth’s output clearly reflects a sharp transition in her thinking. She is now opposed to the contemporary tendency in art toward proselytizing, as being contrary to “real art.” She also begins to reflect on larger existential and metaphysical questions in her novels, and she proposes answers offered by Rudolf Steiner.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Awakening: Conversion to Anthroposophy

Kersti Bergroth does not use the term *conversion* in describing the change in her world view but speaks rather of an “awakening.” But if conversion is to be seen as an “exemplary plot-climax, a reversal of a certain way of being and a recognition, an awakening to essential being, to one’s truest self,”<sup>xxvii</sup> this is precisely how Bergroth describes her experience at the end of the 1910s. She had embraced a materialistic conception of the world and depicts her student times as a time of sleep, of absolute dreaming. Religion meant to her nothing but a topic of discussion, a matter of opinion, that could be used to “*épater les bourgeois*”—to shock respectable citizens. Although her life—as she writes in her memoirs (1942, 1971)—was filled with amusement, surrounded by friends and engaging conversations, it was at the same time an unhappy and empty one.

Bergroth describes her gradual awakening in terms of a few noteworthy events, minor



incidents that forced her to think differently. The first such incident occurred when she was with her husband in Meran, in the South Tyrol, surrounded by the Alps and gazing into the dark night from the balcony of their hotel: “I was suddenly hit by the thought that the starry space is not only above us, but it is all around us, beneath us as well. I realized that the earth is round and loose in the universe—that this is not just something we read in books, but that it is *true*! Up above, all around, beneath, unfolds the universe.” The idea was terrifying: it was as though she suddenly found herself on the outer edge of the world, surrounded by “appalling and indifferent depths.” She felt that “what is scientifically true is horrifying.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Science could thus no longer provide her with answers; she ultimately lost confidence in scientific explanations and started to search for other points of view.

Bergroth began to feel restless and unsatisfied, her impatience being of a metaphysical kind. Bergroth’s sister, however, recognized the nature of her discontent and took her to visit the mathematician Dr. Edvard Selander (1853–1928), their former teacher and a friend of their father. They knew that Selander was familiar with certain new philosophical views and wanted to pose the utmost question to him, regarding the ultimate meaning of being and the world: “What is this all?” The meeting is described in Bergroth’s last novel *Luokkakokous* (*Class Reunion*: 1970). The reply in the novel is, “Read the world literature! Go to Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and Novalis!” The answer, thus, is art: “In every work of art there is now and then a point which, like a bolt of lightning, reveals ‘what everything is.’ That is the real secret of all true art.” When we shift the narrative from the novel to the “actual events” that took place at the meeting, as described by Bergroth in her memoir, a slightly different picture emerges. Dr. Selander did not initially introduce Bergroth to Steiner but gave to the sisters a Theosophical book by Annie Besant.<sup>xxix</sup> Selander, being aware of Bergroth’s aversion toward Christian religion, thus cleverly guided Bergroth through Oriental religion, as a straightforward introduction to the Christocentric writings of Steiner might, as Bergroth herself admits, not have appealed to her at all. The first step in the process of awakening was hence an immersion into Oriental spirituality, mediated through Theosophical literature. While reading works by Besant, Bergroth came to comprehend not only that the world carried a spiritual dimension but also that this dimension could be described in its essence and structure, and that the material side, in a sense, is a manifestation of things spiritual.<sup>xxx</sup> Besant’s writings on Oriental spirituality opened the way toward Steiner’s writings, which followed the Theosophical reading. Steiner’s powerful texts finally “awakened a stormy urge to research and know,” and Bergroth began a “journey of exploration” that lasted for the rest of her life.<sup>xxxi</sup>

