

Tilo Schabert

THE ERANOS EXPERIENCE

The elements.

The *terra* of the Eranos experience is composed of different places. Among them there are of course these three places to be considered first: the old estate of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (the foundress and long-time motivator of the Eranos *Tagungen*) on the road from Ascona to Brissago, the *Bauhaus* building and the park on the Monte Verità, and the cloister, garden and orchard of the Collegio Papio in the centre of Ascona.

Indeed, a special artistry produces the peculiar effect of an Eranos *Tagung*. Not entirely surprisingly, perhaps, this artistry has been a matter of interest since the inception of Eranos. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn was very much aware of it, as her prefaces to the Eranos Books and some of her own published texts show; major Eranos speakers have variously written about it; and in the recent recollections of Eranos documented in this volume it is again a topic of marvel. It has aroused, furthermore, not a little interest among observers of Eranos who felt attracted by what they thought to be a matter of "mystery" and who, as a result, often developed, in various ways and to different degrees, an apparently irresistible urge to get hold of the "mystery" and to impart subsequently their "knowledge".

Nevertheless, we can share some knowledge and surely one which is precisely relevant to Eranos, that is to the artistry "behind" an Eranos *Tagung*. But it is not by revealing a "mystery" that we may be able to elucidate the "wondrous" experience of an Eranos *Tagung*. For the wisdom to be shared is an old one, an ancient one in fact. It has been handed down to us from the myths and the philosophy in ancient Greece, among them the myths of Orpheus and Apollo as well as Plato's *Philebos* and *Symposium*. Let us recall that "Eranos" was, in the first place, a term widely used in classical Greece. And this legacy of wisdom has of course been universally known ever since: a knowledge pertaining to the elements through which, if they are blended artfully in a whole, the human experience can be made to appear ravishingly heightened. Life, as it then seems, has turned into a festivity, the organization of society into companionship, the day to be mastered into a joyful celebration. A transfiguring event has happened and has produced a particular space of time to be experienced in between our ordinary time.

All of us have an idea of it, of this particular space of time; we think or speak of it as "leisure". With this notion we associate moments of life which in essential ways differ from life in the ordinary dimension of time. There is idleness instead of toil, a freedom of action instead of necessity, pleasure instead of strain. To be and to live means to be full of joy, a sense

of festiveness delights our mind. Through leisure, therefore, we seem to know the experience of an Eranos quite well: this is given essentially by being in a state of leisureliness or, as we might say more simply, by "having" leisure. The symbolic expressions used by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn to describe the Eranos experience fall well, it would seem, into the semantic field just evoked here by the term "leisure". An Eranos *Tagung*, she said, could be understood as a "play" enacted on the "stage" (*Bühne*) of the *Tagung*; one might also compare an Eranos Conference to a "fugue" (*Fuge*); the element which characterized most the "meetings" (the Eranos Conferences) was their "distinctly festive note". An Eranos *Tagung*, we might then say, is a festivity performed by the participants who by offering each other speeches and inspired conversation produce a stage for the festive experience among companions to be celebrated. But, we should then also be compelled to ask if such an event would not require elements for and acts of an orchestration which the notion of "having" leisure hardly includes. The answer to this question is: Yes. For the contemplated event occurs only through leisure filled with creativity: A *dance*, a *play*, a *celebration*, a *festive community* want to be orchestrated in *enchanting* surroundings for a *time of giving and offering* that is initiated by the *mutual pledge* to a perfectly open *dialogue*, an authentic *Gespräch*, a *banquet of minds*. No doubt, to enter into an Eranos experience one has to have leisure. A leisure, though, which certainly needs to be *σχολη*, that is leisure as it was understood in classical Greece: as a festive experience achieved through a *staging* and an *orchestration* of this experience.

