The Deities of Samothrace: towards Schelling’s Λογογριϕική

Samothrace is the name for the visible part of a conic, shaky, volcanic mountain top, always being, mysteriously, surrounded by a cloud ring, that rises above the wavy and windy waters of the northern part of the Aegean Sea.

The island as a whole consists in a continuous, inaccessibly forested mountain chain which is abruptly broken by vertical cliffs, dark chasms – whose sight disappears into the depths of the subterranean volcanic rock – powerful waterfalls and innumerable springs; namely, an elusive continuity of sudden breaks, in such a way as if the island by its very compelling presence speaks out the disrupted unity among chthonic, earthly and heavenly realms, life, death and rebirth, in pace with the cyclical flow of waterfalls and springs, and the alternating rhythms of the volcanic convulsions and the restful breath of the cloud ring. It has been surmised by historians that the island was populated in the first instance by people venturing out to sea, far-sailing foreigners – most probably Pelasgians or Phoenicians – who along with ‘incense, purple dye and ivory there also transplanted their gods and sanctuaries’.1

Samothrace has had a reputation since antiquity for its Cabeiri mysteries, which are considered to be the most ancient and important mysteries of ancient times, as equally or even more honoured as the Eleusinian. This is why Samothrace is characterised as χωρα ζαθεη, namely sacred land, hostess of wondrous orgies of gods, unnameable to mortals, as the Orphic hymn informs us,

Ζαθεη Σαµοθρακη,
ενθα και οργια φρικτα θεων
αρητα βροτοισιν.

(Orphica Argonautica 468)

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This is the place and time – the indeterminate transitive period between magic and Greek Spirit, post-‘barbarian’ and pre-Hellenic – that Schelling chooses as accommodation for his philosophical thought. The AW seem to be seized by this magnetic land and need to stop here, to listen and recount its story.

The significance of the Cabeiri deities still lies in darkness and the beliefs, practices and events surrounding their cult are characterised by particular mystery and obscurity. Their names and numbers remain indeterminate, as do the meaning and the role of each individual deity. It seems, though, that this obscurity not only derives from their remoteness in the night of time or the limits of historiological research, but mostly from their very nature, which appears as flexible, transmutable and mainly theurgic, namely creative and generative of new, higher or lower deities. It is mainly from the standpoint of their theurgic dimension that we hazard to explore the messages of this ‘mysterious polytheism’.

As far as the origins of the Cabeiri is concerned, there have been a plethora of surmises and suggestions from the various fields of mythol-ogy, history, philology and etymology, whose details are not our concern, since this very multiplicity of suggestions – indeed supplementary ones – only betrays their manifold nature. Hence, we find them as Uranus’ children – Titans’ brothers – or ancient demons of the volcanoes of the Thracian Sea, giants or dwarfs, Koryvantes from Phrygia, as sons of Zeus and Electra or sons of Prometheus, almighty or lower deities. The most predominant surmise, though, that Schelling also seems to prefer, is that the Cabeiri originate from Hephaestos, the divine smith whom Hera expelled from Olympus due to his natural deficiency, who, though lame in both legs, is the only god who knows the secrets of motion, possibly because of his extraordinary knowledge of fire, the unique gift on which even Zeus confesses to be dependent. The Cabeiri, as Hephaestos’ offspring, children of fire and the art of fabrication, are also mentioned as καιοντες, namely burning and πυρογενεις, i.e. fire-generic, rising from the earth’s bowels and transfusing their fire-like energy to their invokers; their sudden epiphany has also been registered as exceptionally paradoxical, more obscure than shiny, extremely helpful or ruthlessly paralysing, in any case effecting a spectacular transformation to anyone who discovers them.