

The Eranos Movement: A Story of Hermeneutics

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The Eranos Movement: a story of hermeneutics. Edited by Tilo Schabert.
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Reviewing this volume is no small task. It has all the qualities of an edited collection both unique and splendid; its uniqueness owes to the idiosyncrasy of the subject—of the Eranos *Tagungen*, its history, location(s), people, perhaps mostly its experiences. Its splendor results from Eranos's achievement: aesthetic, academic, intellectual, spiritual, even personal. And yet the volume is more, much more. In practice, it is the result of a seminar held in Pisa, Italy, in 2012. The purpose of that seminar, according to Tilo Schabert, the volume's editor, was to “. . . map out first of all, with the instruments of rigorous scholarship, inquiries from which a vision of the Eranos Movement would emerge.” Nine scholars varying in their age, background, discipline, experience, and achievement took as their task to provide a scheme whereby an event, a happening, what loosely might be called a movement, could be described, developed, remembered, but not defined.



A bit of context is in order. Today Eranos is a proper noun, derived from a common word in ancient Greek. In the *Odyssey*, Athena speaks to Telemachus of an *ἐπαινος*, denying that what she sees in the house of Odysseus during his absence is anything like a meal to which each contributes his share. A classical *ἐπαινος* was a communal feast, operating with reciprocity, respect, and equality. As a meal it concerned nourishment, both of body and soul; humans may need to eat, and they may have need of one another, but there is no necessary connection between the two. When they do in fact come together to eat, the circumstance calls forth a setting, is determined by a purpose, gives rise to an occasion, and affects a mood. As most of the contributors attest, Eranos is a banquet, a festivity of community, a sharing at all levels: physical, emotional, and social. And as they insist, it remained to the end classical; the modern Eranos is very much still Athena's *ἐπαινος*, that is, a continuity of inclusion over time.

Festivity as such does not usher forth encomia on its behalf, however. Eranos was also a *Tagung*—a conference—more often scholarly than not. This was true in its modern articulation, at least, which begins with a gathering first convened by Olga Froebe-Kapteyn at her estate in Ascona, Switzerland, in 1933. Except for a few interludes, Eranos met continuously (though not always in the same place) until 2013. The attendees were various luminaries: scholars and artists each selected for their twin capacities—either in deed or potential—to embody a genuine openness to the roots and connectedness of all methods of human understanding, while maintaining the strictest rigor in their thinking. To express this in different terms: Eranos asked of its participants that they create, however briefly, a true community of learners, asking of one another how they might come to know themselves, and thus how to understand and treasure others. Eranos was therefore a rather delightful mixture of Socratic *hybris* and moderation, following the truth unflinchingly wherever it may lead, though embracing one's limitations as an invitation to another's uniqueness. Not surprisingly, Eranos could boast of a cast as impressive as it is long. A non-exhaustive list includes Martin Buber, Joseph Campbell, Henry Corbin, Carl Jung, Karl Loewith, Karl Reinhardt, Gershom Scholem, Erwin Schroedinger, Paul Tillich, Eric Voegelin, Ilya Prigogine, and Erik Hornung.

The present volume is really fortuitous, strange as that seems given its origins in a seminar dedicated to a question for which it was the intended answer. I chose fortuitous because I prefer not to say foreboding. The seminar from which this volume emerged was the penultimate Eranos gathering, ending what was otherwise a truly remarkable

feat of longevity and creativity. True, this fact alone can be a cause for celebration, and no doubt anyone who participated over the years rejoices in their memories of Eranos. Be that as it may, who fails to lament the passing of something good? Here we speak not simply of an event, but of an aspiration, one brought forth in a world no less troubled than ours today. To say that the volume is fortuitous means that its purpose was achieved not in spite of, but rather because of the fact that Eranos's current incarnation has reached its end. In sketching the λόγος that corresponds to Eranos's εἶδος, the volume prepares the way for its next instantiation. Eranos remains a lived and living possibility.

How so? Each of the essays provide a glimpse of how the author, given his or her disciplinary background, understood the part they played in the Eranosian whole. Providing an outline of each essay is unnecessary and maybe too formulaic; it suffices to speak only of a few, tracing the paths they took, and indicating the way(s) in which the others build toward a common understanding. It goes without saying that the first essay—by the editor Tilo Schabert—is the volume's lodestar; it sets the tone for what follows in substance and style. Schabert begins with the apparent contradiction of Eranos: something distinctive is clearly meant by the word Eranos, so much so that the phrase "Eranos Movement" now appears in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, suggesting more than an academic or esoteric nuance. Eranos, however, was also an event, both theoretical and practical. The heart of an Eranos Tagung was uncanny; its focus on understanding occurred precisely because it rejected subjecting understanding to a pre-conceived formula. Schabert's perfectly framed contradiction outlines how necessary and impossible it is to define Eranos, which as an event is more like a play or drama than a text or artifact. In other words, there is something of an argument within Eranos's action, an argument unintelligible apart from the dramatic structure of an event itself composed of its own arguments. Not surprisingly, the focus of Schabert's essay is the historical hermeneutic appropriate to Eranos as such.