The architecture

The formula of *scholein agein* expressed precisely this view. It was meant to convey the notion of leisure as a time actively spent and purposefully formed. The verb *αγω* means "to guide", "to direct", "to form" and, in combination with *schole*, it signifies a "state of peace", a "festive mood" and a readiness "to celebrate". All these meanings denote quite well the event of an Eranos *Tagung*. We might think it quite appropriate, then, to retain the formula of *scholein agein* for further use in the analysis of the Eranos experience as it is developed here. However, like all extrinsic expressions within a given language it would encumber somewhat the flow of words, in making it proceed less smoothly. We should consider this aspect; and we should take into account as well a second one, which is, indeed, crucial. An Eranos *Tagung*, as Henry Corbin observed, is a meeting open to the unforeseen ("*l'imprévisible rencontre*"). And Corbin noted further, not without a degree of amazement, a very special phenomenon which emerges at the Eranos *Tagungen*. Those who speak there have not been consulting with each other about their lectures prior to the event of offering them to each other. In addition, the lectures on purpose reflect a great diversity; they are drawn from a wide variety of disciplines, are given by scholars of distinctive ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, and are presented in four different languages. And yet, at every *Tagung* the lectures together represent, in spite of all their diversity, an *ensemble* of knowledge and insight which gives rise to the notion that out of

very diverse parts a *cosmos* has been built. Henry Corbin felt that this phenomenon would amount to a *homophonie*. The image, however, which this term induces may imply too much harmony, for the experience of a "cosmos" at an Eranos *Tagung* always occurs in the course of a continuing counterpoint between the "parts" and the "whole". Throughout the *Tagung* the "whole" is formed by the "parts", in indeed unforeseen ways, and constructive efforts have continuously to be made in order to achieve the "cosmos". Making an Eranos *Tagung*, we might therefore argue, is the experience of an "experiment", as Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn put it, or, as we later said, of pursuing an "adventure".

Let us, for our better understanding, start and "build" a *Tagung*. What would we have to do? We should at first choose of course a place and a time. As to the former our tradition - the Eranos *Tagungen* moored since 1933 to the scintillating lake - supplies already the decision. And with this mooring, as I hope to have suggested in the first paragraphs, the play of elements conducive to the *Tagung* has already begun. Marking a time is a less obvious matter, and should by no means be taken as a forthright act, for the "time of Eranos" (*temps d'Eranos*), as Henry Corbin explained, has a seemingly paradoxical structure. It is happening "inside" ordinary time and yet it is a time "outside". We must fix its dates on the calendar (August 9-18, for instance) and henceforth have it there immovably, and yet all about it ought to be freedom and leisure. In fixing its dates we shall liberally spread it over the calendar, therefore, and thus we reserve spaces of time not to be filled in advance. The temporal structure of the *Tagung* can be set up and within it there will remain, nevertheless, distinct voids. We shall have given to our Eranos Conference the basis for its particular architecture of time. Yet, we shall continue to observe with much attention the open spaces in this architecture, once the Conference has started and is developing. Indeed, these apertures shall most likely be again a matter of our care, for they have upon the participants in the *Tagung* two different and equally notable effects. On the one side, there will be people whom the "voids" in the *Tagung*'s program inspire to become generous and to transform them into gifts - gifts of time - freely to be offered to other fellow participants in the ongoing *Tagung*, or to rejoice over these moments of time totally apart from any ordinary preoccupation and solicitude. Theirs will be an Eranos experience. And there will be people, on the other side, whom the "voids" affect as being disquieting; they long to have them replenished, by some additional feature of program, naturally. We should, while considering the *Tagung*'s development, forestall any such closing of the openings in its architecture, in order to avoid that the *Tagung* swings into excitement and overactivity and ceases to be a playful movement between ordinary time and a time "outside".

Our next task in building a *Tagung* will be the selection of a theme. This, we have to say, is the least understood part in the setup of an Eranos Conference. It sounds so easy: Choosing a topic. Aren't there dozens of them? Take this one, the voice here would say. Choose that one, the voice there would urge. And each voice would utter its proposal very

readily, as if but a slight problem had to be dealt with. Actually, there seems to be hardly any problem, in view of all the suggestions which one could rapidly collect. But most of these, as we shall realize easily upon some probing, will have been made without much thought or, more importantly, without much listening (if any) before. An Eranos theme, though, is found only in the process of an osmosis. This process certainly requires a receptive approach. In searching for a theme we should be well advised, then, if we set up our mind like an antenna to receive information, inspiration, and judgment from wherever and however such aid, orientation and counsel may come, from inside the Eranos community or from outside (a sphere which should by no means be ignored), from sources belonging to the past or being present around us, in the form of writings upon which we happen to come across or which we have looked for on purpose, through encounters which had been unintended or conversations with advisers and mentors whom we had wished to consult.

