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# The Swiss Observer

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## THE "GOTHEANUM"

Along the final curls of the Grand Union Canal, not far from the St. Pancras coal yard where this opaque watercourse with a proud name dismally ends, there is a row of run-down buildings which Dickens would have loved to contemplate. One of the decrepit tenements is the abode of a hippy friend of mine, who sleeps on a mattress in a cubby-hole, and lives on a shillings worth of rice and grain a day. It is in this surprising setting that I learnt of the very existence of a unique school in Switzerland, the *Gotheanum* of Dornach.

Among the masterless society squatting in a living room furnished with a sofa, a lonely television set and topless photographs on the walls, there was an intellectual hippy in gym shoes and a canvas outfit, with the face of a seminarian and Trotsky glasses, expounding the revelations of a large book which he had brought along. The book was about *eusthenics* and written by the creator of this oblique art, Rudolf Steiner, otherwise known as an Austrian philosopher and founder of Anthroposophy.

Eusthenics, as far as I could gather from our friend's exposition, was the art of translating emotions into special movement. It was more than choreography, the mere presentation of visual patterns, because eusthenics sought the expression of the deepest feelings by the sheer geometry of motion. Thus an expressionless marble moving in smooth trajectories was pretendedly able to procure emotions of the same intensity as, say, a symphony. I hazarded a doubt on this assertion, and immediately aroused the violent reaction of the hippy. I soon learnt however that he had acquired his esoteric notions in the course of two and a half studious years spent at the *Gotheanum* or *Schule für Geisteswissenschaft* in Dornach. I asked him how he had landed in such an original institute and was told that his destiny was the result of his education in a Rudolf Steiner school, another entity of which I knew nothing.

His career departed somewhat from the ordinary. Being a Scot, he was brought up in Scotland and sent to the

Daniel Stuart School. There, he was beaten by his masters on average twice a week. This, apparently, was current practice in Scottish schools of those days. Our friend was understandably allergic and refused to co-operate. He began to be an unmanageable schoolboy. His parents did what an increasing number of distressed parents do in similar circumstances: they sent their son to a psychiatrist. The doctored man gave the sound advice that Robin Mitchell (for this is our friend's name) should be sent to a Rudolf Steiner school. So Robin was sent to one of these singular establishments at considerable expense and enjoyed a liberal and benign education inspired by the enlightened views of Rudolf Steiner. These schools are distinct by their syllabus, which includes *eurythmics*, and by the total unobtrusiveness of their teachers. They run the school in a collegial way. Rudolf Steiner schoolchildren enjoy exhilarating freedom as the guiding motto is never to impede the budding will of a child.

This system of education evidently suited Robin very well, because he not only passed his A levels, but decided to follow the same lead by going to the *Gotheanum* to study *eurythmy*, the musical gymnastics devised by our compatriot, Emile-Jacques Dalcroze. He did not pursue these studies to the end because, with a final year to go, he felt the acute urge of living life to the full. The knowledge verbally imparted to him *ex Cathedra* by his professors could not replace the actual fulfilment of experience and Robin stepped into vibrant living by taking pot. This spell-binding experiment changed his vision of life and induced him to complete the break with the *Gotheanum*. The vapours of hashish lit up in his mind the shimmering vision of a wonderful, wide world of which he must take possession. So off in the great world he rambled. His peregrination took him to Greece, where he had a chance of applying his choreographic knowledge in making films. Seven of them in all, mostly art films—but they included *Elektra*, for which he was assistant director. He re-

turned to Switzerland and continued his vagrant life by living on a succession of trades that varied from disc jockey to dish washer. Back in London finally, he became engaged in a West End theatre procuring him his livelihood in awaiting the start of the next university year, when he will apply for a grant and study for a diploma in eurythmics. There is now a London college which has recently promoted eurythmics to the status of a full-time course. He plans to devote himself to autistic and mongoloid children with eurythmical methods once he is through with his studies. He will then have drawn a full circle.

The *Gotheanum* in Dornach is one of the only institutions devoted to the serious study of the *spirit*. It was first built in 1913 but destroyed by fire in 1923. It was rebuilt in concrete and completed in 1925, the year of Rudolf Steiner's death. But it continued to expand and new annexes have been added to this day. There are now approximately 200 full-time students from all over the world reading in eurythmy. Thirty others study agriculture, 40 art, 50 speech therapy and 150 anthroposophy. The *Gotheanum* delivers a recognised diploma although in anthroposophy, which can with difficulty be considered as a marketable trade, the school delivers an attestation of study.

But Rudolf Steiner's life work was by no means limited to the *Gotheanum* but diverged in many other enterprises. With the financial help of a German industrialist attached to Steiner's ideas, his disciples were able to launch the Waldorf school movement responsible for creating some 60 Rudolf Steiner schools and 25,000 students in America and Europe. There are six such schools in Great Britain. They also created various scientific institutes mainly devoted to Steiner's biodynamic method of gardening and farming, to eurythmy, to speech therapy and to mathematics. The central clinic of the movement is at Arlesheim, near Dornach.