The theme of hermeneutics is implicit in every essay, and explicit for several, including Hans-Jörg Sigwart's inquiry into the distinctive *Wissenschaft* of Eranos. From its beginnings, and despite the incredibly diverse array of backgrounds and personalities involved, Eranos had in fact something of a unifying method to its gatherings, according to Sigwart. It becomes possible then to speak of a specifically Eranosian "methodology," which for Sigwart has ten effectual principles: "Being decidedly interdisciplinary, it should be critical; humanistic; non-instrumental and therefore interpretive; integrative (or synthetic); self-reflective; imaginative (yet in an empirically grounded and rationally balanced way); and comparative. With regard to disciplinary identities it should be provocative and at the same time open. And, finally, it should comprise practical, non-discursive modes of 'enactment' of interdisciplinary discourse and interpretation" (94). The root of this unique methodology was the felt need throughout much of the twentieth century to overcome the socially and intellectually flattening effects of "instrumental rationality," indicating thereby that Eranos attracted and was sustained by those who thought the dominant modes of intellectual discourse had become too truncated to account fully for the variety and complexity of human life. Eranos's method sought a revival of sorts, one that brought about not only a broader and more rigorous *Wissenschaft*, but also a genuinely social ecumenicism regarding the variety of religious experiences. In part, we can say Eranos's methodology was a success, for this volume, birthed from an "Eranos about Eranos," testifies to its success as "an intellectual experiment in finding new forms of interdisciplinary scholarship that aims at a comprehensive hermeneutics of human culture and society" (94).

The volume displays its intrinsic interdisciplinary character in Chloe Ragazzoli's essay on the role Egypt played in Eranos, and by extension within our civilizational self-understanding. Ragazzoli, herself an Egyptologist, raises the question of Eranos partly as an historical question, and partly as a broader, more thematic inquiry: ". . . the theme posed . . . was there to trigger a contribution from each guest who would respond from the vantage point of their particular discipline and culture of expertise to engineer, through their own voices, a collection of cultural and spiritual encounters between human beings that were divided by civilizations and centuries" (139). Artfully weaving together the powerful ways in which Egypt figured into the Eranos Tagungen of the past, Ragazzoli demonstrates the enigmatic duality of Egypt as a symbol. Within our cultural memory, the symbol of Egypt oscillates, allowing on the one hand a pathway through a superficially different 'other,' toward a deeper, more basic universal human understanding. But the symbol also divides fruitfully, remaining as the mysterious other that imposes a limit to our

self-understanding and knowledge of the world. This symbolic oscillation offers a dynamic and provocative interplay: “The question brings us back to a familiar mantra, the one of *sameness and otherness*: is Egypt here because she is a reflection of a universal human self or because she is as different as different can be and tells me something about a self that I cannot be, thereby enlarging the map of human possibilities?” (140). Eranos’s interdisciplinary character was achieved through a constant and robustly applied comparative measure—only by way of difference does universality and distance show themselves as they truly are. For that reason, Ragazzoli marks a place for the symbolic orient within the heart of the Eranasian—or perhaps any—occident. “The attendance of Ancient Egypt at our banquet both takes us to a land remote in time and simultaneously refers us to our own time; both recovers Egypt’s past and deepens our understanding of our own situation; both diffracts the human condition into a kaleidoscope of experiences and throws a spot light on a universally shared core human condition. This minuet of sameness and otherness, of here and there, now and then is also the movement initiated by Eranos and each of its Tagungen: *eadem mutata resurgo*” (151).

I said at the beginning this volume was much more than a collection of splendid essays. It is the achievement of an undertaking in many ways Herculean. It is no small task to describe the ineffable, no matter how precise or rigorous its own internal hermeneutic. Schabert is correct in likening Eranos to something akin to a play or dance (9). Yet this should describe by analogy at the price of precision; speaking of Eranos as an event makes it idiosyncratic, known only to those who were there, at that time, in that place, with those involved. Indeed, the whole thing sounds magical, mysterious, perhaps even unbelievable. Surely in our time such things sound fantastical, harkening back to a by-gone aristocratic era. And even if Eranos was real, to what end? What could be the purpose of writing about something another cannot experience; is the audience to react with wonder, amusement, suspicion, even incredulity? I too was a participant in Eranos’s grace, which is why the volume’s sweet song resonates vibrantly with me. The volume describes accurately Eranos’s form and function; the anamnesis it kindles yields bright memories filled with color and complexity. But the volume speaks to me as a reviewer only because it speaks to me from within the movement. How so then with other readers? What could justify reviewing a book that cannot speak to those unacquainted with the subject’s experiences? The answer to that question cannot have greater veracity than the answer to the question of why the volume was written in the first place.

The genius of the volume is not that it makes the experience of Eranos transparent to those not present. Those experiences remain opaque to all but the participants whose contributions brought forth the feast. Disconcerting though it may be, reading is no substitute for a form of thinking inseparable from action, if not acting. Instead, the volume beckons its readers to participate in the four-fold hermeneutical circle it creates between itself, the original experiences, the review, and the audience. In so doing, readers become aware of what others have done, why it was done, and what meaning it had or continues to have. They witness not only a play in action, but also a mirror, one that reflects themselves partially refracted—as possible characters on a possible stage somewhere else with someone else. The reader can understand Eranos’s *εἶδος*, where the surface of things reflects, however tenuously or playfully, the heart of things. The volume speaks of Eranos as a challenge, not only for future scholarship, but for future articulations, for a furthering of the inchoate vision of the movement. The contributors are to be commended for their good, just, and noble effort; they succeed in their task to keep Eranos a living possibility, and thus to preserve, in principle, the same banquet to which the Greeks bore witness. And therein you have the argument of Eranos’s action.

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