

Tilo Schabert

## IN THE FADING OF DIVINE VOICES:

### THE SONG OF ERANOS

I take you with me for a visit to Marburg an der Lahn in Germany, in early July 1930. We are going to accompany two persons who at that time both render, although separately (for they do not know – yet – of each other), a visit to a scholar whose name is resounding far and wide in the world of religious studies: Rudolf Otto. The name of the one visitor is Henry Corbin, that of the other Olga Froebe-Kapteyn. Henry Corbin, a young French scholar in philosophy, with an increasing interest in Oriental studies (to pursue them seriously he has learned Arabic, Persian, and Turkish at the *École des Langues orientales*), had been sent to Marburg by his teacher in Paris, Jean Baruzi, who himself is an academic friend of Otto's. Corbin has undertaken his journey from Paris to Marburg in the way of an intellectual if not spiritual pilgrimage; not only in his eyes Rudolf Otto has made of this German University town an "haut lieu" of inspired scholarship for anyone studying the phenomenon of religions in human civilisations, and not only the ones in the West, but also, and in particular, that in the East. A vivid sign of this, in the summer of 1930, is the visit to Marburg – that is: Rudolf Otto – of Rabindranath Tagore. Henry Corbin meets him too, in the company of Otto. During his stay in Marburg (that lasts a month) Corbin, furthermore, becomes acquainted with Friedrich Heiler, Ernst Benz, and Karl Löwith – scholars who later will be, like himself, participants in an Eranos.

The "Eranos", namely, which Olga Froebe-Kapteyn has in mind, although she does not know yet this word for it, as she is consulting in June 1930 with Rudolf Otto in Marburg, and which eventually indeed, in 1933, she will initiate, at her place on the shores of the Lago Maggiore, at Moscia (Ascona). At the encounter of Olga Froebe-Kapteyn and Rudolf Otto two activists in the pursuit of the same cause meet. In the years before their meeting, both have participated and been busy already in that para-modern movement for which, I think, in partial agreement with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the proper term is indeed "Eranos movement".

I propose, as you may realize, a change of perspective. And I would illustrate the implications of this change in referring to what lies at hand: The Eranos *Tagungen* at Ascona have by no means been the only manifestation of the Eranos movement, they have rather formed but a part, albeit a major one, of this movement. Well, this would precisely be the objective of our "great tale" – to tell the long, complex and wide-ranging story of the Eranos movement. But, for the moment, we better switch our attention back to Marburg: At their meeting there Rudolf Otto suggested to Olga Froebe-Kapteyn, as has often been reported, that she use the word "Eranos" for the gatherings she was planning to hold at her estate and as to which she wished to receive Otto's advice. But why did the Marburg sage choose the word "Eranos" and not, for example, "symposium", or "school", "circle", "society" – each of them being an obvious and familiar term for a unit of scholarly and spiritual interchange? I find the question most

intriguing, for it leads us to think of a chapter in the story of the Eranos movement of which I believe that it could explain much of the dynamics of the movement but which as yet has not at all been recognized as such a chapter in such a story.

Consider: In 1876 an *Eranos Vindobonensis* is founded, an association in Vienna devoted to the culture of Classical Antiquity; in 1896 a journal in the field of classical studies is launched in Uppsala, Sweden, under the title *Eranos. Acta philologica Suecana*. Concerning religious studies, we associate of course with Uppsala the name of Nathan Söderblom who as professor in the School of Theology at the University there (and concurrently at the University of Leipzig) led a theological revival in Sweden and greatly enhanced the comparative study of religions, with a particular emphasis on non-Christian religions. Rudolf Otto and Nathan Söderblom know each other since 1900. Was “Eranos” a word never pronounced in their conversations? A titillating question. Consider further: In 1904 Adolf Deißmann and Albrecht Dietrich set up in Heidelberg a circle for the discussion of religious themes among scholars of different disciplines. They give to this circle the name of “Eranos”. Albrecht Dietrich, besides, was a friend of Deißmann’s – from Marburg. In 1924 a *Festschrift* appears in honour of the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Its title: ERANOS.