But isn't there a question? Will the osmosis within such a wide field, we might feel compelled to ask, not result finally in nothing more than a potentially infinite and amorphous flow of exchange? The answer to this question can well be a negative one, for in order to advance in our search and to secure eventually our choice we have a distinct criterion to which we can look as to a scout and guide. This criterion represents the core of the Eranos experience. It concerns the great diversity of interpretations of the human experience and the ensuing eminent question (in three parts), why all these diverse interpretations are nevertheless expressions of one, namely the *human* experience, and wherein, then, could lie the unity of the latter, and how this ensemble of humankind might be discerned and considered. Our criterion tells us the way which we have to take in view of this question (with its three parts). We could also speak here of the "Eranos method", for at the beginning of the way an offering is held out: the invitation to study the ensemble of humankind by searching for its unity precisely in its diversity. The criterion is set as a paradox, as indeed the great paradox, we might say, for the experience of the diversity is the only mode for experiencing a unity; there is no way other than the movement between diversity and unity; any attempt to bend one's way towards a seizure of unity destroys the very condition for being on the way: the experience of diversity through which alone there is a way.

The Eranos of the Eranos *Tagungen* is an offspring of a large "Eranos movement" which emerged at several places in Europe during the last decades of the 19th century. One of the figures of inspiration for this movement was Friedrich Schleiermacher. Indeed, we can find in his study *Über die Religion* (On religion) an exemplary description of the way to a *Tagung*: "I invite you to consider every faith which human beings have professed, every religion... It is in the *religions* that you should discover *the* religion (my emphasis, T.S.). Nobody can have the religion as a whole, for a human being is finite and the religion is infinite. ... The *religion of the religions* (my emphasis, T.S.) cannot collect enough materials for its very own staging of its inner contemplation ... innumerable forms of religion are possible ..."

One should be well advised, I have said, to set up one's mind like an antenna. We are now able to name the virtue of our mind which should govern the antenna. And, besides, we needn't search for a term yet, as a most apt one already exists in this splendid expression coined by Roger Caillois: *sagesse diagonale* (diagonal wisdom). In virtue of such a wisdom we may eventually be fortunate enough at some stage in the osmotic process of our search to strike a theme from which, as it seems to us, we could rear up our *Tagung*. The new theme will bear comparison with former themes such as "Structures of Chaos", "The Language of Masks" or "Religions - the religious experience". And we shall therefore proceed. Then our theme will have to stand the decisive test: Will it prove to be the crucible for an Eranos, for the intended play between the "parts" and the "whole", between the individual lectures given and the emergence among them of a common bearing?

The agents of the test will be the speakers at our *Tagung*. We shall invite the traditional number: 8 to 10. Our invitations will be guided by an established set of rules with which we shall continue to construct, as we apply them now, the Eranos architecture. We may formulate those rules as follows: (1) Through the speakers a wide variety of disciplines will be heard; there is no discipline which could not be included into an Eranos, new or newly promising disciplines should be sought, the Eranos *Tagungen* from the very beginning have been shaped by pioneering minds and their scientifically innovative explorations; therefore we should undertake every effort to achieve an Eranos of such minds. (2) The speakers themselves will represent the widest possible diversity of geographical, cultural, religious and ethnic origins; in actively considering and, furthermore, working with the difference between female and male voices, we shall continue to follow the *eros* of the *Tagungen* and render to it the rule over our play, that this "God" common to women and men, in the process of bending mutually their creativity towards each other, appear to have staged it. (3) We expect our speakers to strike us particularly by these two qualities: the imaginative and inspiring force of mind and the unfailing rigor of scholarship. While remaining always firm about this requirement, we shall by no means be discriminative regarding the profession or occupational status of a speaker; the majority of Eranos lecturers have been academics, but one does not need to be an academic in order to be an Eranos lecturer. (4) We shall compose the group of speakers in such a way that half of them have at least once been speakers at an Eranos already, and that the other half will be new speakers. Of the older speakers we shall consider for an invitation only those who have not been chosen in the preceding year (and usually the pause between invitations is longer than just one year); by this simple yet decisive architectural measure a field of lecturers is formed which is sufficiently open, diverse, extended, and fluid to keep Eranos productive, on the one hand, and to avoid the emergence of a circle of lecturers who become more and more only their own *habitués*.