The ultimate question of meaning implies a search for a coherent and comprehensive world view, one that also includes the rationale of existence: the meaning of life and death. For Bergroth, answers to these questions were offered by Rudolf Steiner. Steiner argued that scientific thinking could be enlarged so as to include the spiritual side as well; his aim being thus to expand both human thought and the scope of science. Modern man, in Steiner's view, is excluded from the spiritual world, in the sense that he can believe in its existence, but—unlike people of ancient times—he cannot “perceive” it. Steiner, who allegedly had the ability to perceive the spiritual reality, thus introduced spiritual science, suggesting a means whereby that reality becomes attainable for modern man.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In both her early novel *Kiirastuli (Purgatory)* (1922) and her late memoirs, Bergroth conveys that she had had, occasionally, perceptions or experiences of the spiritual world. The first such instance occurred during a walk in the city of Helsinki, when she abruptly sensed the simultaneous presence of two different realities: “Before her were two worlds. They were interwoven and interpenetrated each other.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> In her memoirs, she writes, “I see a street view before me. Tall blocks of flats on both sides of the street (*Korkeavuorenkatu*) ascending the hill. Behind them is the sky. Suddenly the sight changes. At the upper end of the street the buildings thinning out, becoming transparent. Behind them is another, lighter landscape. At that moment I know this is the spiritual world.” The existence of a spiritual world became for Bergroth a self-evident truth, something she would accept without further evidence.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The Bildungsroman *Kiirastuli (Purgatory)* describes the gradual progress of a young girl, Bergroth's alter ego Ruth, toward her awakening. Before the awakening, “the girl's soul was still asleep,”<sup>xxxv</sup> but with the opening of the next novel, *Ensimmäinen taivas (The First Heaven)* (1923), the existence of a spiritual dimension is an almost tangible reality:

During her morning walk Ruth suddenly realized she was leaving her normal thoughts and feelings and moving somewhere else. She entered an adjoining world, which flourished just beside her normal consciousness. Everything changed. The old trees refreshed her. The darkness of the soil gave her a swift pure bliss. All nature's shapes and colors were permeated by an unanticipated powerful spirituality. Ruth understood once again, as always when she found herself in this world, the secret potential in the realms of nature. She sensed the energy and striving that exists everywhere. With all this she looked forward to distant times to come, deeming that a thousand years are like one day. Yes. The air was filled with immense future hopes. The trees bowed towards new eras. The rocks awaited entrance into life. And the people who approached Ruth, were hopefully reaching towards eternal, distant destinations.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In Bergroth's novels faith, or firmness of faith, is not something one obtains quickly and easily. It is something that develops slowly, matures, something one has to struggle for. Life, in its entirety, is a striving toward spiritual growth. It is like the chalice of the Grail, with

truth gleaming within it.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

## Awakened Life and Awakening to Death

One recurrent theme in the novels of Bergroth is death. The way death is encountered also displays an Anthroposophical inclination in her thinking. The meaning of death relates not only to the spiritual state of the individual who is dying but also to the spiritual development of the others involved: family and friends who remain behind. According to Bergroth, death impels the development of those who witness it. We learn from death, but in unpredictable ways. Personal relationships do not end with death. Nor do they remain the same as before, but they may actually improve—if one nourishes pleasant memories and thoughts of the person. Relationships with the dead are thus as various and changing as with the living.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

When death occurs, this is not simply an event or a process. Death, according to Bergroth, is a sort of actual being or entity, an atmosphere, and at the boundary of death there dwells a warm atmosphere of love. Here we find not only the dying one but “everyone and everything else”: “All earthly vegetation fades there, all superfluous flowers, but it is also the sole place where one can see heavenly flowers. There one may perceive invisible lilies, and sense the same scent as sometimes in childhood, for instance at Christmas time... Only at the moment of death can one perceive ‘the heavens being open.’ One *is* factually in the other world, and can breathe the air that once will always be breathed.”<sup>xxxix</sup> For Bergroth, to be spiritually developed is more or less the equivalent of wisdom. A wise person, as death approaches, becomes beautiful and pure in both soul and body. Thus in her novel *Uusia sieluja* (*New Souls*; 1930) Bergroth’s protagonist Mari observes her old and sick aunt Emmi on her deathbed, a woman who has labored hard her whole life, now surrounded by a new kind of sacredness and spirituality: “Her aunt’s whole being bore a kind of fragrant purity, a flowerlike beauty. Within her a new bud was blossoming, a heavenly being.” As she fades away, little by little, an angelical atmosphere arises around her. Her sparse and simple words often seemed to carry a message from the spiritual world. Mari felt that they were both, simultaneously, in two worlds: “Between this world and Heaven there was no longer that barrier, death, preventing perception from one life-realm to another.”<sup>xl</sup>

