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My Eranos

Eranos 1986: "Human and Cosmic Mirroring."

A Personal Impression by Robert Bosnak

Eranos is a picnic, Gilbert Durand always says. It is a picnic where everyone comes with his own food. Pot-luck might be the American translation for the Greek word Eranos. At the center of the Eranos grounds on the Lago Maggiore in Ascona, Switzerland, stands a green round table. Next to it is a carved stone with a dedication by Jung in Latin which says "To the unknown spirit of this place." I personally owe this spirit a great deal. My wife and I arrived there in 1971, me with my hair below my shoulder blades, walking on the Dutch wooden shoes I wore on the farm where we lived with a group of friends. I am Dutch and had just married Deanne from New York. She had been a student at the New School for Social Research. An extraordinary professor there, Gerald Sykes, wrote the words "Eranos, Ascona, Switzerland" on a three inch by four inch white note card when he heard that Deanne was to move to Europe with me. I had just read a translation of a book by or about Jung that carried a picture of the analyst Aniela Jaffe, once his secretary, on the back cover. It may have been her book The Myth of Meaning. She was a beautiful woman in her late sixties who attracted me greatly. I was twenty-three. The Eranos conference that year, 1971, of which Deanne had obtained the program, had the overall theme, The Stages of Life in Creative Process. There Aniela Jaffe would speak about the creative phases in Jung's life. Since we were at the beginning of a new life together, we decided to go there on our honeymoon.

From that initial meeting, we became part of what Henry Corbin called "the Time of Eranos," returning year after year down to the present to the Tagung, the conference; even living there for two and half years. Both of our children were born in one of the Eranos houses. I write to try to explicate for myself —what is this time of Eranos?

In part it is the content of the lectures, sparking thoughts and discussion. In 1973, while living there, I was asked to write an article for a London magazine called The Human Context about the 1973 conference, "Correspondences in Man and World."

It was a terrible job which took me several months, undertaken to understand Eranos through a report of each lecture. I promised myself this was to be once and never again. When I started out I understood very little. Of Henry Corbin's lecture I understood nothing intellectually, though he moved me to tears. I had to ask him the favor to write his own summary, in French; here is my translation:

The Science of Balance and the Correspondence Between the Worlds

In Islamic gnosis the science of correspondences is called the "science of balance." But what is "measured" is not quantitative, any more than in alchemy, which is not just a chapter preceding chemistry. This science tries to understand the composition of beings in their exoteric as well as the esoteric components. Haydar Amoli (fourteenth century) proposes an architecture of spiritual worlds illustrated by twenty-eight diagrams. They are cyclic instead of rectilinear and illustrate the "bringing to balance" of the three great books: Book of Horizons (macrocosm), Book of Souls (spiritual world), Book of Revelation (Koran). Koran 29/42: "We propose parables to man; only the Wise will understand them." Who are those wise? According to Ibn'Arabi they are the "knights of the invisible." They carry the task and perpetuation of the science of correspondences.

Man sleeps as much in his dreams as in his waking life. He realizes this only when he wakes up in the other world. Interpretation of dreams means, "to let pass from one side to the other." This world is a bridge; one doesn't settle on a bridge, one passes over it from one side to the other. The "riders of the Invisible" cross it on the "Night of Destiny."

In 1932 a Dutch woman, called Olga Froebe-Kapteyn, who lived on an exquisite stretch of gardens on the Lago Maggiore in Ascona, Switzerland, went up to C. G. Jung with the idea to start a yearly conference about the relationship between Occidental and Oriental thought. Jung, at the time, had begun to work himself deeply into alchemical material and was looking for a forum to try out his new ideas. At the first Eranos (1933) "Yoga and Meditation in the East and the West," Jung presented the material that was later to become his first great book on alchemy, Psychology and Alchemy. Mrs. Froebe also went to Rudolf Otto, author of the book The Holy, who had coined the word "numinous" and now came up with the name "Eranos" for the yearly conferences. He died before the first Tagung was to take place. From the 1933 Tagung onwards, Jung spoke yearly, for many years, through and after the War about the central themes of his later thought.

Many of the great thinkers of our time passed through Eranos. There were always those who spoke a few times only, and those who were the mainstays of the Tagung, speaking year after year. By 1971 Kerenyi was dead, Eliade concentrated on translations of his works and no longer came to Eranos, except in 1982 for the 50th Eranos, and the four great men of Eranos were Ernst Benz, Henry Corbin, Adolf Portmann and Gershom Scholem. Benz was a scholar of Christian mysticism, Scholem had singlehandedly brought Jewish mysticism to contemporary Western awareness, Portmann—a biologist—looked at bio-organisms as self-expressions of beings who could not only be explained through the presently fashionable Evolution theory, while Corbin, after translating Heidegger into French had gone on to become the main authority on visionary Sufism during the early period of Islam, as well as one of the most profound philosophers of the creative imagination. Also important were the speakers of the new generation, James Hillman and Gilbert Durand.

But neither history, lists of speakers, nor even the content of the Eranos

yearbook can evoke Eranos as an experience.

An Eranos Tagung creates its own time; its own quality of cosmos that makes the end of August a moment outside of linear time. Or better said, Eranos unmaskes our notion of linear time. Corbin used to say that most of his contemporaries have been dead for several centuries. According to him Eranos says an emphatic no to the notion of time as

some horizontal line of force that fades into limitlessness devoid of meaning . . . [in which case] one is naive enough to suppose that all human beings everywhere are of the same age, have the same desires, the same aspirations, and the same sense of responsibility; and to suppose that good will and proper hygiene would suffice to bring them into accord in the frame of abstract objective time, the uniform mathematical time of universal history.