Tell me: Do you not think, too, that there seem to be curious coincidences? I cannot help but let the forces of my scholarly imagination run. What might they find? I dare to conjecture, in order to reach out for goals of our quest whereto we should direct it. Rudolf Otto suggested to Olga Froebe-Kapteyn the word “Eranos” because he himself had the word very much in his mind. He lived mentally in an Eranos epoch – as did others.

Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel, for instance. Young scholars in Tübingen. Their thoughts shivered under the coldness of the world which humans now possessed. For it appeared to consist but of physical bodies functioning mechanically for the totally obscure purpose of a universal machinery. And it shocked, utterly, hurtfully, by the silence which it bore, manifesting but signals which did not speak, codes which did not illuminate, sounds which did not ring. To the world which they owned humans were but strangers. And the logic of this world couldn’t be more unforthcoming, more dismissive: Machines are there to be operated, and certainly are not meant to participate in a communicative interpenetration of living beings and things within a common cosmos. What a fate seemed to have befallen humankind after its millennial leap! Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel wondered – and diagnosed. They were flying high. For they aspired not only to explain but also to heal the estrangement of human beings from their world. *Die jetzige Physik*, modern physics, they sharply stated, couldn’t satisfy *einen schöpferischen Geist*, a creative mind. And the modern state was in their view something purely mechanical, putting free people under the management *eines mechanischen Räderwerks*, of a mechanical wheelwork. But this of course *it should not be* – the modern state had therefore to be superseded.

To discuss and to diagnose together their age in this way the three scholars and friends had come together again, in 1795, in 1796. But now, while still adhering to the political project of modernity, they rather aimed at elaborating a new philosophical and religious project in reponse to what they felt to be the great and indeed unacceptable

loss in the condition of human life under the premises of modernity: life had become terribly cold. This common project of Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel has become known under the title *Das Älteste Systemprogramm des Deutschen Idealismus* – The Oldest/Earliest Program for the System of German Idealism. It formulates a number of intentions and I would suggest that we take these intentions as our guides on our further way of exploration. For they will lead us into spaces of thought where we shall begin to be able to recognize the physiognomy of the Eranos epoch.

Hölderlin, Schelling and Hegel, then, proclaimed: First, an absolute freedom of all minds – an *absolute Freiheit aller Geister*. Secondly, a supremacy of beauty – of the *Idee der Schönheit* – in all matters of thought; reason has to be understood in this greater platonic sense (and let us not forget this reference to Plato), for beauty only *vereinigt alle*, brings all human beings together unto a community. Thirdly, a re-emergence of poetry now “at the end” as what it had been “at the beginning” – *Lehrerin der Menschheit*, teacher of humankind. Fourthly (and let us particularly take note of this intention), a *Monotheismus der Vernunft und des Herzens*, a monotheism of reason and heart, and a *Polytheismus der Einbildungskraft und der Kunst*, a polytheism of imagination and art; for everyone, and especially the philosopher, was held by the authors of the *Systemprogramm* to be in need of a *sinnliche Religion*, a religion sensually felt. Fifthly, *eine neue Mythologie*, a new mythology, which will have to be a *Mythologie der Vernunft*, a mythology of reason.

The *Systemprogramm*, undoubtedly, calls for a thoroughgoing interpretation. It represents a challenging case for the hermeneutical art. For our purpose here, however, we would go astray, if we would preoccupy us now with attempting to decipher all what the *Systemprogramm* says. Due to its apodictic style, we have in any case not missed the importance of these expressions in its construction: absolute freedom of all minds, supremacy of poetry, monotheism of reason and heart, polytheism of imagination and art, religion sensually felt, new mythology, mythology of reason. What I would rather propose is to listen to one of the authors of the *Systemprogramm*, to Friedrich Hölderlin lending his own poetical art to an expression of the intentions which he had once abstractly formulated, with his two other philosopher-friends, by the *Systemprogramm*.

I have chosen two texts of Hölderlin's. The first is a poem, dating from the period 1796-1799, hence from a time not far removed from the moment the *Systemprogramm* was composed. With this poem, Hölderlin evoked a jubilant life in a divinely tended garden of the world which apparently has gone forever:

Da ich ein Knabe war,  
Rettet' ein Gott mich oft  
Vom Geschrei und der Rute der Menschen  
Da spielt ich sicher und gut  
Mit den Blumen des Hains,  
Und die Lüftchen des Himmels  
Spielten mit mir.