The notion of spirituality is not in Bergroth’s view confined to Anthroposophy alone. The pure and, to some extent, somber religion bequeathed by Pietism becomes for her a rather exemplary form of spirituality. As a child, Bergroth sensed the solemn and holy atmosphere that dominated the home of her grandmother, who was of a deeply Pietistic

nature. She writes, “She really knew that there existed an eternity—an eternal world and an eternal life—and if you really know that, then living is actually always solemn.”<sup>xli</sup>

## Spiritual Development: The Soul and Body of an Artist

According to Rudolf Steiner, the spiritual manifests itself in art. The meaning of art is to place “the world of the spirit within the world of the senses.” Steiner also maintains that “the true artist more or less unconsciously confesses the spirit” and penetrates “to a knowledge of the spiritual world.”<sup>xlii</sup> Bergroth endorses Steiner’s view that a true work of art is an expression of the artist, who ultimately, since artists define beauty and truth, approaches questions of the meaning of life and the mystery of death.<sup>xliii</sup> The artist’s skill is obtained through suffering, which purifies the artist and gives birth to a new kind of vision, to new ways of creating art. This process is described in the early novel *Helena, Kristian ja taulu* (*Helena, Kristian and the Painting*; 1920). The suffering is not necessarily palpably dramatic: as the artist suffers “within,” it is not apparent to the eyes of others. But precisely this “within” of the artist connects her to the spiritual, supersensory world—as Steiner likewise maintains.<sup>xliv</sup>

In almost all her novels, Bergroth discusses art, usually literature. As already mentioned, in her autobiographical narratives Bergroth discusses not writing but reading. This also applies to her novels; her characters read books, have conversations about literature, and reflect on what they have read, sometimes even doing research on world literature. Bergroth was a lover of letters and literature, in particular the tradition of German idealism: Goethe, Schiller, and—as the foremost and most profound of them all—Steiner. These writers form a genuine part of Bergroth’s thinking and penetrate the characters of her novels as well, as distinctive truth-seeking spiritual beings.

In her novel *New Souls* (1930), Bergroth asks what the artist needs: “Perhaps the artist now needs something other than intellect or instinct. Simply, perhaps, new organs of the soul, so as to realize the world in a manner other than the intellectual or the instinctive.”<sup>xlv</sup> Bergroth integrates art and religion: “If religion separates itself from art, it is no longer religion. In the Bible every word is art. And if art separates itself from religion, it is no longer art. Creative ability is the same as the Word.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

The crucial thing in human life is to advance and grow spiritually and to understand ourselves “as creatures forming part of the world’s design.”<sup>xlvii</sup> If we read Bergroth’s novels

as mirrors reflecting her own spiritual development, we observe, as noted by Irma Rantavaara, that she remains faithful to her own teachings.<sup>xlvi</sup> She frequently dwells on the souls of her characters. The soul of an individual can be seen in the body and its movements, as nature transforms man's soul into the body. Bergroth's aim is to describe both the body and the soul of her characters, as when, for instance, she portrays the soul of a servant in *Helena, Kristian and the Painting* as "an unusually natural soul, working vigorously in all directions, in such a way that the overall result was rest."<sup>xlix</sup>