Eranos time is ritual time. Every year I pack my bags to go and spend time in an atmosphere where the "eternal present" of our human condition truly matters. The ritual of the two daily two-hour lectures, twelve in all, in three different languages with participants from all over the globe offers a mirror--which includes food, drink and sometimes dance together with people I only meet there--in which I reflect my temporal presence in the eternal dreams, the mundus imaginalis, where the creative imagination constantly expresses herself anew. Therefore it did not surprise me that the 1986 Tagung would be entirely about Human and Cosmic Mirroring.

I arrived this past August with the same misgivings I have every year during the Tagung: things are getting increasingly worse, the lectures or lecturers aren't as good as they were and the atmosphere in the audience is dull and uncomprehending. I always find someone to commiserate with, especially in the beginning. That is the moment I decide to never ever in my life come to a Tagung again, at which point I start to look at the Tagung as if it were my last, and my Eranos begins to take place.

This year we are about one hundred people, a few less than usual, at this fifty-fifth conference. For the last twenty-five years the conferences have been organized by Rudolf and Catherine Ritsema, who, together with the late Adolf Portmann, took over from Olga Froebe-Kapteyn when she died in 1962. Catherine is a musician and Rudolf has been working on an extraordinary English translation of the I Ching from the original Chinese, parts of which have been published by Spring. I have especially been looking forward to the lecture of Herbert Pietschmann, a Viennese physicist of renown who has published also about the philosophy of physics; the talk of Wolfgang Giegerich, "Consciousness as the Second Creator of the World"; and that by Hayao Kawai on "Nature in Dreams of Medieval Japan." Because I had to leave before the end I knew I would forfeit a lecture by David Miller and a talk on Egyptian hieroglyphics; I was sorry to miss these. Some years I have asked for tapes of the lectures I missed, but when I would listen to one outside of the Tagung, it would not be an Eranos lecture. Maybe because I wasn't sitting on those impossible wooden chairs in the Tagung room, listening to the waves and the boats of the Lago, or perhaps because I wasn't distracted by all the interesting faces around me, the atmosphere was gone. Somehow an Eranos lecture is a function of the Eranos Saal, the room in which the lectures are given.

On the wall of the Saal, pictures from the Corpus Hermeticum and other alchemical images remind us of Jung and the influence he and Eranos have had on each other. Usually, I drift in and out of them according to the attraction the lecture has on me. As Pietschmann talks, I don't notice them. He demands my complete concentration. He looks at the way the great laws of physics come to the genius of a physicist who first formulates the law. He analyses thinking in physics and then he tells a story. (Since I love stories, I can remember and reproduce it better than his formal discussion of the difference between truth, reality, and mathematical correctness, even though his exposition of these topics was fascinating and completely transparent when he spoke.)

In Nazi Germany many scientists were eager to disprove the theories of the Jew Einstein. When they could no longer do this, because the power of the theory had increased greatly by all kinds of proof, they said: "Everything, all the mathematical equations on which the relativity theory was based, was already known at the time he formulated the theory; therefore his contribution was not particularly great." The audience in the Eranos Saal laughs. Pietschmann turns to us and asks: "But what then was it that Einstein added?" Silence. "Nur die Idee," (Just the idea). "Just the idea that time is not absolute; just the idea." He delivers his line like a humorist, as if he really is talking about Einstein's idea as a mere trifle. Then he demonstrates how indeed laws are not a product of thought at all. To find its laws, those basic forms of physics theory, science does not think. The laws come to the scientist as a secular revelation. It is strange to hear an internationally respected scientist demonstrate this with an elegance that probably also pervades the mathematical formulae on which his own fame as a mathematical physicist is based. I had just lectured on this very point at the Jung Institute in Boston, for a series called Science and Dreams, where a physicist and I looked at the basic laws of science as if they were dreams.

Wolfgang Giegerich didn't know Pietschmann and had no idea what the physicist would say. He spoke two days later about the nature of creative consciousness, and he also tells a story; this one about Jung in Africa: Jung overlooks a valley where he sees all kinds of wild animals grazing, a vision of the world as it could have looked when the humans first came to be. For Jung, this is like the beginning of creation, because, as Jung puts it, consciousness is the second creator of the world. Without human reflection, a world conscious of itself could never be. There would not be "World" at all.

Giegerich carefully analyses each element in Jung's statement, not to explain Jung but to be filled with the same question. His mind dances faster than I can follow, but one thing becomes clear: psychology's search for knowledge is different from that in any other field. Physics, for instance—and this is an integral part of his argument, not recently added because of Pietschmann's lecture—does not think to find its laws. It must by necessity be naive and receive the revelations of its laws without asking where they come from. It cannot think about the creative imagination that produces the laws because otherwise it could not concentrate on its quest to explain the nature of physical reality. And it must needs take physical reality as a literal entity. Psychology follows the images produced by the creative imagination back to the sources that created them (a process that Corbin's hermeneutics calls Ta'wil) thereby differing in deepest fundament with physical sciences.

I am invited for lunch at the round table after Giegerich's lecture. I sit next to Pietschmann, who explains to me what Giegerich had spoken about. I understand things much better after that conversation. Suddenly Pietschmann turns to Rudolf and Catherine Ritsema. He begins to praise them for their foresight to have invited him and Giegerich for the same Tagung. They point at the stone next to the table, in which was carved the dedication to the spirit of Eranos. Rudolf Ritsema explains this gesture to me later. He tells me that he had tried to get Pietschmann here for some time, but that always there had been other engagements. That both he and Giegerich had come this year and made the same point about science—laws as the revelations of a Creative Imagination—had been entirely "accidental." Such confluence seems to issue from the Unknown Spirit of the place.