Und wie du das Herz  
Der Pflanzen erfreust  
Wenn sie entgegen dir  
Die zarten Arme strecken,

So hast du mein Herz erfreut,  
 Vater Helios! und, wie Endymion,  
 War ich dein Liebbling,  
 Heilige Luna!

O all ihr treuen  
 Freundlichen Götter!  
 Daß ihr wüßtet,  
 Wie euch meine Seele geliebt!

Zwar damals rief ich noch nicht  
 Euch mit Namen, auch ihr  
 Nanntet mich nie, wie die Menschen sich nennen,  
 Als kennten sie sich.

Doch kannt ich euch besser,  
 Als ich je einen Menschen gekannt,  
 Ich verstand die Stille des Äthers,  
 Der Menschen Worte verstand ich nie.

Mich erzog der Wohllaut  
 Des säuselnden Hains  
 Und lieben lernt ich  
 Unter den Blumen.

Im Arme der Götter wuchs ich groß.

The second text I draw from Hölderlin's novel *Hyperion*, published in 1797/1799. It is a passage in a letter Hyperion has received from Diotima, his love, his muse (whose name was of course chosen by Hölderlin deliberately, as an echo of the figure of Diotima in Plato's *Banquet*). Now the divine voices, once filling a garden of the world, have faded. But, instead of the divinely tended garden, another paradigmatic image has appeared: A festive community among human beings at which no stranger lacks a friend and the tired souls of humans are again filled with the gaiety of gods:

“Ach! nun verließen so leicht sich nicht die geselligen Menschen; wie der Sand im Sturme der Wildnis irrten sie untereinander nicht mehr, noch höhnte sich Jugend und Alter, noch fehlt' ein Gastfreund dem Fremden, ... und die Götter erheiterten wieder die verwelkliche Seele der Menschen; es bewahrten die herzerhaltenden Götter jedes freundliche Bündnis unter ihnen. .... Ach! nun nahmen die Menschen die schöne Welt nicht mehr, wie Laien des Künstlers Gedicht, wenn sie die Worte loben und den Nutzen drin erschn. ... entzündet von der ewigjungen Götter Glück war *alles Menschentum*, wie einst, *ein Fest*.”

We are at the starting-point of the Eranos movement: the programmatic re-emergence, in German romanticism of the idea of a gathering, held for the purpose of offering, sharing, conviviality. The idea of religion sensually felt. The idea of opening again the doors to the truth of myths, to the humanity of the other, the stranger, the *Fremde*. The

idea of the social, and, yes, political blessings of beauty, the magic companion of humankind at its quest for unity. We have already evoked here the names of some of the idea's new carriers: Hölderlin, Schelling, Hegel. But we should of course not forget to mention at least the names of others: Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Goethe, and, in particular – Friedrich Schleiermacher. If we could go on with our exploration of the physiognomy of the Eranos epoch – but we cannot, the great tale, as I said, remains to be told – we would discover Schleiermacher at a very prominent place in this physiognomy. In a threefold way, as translator of Plato, as teacher of the hermeneutic art, as scholar in the study of religion, Schleiermacher directly and immensely inspired the advanced and, as such, more visible Eranos movement, in the later part of the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries. And he was to a large degree the mentor of the *Ecole d'Eranos* founded 1933 at Ascona. Through Rudolf Otto, at first, and then members of the *Ecole*. Henry Corbin, for example, who for a long time was a leading figure in the *Ecole*, referred to Schleiermacher's hermeneutics whenever he spoke about the nature of his scholarly work, in general, and at Eranos, in particular. An Eranos, he explained, is shining up when the speakers there make the subject they are speaking about *visible*, to be seen “unhidden”, by performing actually, through their scholarship, their *Wissen*, an appearance of this subject whereby it is given an immediate *présence* – of which they themselves are *le signe*, the sign. When Walter Haug – Eranos speaker in recent years – described the appearance of Erwin Rouselle at Eranos, as a speaker on Daoism, he emphasized Rouselle's “double knowledge”, his *doppeltes Wissen: Gelebrsamkeit und Erfahrung*, scholarship *and* experience. At Eranos, we have studied together and we have conversed with each other. And we have made of our conversation the chant of a community. Now, I invite you to carry it with you: The song of Eranos.

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