## Death Is Not the End: The Doctrine of Reincarnation

Anthroposophy is often described as an occult movement rooted in Theosophy. But the reality is not that simple, and Anthroposophists themselves strongly oppose this view. Rudolf Steiner joined the Theosophical Society and was appointed general secretary of the German section of the society in 1902, but he did not endorse all its views and tenets. He had previously explicated his own interpretation of the spiritual world and how it can be properly understood. Theosophy leaned primarily on ancient Asian wisdom, while Steiner's sources of inspiration came from Christianity, Western spirituality, and—most notably—German idealism and Goethe. Steiner furthermore claimed that his ideas were based on his own experiences and were thus independent; any similarities to other doctrines or ideologies were due to the possibility that others might have reached similar conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

Anthroposophists, Kersti Bergroth among them, do not regard Anthroposophy as either a religion or a philosophical system but as a pathway to an understanding of the human being, a "way of knowledge" (*Erkenntnisweg*). Steiner himself considered his spiritual investigations a science, comparable to the natural sciences.<sup>li</sup> Bergroth thus refutes the claim that Anthroposophy has a religious nature, asserting that the religion of Anthroposophists is Christianity. Anthroposophy, according to Bergroth, is a cultural impetus based on Christianity.

Some of the central principles of Anthroposophy are shared by Theosophy, as well as by Hinduism and Buddhism: for instance, the ideas of karma and reincarnation. Human beings develop through a number of reincarnations. There is a larger, cosmic cycle of development as well, as the earth has gone through several states or planetary phases. In different times and during different epochs, the human race has been endowed with distinct qualities and capacities; thus, for instance, the capacity for clairvoyance was common during

earlier phases of the earth.<sup>lii</sup> Man is accordingly the result of a long process of cosmic evolution. Anthroposophy thus contains a number of dimensions that are alien to traditional Christianity. Bergroth did not see this as a contradiction but maintained that the idea of reincarnation satisfies both the heart and the mind.<sup>liii</sup> Through continuing rebirth the soul develops; as it gets “older” it becomes wiser. In old age, Bergroth confessed, “I am probably a very young soul and I need a great deal of shame and repentance as I slowly strive towards the goals that have been set for mankind.”<sup>liv</sup>

The idea of reincarnation is a frequent trait in Bergroth’s novels as well: for instance, in the title of her early novel *New Souls*. But having a soul, new or old, does not make a person spiritual: “She wandered through life in accordance with an old pattern, because her way had always been to be born, to live and to die. Everything was familiar and known, nothing gave rise to new ideas. If some question was being discussed, she didn’t need to think about it. She had her opinions ready and well preserved, since the time of Ramses the Second.”<sup>lv</sup> To be reborn time after time, thus having an old soul, does not necessarily mean that one is steadily developing spiritually; one may simply be in this world as a conscious being, but a somewhat uninspired and undeveloped one.

## The Life of a Journalist and a Cosmopolite

Kersti Bergroth’s fiction deals with Anthroposophical ideology and makes it visible to a large extent only to Anthroposophically minded readers. In periodical publications, on the other hand, she could make her views more explicit and invite discussion by readers. The magazine *Päiväkirja* (*The Diary*; 1934–37) was thoroughly Anthroposophical in content; Bergroth published it jointly with her friends. The magazine was published monthly, with no fewer than 2,500 subscribers,<sup>lvi</sup> according to Bergroth, fighting “side by side with those seeking a new spiritual, cosmic meaning for man.”<sup>lvii</sup> Bergroth defined the magazine as religious and religiosity as an ability “to see the world as a whole, both material and spiritual.”<sup>lviii</sup> Although *The Diary* consisted mainly of articles dealing with literature and literary critics, the choice of books and authors clearly represented an Anthroposophical point of view, with names such as Goethe and Novalis featuring prominently. There were also essays dealing with Finnish literature and prominent Finnish artists, but its main perspective had to do with Anthroposophical themes.<sup>lix</sup> During its brief lifespan, *The Diary* developed from a purely literary journal into one with a clear and pronounced Anthroposophical ideology, on a crusade against the material and modern world, and channeling the ideas of Rudolf Steiner to

the Finnish audience. During the last years of *The Diary*, almost every article refers to Steiner or one of his followers or disciples.<sup>lx</sup>