Eurythmy has been widely adopted by the Steiner schools although the best known method of eurythmy is due

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to Emile-Jacques Dalcroze, who was professor at the Geneva Conservatoire and who is well known in French-speaking Switzerland for his popular songs, the most widely sung of which is *Et chantons en chœur le Pays Romand!* Eurythmy is a kind of gymnastics designed to develop body reflexes and concentration. It consists in making precise movements according to the duration of the notes played by a pianist. The response to a quarter note is a step, a longer note would require a step followed by a forward movement and interrupted. There was a Dalcroze school in Geneva. The two main schools at present are in New York and Laxenburg, Holland. But eurythmy is a wider subject than the mere Dalcroze method. It is, so I learnt from Robin Mitchell, an increasingly adopted therapy for maladjusted and defective children. One always learns something new. (PMB)

## COMMENT

### HAVE MERCY ON A SOLDIER'S HEART!

In the last fortnight of August, three men performing their annual military service collapsed and died from overstrain. I have details of the two latter cases. One of them involved a 40-year-old corporal of the 165th Infantry Battalion, who, on the day of his entry, had to walk with all his gear to the gathering centre for three quarters of an hour. The last stage of the climb was completed in a coach. A few hours later the unfortunate victim of these introductory efforts collapsed and died of an infarction before being brought to the hospital of Monthey. The second accident occurred on the same day in the course of a night patrol race in which a 40-year-old sergeant of the 264th Battalion collapsed

in his stride and died on the spot of a cardiac weakness.

Military accidents and deaths are inevitable in any army. There is no doubt that our Swiss Army authorities are taking all the measures they can to prevent accidents with the instruments of death which the rookies come to learn to handle. The fact that the Swiss army is a militia army, almost entirely manned by non-professionals, heightens the danger and one occasionally hears of men being seriously wounded by unscrewed grenades blowing up in the pockets of their combat suits, of others being shattered by uncleared mine-throwers or burnt by flame-throwers. In the course of practice assaults against a hill strongly defended by wooden targets, a bullet rebounded on a Geneva infantryman five yards away from me. His helmet had a lovely dent which he could show off at inspections.

But death by mishandling of weapons can usually be controlled by the fact that weapons behave in a predictable way, whatever else one might say about them. The human body is not endowed with such a safe predictability. The purpose of the Swiss militia is to keep the populace as fit for fighting as possible by plunging it into military life at regular intervals. But being fit for fighting doesn't only mean knowing how to handle guns and grenades, it also requires a physical condition able to withstand the stress of prolonged fighting which would be faced in real warfare. Military repetition courses may therefore not be a rest cure and have to tax the physical hardiness of a people's army. In the course of wide-scale manoeuvres in which the combined forces of Neuchatel and Geneva successfully defended the passes of the Jura against the invading Bernese, we were made to trudge in the snow for five days and nights—as good an imitation of the real thing as one could wish!

The men who enter annual military service are supposedly fit, because they have proved this by accomplishing recruit schools and other previous military stunts. The weak hearts are rapidly screened out. In the case of Colombier, in the grand château where the infantry of Geneva has to do its basic training, recruits are made to sprint 60 yards on the day of their enrolment. The erratic thumping of the hearts of about a tenth of them are a welcome ticket back to the family. During the next days, all recruits have to plod up a two-mile ascent to the firing range of Bôle under a blazing sun. This exercise prunes off another batch of weak hearts. The last weaklings are nipped away during the first night exercises, which is the first major test of physical endurance. With all this sifting, a 20-year-old youth who has accomplished four months of hard military effort can normally be said to be free of a deficient heart.

But between the vigour of the

young man released from basic training and the paunchy stomach of the professional man, who, in his greying forties must accomplish his last *Landwehr* course, there may be an intermission of stress, overwork, over-eating, cholesterol perfusion and family worries. A man called in his forties may not be fit for service, even though his military booklet may be free from all inscriptions indicating ill health. The only way of preventing the frequent recurrence of heart failures during repetition courses would then be to precede all of them by a thorough medical check-up. This of course would cost money and time, but money is a fair price to pay for human life.

The cause of these men's deaths was perhaps not physical strain as such, but the suddenness with which it was imposed. The first of the two cases mentioned above was that of a man who died less than ten hours after putting on his uniform. Whatever the results of the enquiry, it appears that the human machine isn't maintained with sufficient care by the intendants. Account has got to be taken of the times, as people nowadays lead rather unhealthy lives.

If other heart accidents were to occur, one could well imagine the ensuing mass psychosis. Both officers and men would dread the least exertion. The officers would be afraid of taking the responsibility of prolonged efforts and order lengthy pauses after every mile of marching, or transport their delicate men in upholstered coaches. The common soldier would keep an anguished ear on the vagaries of his heart and stand transfixed in utter anguish at the first twinge inside his chest, fearing that his life pump might suddenly stop.

Weeding out the weak hearts before the annual effort is better than letting coronaries snap suddenly during the armed storming of a mound. All those valiant men liable to puff themselves irremediably out in the Army could still be useful to society. They are worth keeping alive. (PMB)

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