With a mixture of diligence, phantasy, wisdom and luck we should have our group of speakers built in the early fall of the year preceding the year of our *Tagung*. It may seem to us,

then, that we have done the essential part of our architectural task. All is set now: the place, the time, the theme, the group of speakers. We have just to wait for the day of the opening of the *Tagung*. Certainly. And yet, imperceptibly almost, while we were preoccupied with "organizational" matters, the creative process has begun which has been and is our intention. The "test" referred to earlier is already under way. Why? The answer, intimated already by terms and expressions such as "crucible", "counterpoint between the whole and the parts", "ensemble of knowledge and insight" is this: When we invited the speakers, we asked each of them to formulate within the *Tagung*'s general theme the title of his or her lecture. And with this request we have of course brought the speakers into the play. It will from now on be largely theirs. In complying with our request and in offering a speech on this or that topic for the event, each of the speakers has become a co-author of the *Tagung*. Naturally, it will again be our task, once all the titles will be in, to put together the program for the *Tagung*. Yet, we shall not really write it. It has already been written by the speakers. The topics which they have chosen - together with the disciplinary and cultural identities which the speakers represent - lay out by themselves the order in which they stand best individually and in relation to each other. The play (the "dance") is on and rather than imposing upon it any plan of ours we should follow the leads of the actors ("dancers").

The need for care

Have we built an Eranos *Tagung*? Yes, we have. No, we haven't. The *Tagung* which we have produced has taken on a reality in our thoughts only. There it exists, no doubt. But it is there in the mode of a paradigm, and in that mode alone, we have to admit. While the paradigm is present in our mind, the *Tagungen* for which we have formed it have yet to occur. Will they correspond to our paradigm?

They will not, of course. The normal development of human affairs will imperil a *Tagung* in the making with all kinds of vicissitudes. Of the many things which could happen let us take just a few examples: One or perhaps even two of the invited speakers will let us know, at very short notice, that they will be unable to give their lectures (and the notice may come in only on the eve of the day for which a lecture was scheduled); unexpected but unavoidable expenses will put a great strain on the budget; a large group of native speakers of this or that language who abuse their dominance will ignore the common *Gespräch* and will not take part in the symposium among a diversity of tongues; too many of the participants in the *Tagung* will remain within the confines of their origins, cultures, professions, or generational cohorts and thus will act counter to the very purpose of their being at an Eranos.

With the release of creativity which we induced we have also freed elements and forces of failure and decay. They may steer the actual *Tagung* very far away from the *Tagung* which we have constituted and still contemplate. For a moment we might be tempted to imagine ourselves under the rule of *Kronos* who, according to the tale told by Plato in the

Politikos, repeatedly took the human race in his care and led it each time from a fatal course of straying back to a new beginning. But Kronos withdrew his care one day. If we dreamed, then the dream reminds us: We must keep our work from disintegrating. The ongoing *Tagung* still needs our care. The more it becomes truly an *Eranos* the more it suggests a thing of beauty. Precisely this appeal renders an Eranos extremely vulnerable. Beauty seduces while it is seen. If anyone desires to possess it and sets out to seize it, the rage of jealousy will be met where beauty was. That the spell be not broken - this care is at the core of the Eranos experience.

This is an abbreviated version of a text whose full version, including notes, was published in: E. Barone, M. Riedl, A. Tischel (Hrsg.), *Pioniere, Poeten, Professoren. Eranos und der Monte Verità in der Zivilisationsgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Würzburg, Königshausen und Neumann, 2004, S. 9-19