A turning point in the life of Kersti Bergroth occurred in the early 1950s when, at the peak of the sway of modernism in Finnish literary life, she became the target of crushing criticism.<sup>lxi</sup> Already in her sixties, and recognizing that her novels were not reaching the young generations, she decided to move to Rome, where she spent almost twenty years. Accustomed as she was to a cosmopolitan life, moving abroad was not a difficult step, and her longtime friend and companion Liisa Ottonen (an Anthroposophist and the author of youth novels) followed her. In Rome they lived together until Ottonen's death. Their friendship has been the subject of lively discussion, and it has been suggested that they were lovers as well. Bergroth herself strongly denied any such suggestions. Together they wrote a tourist guide to Rome, but otherwise Bergroth did not write much during her years in Rome. Her connections to Finland nevertheless remained active, and she also played a lively role in the Finnish community in Rome.<sup>lxii</sup>

Bergroth made a late comeback as an author in the early 1970s, when at more than eighty years old she published the novel *Luokkakokous* (*Class Reunion*; 1970), followed by two autobiographical works and a collection of poems in German (*Neue Romantik*, 1971), as well as a collection of aphorisms (*Meidän elämämme täällä* [*Our Life Here*], 1973). These were her last literary works. She spent the last years of her life in Finland, dying in 1975 on her eighty-ninth birthday.<sup>lxiii</sup>

## Art as the Author's Veil

Kersti Bergroth's life and work demonstrate how impulses of early twentieth-century spirituality reached writers and artists and how these traditions were received and diffused. This was the formative period of Theosophy and Anthroposophy, when both were establishing themselves in Finland. It also shows that the rift between them at the time was not sharp: in moving from the former to the latter, Bergroth was probably following a common path.

Rudolf Steiner's writings evidently appealed to artists in general, as in his thinking spirituality strongly adheres to creativity. The artist in fact becomes the conveyer of spiritual truths. Bergroth's life also demonstrates the impulse of *Bildung* as an important ingredient in this early twentieth-century spirituality. Yet there seems to be a tension in Bergroth's views of art and religion. The pure and solemn spirituality of her parents is for Bergroth clearly an

exemplary form of religion. This Pietistic religiosity, however, rejects art as secular and dangerous. In contrast, Bergroth sees religion and art as mutually dependent. Bergroth was also much occupied with questions of death and dying, apparently due to her experience of the loss of close relatives. This tendency is consistent with the ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg, whose views she also briefly discusses in one of her novels; for both Bergroth and Swedenborg, the existence and proximity of the spiritual world is self-evident.

It is in Bergroth's view impossible for an author to speak of herself openly, nakedly, outside of her art. Art works as a veil for an author. When the author's experiences are expressed through art, they become objective and universal to all humankind and are no longer personal confessions. Bergroth declares that she has expressed her whole life in her writings, "but always veiled, covered, deceptive, quite different than it was ever lived." The same applies to her world view as well.

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i In previous studies I have tried to outline the influence on Finnish literature of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), the Swedish spirit-seer and philosopher—a subject generally ignored in Finnish literary scholarship. I have found that some significant Finnish authors were indeed familiar with Swedenborg's ideas, employing various aspects of those ideas in diverse ways in their literary work. See Tiina Mahlamäki, "Seitsemän veljeksien salattu maa: Emanuel Swedenborgin ideoiden läsnäolo Aleksis Kiven Seitsemän veljestä-teoksessa," *Sananjalka* (2010): 163–80; Tiina Mahlamäki and Tomas Mansikka, "Remarks on Swedenborgian Elements in the Literary Production of Johan Ludvig Runeberg," *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 46 (2010): 1, 73–99.

ii See, for example, Kirsti Manninen and Suvi Ahola, "Verhona taide—Kersti Bergroth," in "*Sain roolin johon en mahdu*": *Suomalaisen naiskirjallisuuden linjoja*, ed. Maria-Liisa Nevala (Helsinki: Otava, 1989), 473; Heidi Grönstrand, "Kirjailijan monet kielet," *Tieteessä tapahtuu* 9 (2009): 35–37; Heidi Grönstrand, "Monikielinen kirjailija—harvinainen kirjailija? Tapaus Kersti Bergroth," *Kulttuurintutkimus* 26 (2009): 2–3, 19–30.

iii See, for example, Tyyni Tuulio, "Kersti Bergroth," in *Suomalaisia vaikuttajanaisia*, ed. Suoma Pohjanpalo et al. (Porvoo: WSOY, 1977), 185–94; Esa Ristilä, *Mitä tämä kaikki on: Kersti Bergrothin aatemaailma* (Tampere: University of Tampere, 2010).

iv Irma Rantavaara, "Johdanto: Kersti Bergroth," in *Kersti Bergroth: Teokset I* (Helsinki: Otava, 1952), 16.

v Tuulio, "Kersti Bergroth," 189–92.

vi Ibid., 189, 191–92.

vii Esa Ristilä, "Bergroth, Kersti (1886–1975)," *Suomen kansallisbiografia*, uploaded November 30, 2001, <http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/kb/artikkeli/4841>; Tuulio, "Kersti Bergroth," 191. She was an active member of the Finnish Anthroposophical Society and held positions as a member of the Executive Committee and as chairwoman during 1946–51. She also contributed articles to the society's journal as well as to the Anthroposophically oriented periodicals *Sininen kirja* (*The Blue Book*; 1927–30) and *Päiväkirja*



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(*The Diary*; 1934–37).

- viii Tore Ahlbäck, *Uppkomsten av Teosofiska Samfundet i Finland* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1995).
- ix To my knowledge, Kersti Bergroth did not attend these lectures. But she was a friend and former student of Dr. Edvard Selander, who, together with his wife, organized Steiner's visits. See Antti Harmainen, "Selander, Aline ja Edvard (1857–1937 ja 1853–1928)," *Suomen kansallisbiografia*, uploaded January 15, 2010, <http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/kb/artikkeli/9613>. In her memoirs, Bergroth does not mention that she was a Theosophist first but describes her first steps on her spiritual path as though they were taken much later.
- x Ristilä, "Bergroth, Kersti."
- xi Tuula Hökkä, "Södergran, Edith (1892–1923)," *Suomen kansallisbiografia*, uploaded October 20, 2002, <http://www.kansallisbiografia.fi/kb/artikkeli/4814>; Jan Häll, *Vägen till landet som icke är: En essä om Edith Södergran och Rudolf Steiner* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2006), 144. Jan Häll has studied Södergran's relationship with Steiner's ideas, her efforts to improve in spiritual development through Steiner's exercises, and Steiner's influence on her lyrics. Södergran's letters to her friend Hagar Olsson offer a straightforward and explicit description of her spiritual struggles.
- xii Häll, *Vägen till landet*, 280.
- xiii H. W. Donner, "Olly och Uno Donner," *Årsskrift utg. av Åbo Akademi* 42 (1959): 29–38.
- xiv Cf. Wallace Fowlie, "On Writing Autobiography," in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 166.
- xv Paul John Eakin, "Narrative and Chronology as Structures of Reference and the New Model Autobiographer," in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 36–39.
- xvi Kersti Bergroth, *Löytöretki* (Helsinki: Otava, 1973), 188.
- xvii Rudolf Steiner, *The Course of my Life: An Autobiography*, trans. Olin D. Wannamaker (New York: Anthroposophic, 1951), 1.
- xviii Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 178.
- xix Kersti Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva* (Helsinki: Otava, 1942), 9, 321.
- xx Rantavaara, "Johdanto," 19.
- xxi Kersti Bergroth, *Alkusoitto* (Helsinki: Otava, 1971), 9–16, 20–21.
- xxii Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 134.
- xxiii Ibid., 136.
- xxiv Manninen and Ahola, "Verhona taide," 474; Ristilä, "Bergroth, Kersti"; Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 61–67.
- xxv Manninen and Ahola, "Verhona taide," 475; Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 87.
- xxvi Ristilä, "Bergroth, Kersti"; Ristilä, *Mitä tämä kaikki on*; Tuulio, "Kersti Bergroth," 187–88; Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 318.
- xxvii Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Conversion and the Language of Autobiography," in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 43.
- xxviii Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 116–17.
- xxix Kersti Bergroth, *Luokkakokous* (Helsinki: Otava, 1970), 62; Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 88–95.
- xxx Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 117–18.

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- xxxi Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 93.
- xxxii Ibid., 110, 112–13; Steiner, *Course of My Life*; A. P. Shepherd, *En forskare på nya vägar: Rudolf Steiner och antroposofin* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1958).
- xxxiii Kersti Bergroth, *Teokset I* (Helsinki: Otava, 1952), 266.
- xxxiv Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 94.
- xxxv Bergroth, *Teokset I*, 270.
- xxxvi Ibid., 274.
- xxxvii Ibid., 326.
- xxxviii Ibid., 174, 408–9.
- xxxix Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 288–95.
- xl Bergroth, *Teokset I*, 495.
- xli Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 12–13.
- xlii Steiner, *Course of My Life*, 104.
- xliii Rantavaara, “Johdanto,” 7–8; *Sininen Kirja* 5–6, 19.
- xliv Bergroth, *Teokset I*, 163.
- xlv Ibid., 458.
- xlvi Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 83.
- xlvii *Päiväkirja* 1 (1936): 3.
- xlviii Rantavaara, “Johdanto,” 11.
- xlix Bergroth, *Teokset I*, 32.
- I Liselotte Frisk, *Nya religiösa rörelser i Sverige: Relation till samhället/världen, anslutning och engagemang* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1993), 142; Kari E. Turunen, *Rudolf Steiners kehitys ja ajattelu: Filosofis-psykologinen tutkimus* (Helsinki: Arator, 1990), 173, 290–91; Robert A. McDermott, “Anthroposophy,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed.), ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), 392–94; Robert A. McDermott, “Steiner, Rudolf,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2nd ed.), ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), 8738–39.
- li Frisk, *Nya religiösa rörelser*, 143; Steiner, *Course of My Life*; Shepherd, *En forskare*.
- lii Frisk, *Nya religiösa rörelser*, 145, 149; McDermott, “Steiner, Rudolf”; McDermott, “Anthroposophy.”
- liii Ristilä, “Bergroth, Kersti”; Tuulio, “Kersti Bergroth,” 187–88; Bergroth, *Oma muotokuva*, 318; Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 116.
- liv Bergroth, *Alkusoitto*, 201.
- lv Bergroth, *Teokset I*, 73.
- lvi Ristilä, “Bergroth, Kersti.”
- lvii *Päiväkirja* 1 (1934): 4.
- lviii *Päiväkirja* 2 (1934): 41.
- lix *Päiväkirja* (1935): 5–6.
- lx *Päiväkirja* 1934–37; Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 149–60.
- lxi Most of the newspaper critics treated Bergroth and her literary career in a kind and appreciative way. There were, however, certain exceptions: young male critics, who harshly attacked both Bergroth’s novels and her person as an old woman living a privileged life and writing novels of light entertainment.

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lxii Tuulio, “Kersti Bergroth,” 192–93; Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 186.

lxiii Tuulio, “Kersti Bergroth,” 192–93; Bergroth, *Löytöretki*, 186; Manninen and Ahola, “Verhona taide,” 479.