

Editors' Preface: Sighting and Sizing Up Sesemann

What can the reader expect to find in this volume? What is missing from it that might have been included? And why is Vasily Sesemann important? Let's start by looking at the latter question from the widest perspective.

In the context of European philosophy, Vasily Sesemann (1884–1963) might indeed seem to be the somewhat *marginal* philosopher that Arūnas Sverdiolas takes him to be in his Introduction to this book. But even if this is correct, it is far from making him slight and unimportant.

For consider: if European philosophy is thought of as centered in Germany, Austria, and France, as is often the case in so-called Continental academic reflections, then even Britain ends up a bit off the beaten track, not to mention Italy and Spain and most of the rest of Europe (in all directions). But move the center just a little *east* or *northeast* of Germany, that is, move it to what actually *used to be* northeasternmost Germany—to Königsberg, for example, where the greatest of all German philosophers spent his entire life, or to Riga, where one of his greatest books was first published, or to both, where one of his greatest students not only influenced the 19th-century national revivals of Eastern European peoples but also foundationally contributed to classical interpretative scholarship; hermeneutics; linguistics; anthropology; and modern history and philosophy of culture, thought, and language—and an entirely new perspective opens up. Then the “marginal” Sesemann ends up right in the middle of what might be called German-Polish-Baltic-Nordic-Russian philosophy; and in that context he is far from marginal but rather a worthy pupil of Kant and Herder.

Of course, in this (by no means homogeneous) philosophical concatenation it is the German component that bears the most intellectual weight. Moreover, this bloc (call it *Nordic*) is on the whole less significant than another one (call it *Western*) that might also be concatenated, starting again with Germany but now looking northwestward, westward, and southwestward, to form (the no less heterogeneous) German-French-British-Italian-Spanish philosophy. The Nordic bloc is indeed less illustrious than the Western one; but this is in part for reasons having to do not so much with the quality of the philosophy originally created there as with the political circumstances under which particularly the eastern portions of this Nordic bloc had to live for large stretches of the last two or three centuries. Hand-in-hand with the relatively miserable political conditions went a lack of access to venues where European culture in general was publicized, promoted, and discussed.

Thus, for example, Polish logic was able not only to come into existence and flower but also to earn recognition as a major contribution to world intellectual culture when and only when Poland regained its national independence after World War I and the free movement of East European people and ideas became (at least for a while) a reality.

Similarly (though admittedly on a smaller scale in comparison to Polish philosophy) Vasily Sesemann would be much better known in the world today if like Nicolai Hartmann, his friend from St. Petersburg, he had written and published his major works in German (and Germany) rather than in Lithuanian (and Lithuania). That he favored the latter turned out to be a great boon to it—Lithuania received a first-rate scholar in the fields of aesthetics, epistemology, logic, and history of philosophy.

On the other hand, the fact that Sesemann taught and published in the “boondocks” is (to repeat) in part why his relative importance is still not widely appreciated. Another reason why he is less celebrated than, for example, Hartmann lies in the fact that although the former’s *Aesthetics* is probably equal in value to any single work written by the latter, Sesemann did not construct an original system of his own but contented himself with just fairly, judiciously, and thoroughly expounding (and questioning) the philosophical ideas of others, both modern and ancient. Although for nearly two decades he taught philosophy at the University of Lithuania in Kaunas, he was neither the founder nor a follower of any philosophical school—just a brilliant and critical teacher who (together with the Swiss-educated Stasys Šalkauskis) helped raise a whole generation of Lithuanian philosophers later active not only in Lithuania but also, and indeed predominantly so, in the West.

It was Lithuania’s tragedy to be occupied by, and completely lose political independence and be annexed to, the Soviet Union in 1940 and again in 1944. Lithuania, as a “constituent republic” of the USSR, did not even have a shadow of the formal token independence that Poland and the other Warsaw Pact nations enjoyed until the dissolution of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s and the Soviet Union’s breakup in the early 1990s, which latter developments helped secure whatever in the way of a safer kind of sovereignty Lithuania (and, for that matter, the whole of Eastern Europe southward from Finland) at present still has. For Sesemann himself, this Lithuanian tragedy played itself out in the fact that he spent six years in a Soviet forced-labor camp, for which reason his work was only sparsely published as long as the Soviets were in power.

In this context it becomes understandable why Sesemann is so late in arriving on the scene of Western European intellectual consciousness. The first work of his translated from the Lithuanian and published in the West is the above-mentioned *Aesthetics* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, New York,

2007). The second is this volume of Selected Papers. It contains translations into English of some noteworthy essays, ranging from the scholarly to the popular, on aesthetics, aesthetic education, national culture, and theory of knowledge—all fields that Sesemann cared deeply about and enriched.

Nevertheless, it contains by no means everything that he wrote in the Lithuanian language and/or that was published in Lithuania (and which is therefore difficult to access by a non-Lithuanian reader). For one, it does not contain (with one exception) the many valuable articles on philosophical topics that he wrote for the *Lietuviškoji enciklopedija* [Lithuanian Encyclopedia], which began to be published in 1931 and was discontinued in 1944 (after 8 volumes up to the letter *J*) because of the occupation. The list of these encyclopedia articles is impressive: it includes (but is not limited to) entries on *Anaxagoras*; *Anaximander*; *Antisthenes*; *Aristotle*; *atheism*; *Bacon*, Francis; *Bergson*, Henri; *Byzantine philosophy*; *Comte*, Auguste; *Croce*, Benedetto; *deduction*; *definition*; *dialectics*; *empiricism*; *Epicurus*; *Epictetus*; *Fechner*, Gustav Theodor; *phenomenon*; *phenomenology*; *Feuerbach*, Ludwig; *Fichte*, Johann Gottlieb; *gnosticism*; *Gorgias*; *Greek philosophy*; *Guyau*, Jean Marie; *Hartmann*, Eduard; *Hartmann*, Nikolai; *hedonism*; *Hegel*, G. F. W.; *Hegelianism*; *Heidegger*, Martin; *Helvetius*, Claude Adrien; *Heraclitus*; *Herder*, Johann Gottfried; *Hobbes*, Thomas; *Holbach*, Paul; *Husserl*, Edmund; *I* (ego), *idea*; *idealism*; *infinity*, *space*.

Since publication of the encyclopedia was forcibly stopped just before the letter *J*, one can only imagine how many more such articles Sesemann would have produced had he been given the chance. Those listed here possess a quality which would bring honor to any American, British, French, or German encyclopedia. They are clear and sober introductions, never oversimplified, to the topic at hand; especially weighty and detailed are the entries on Aristotle, Fichte, Greek philosophy, phenomenon, phenomenology, Hegel, Herder, Husserl, idealism, and space (in Lithuanian, *erdvė*). The main reason we have not included translations of them in this volume is that unfortunately that would take up too much space.

But there is one exception: we have included the encyclopedia article “Aesthetics” because it is an early and succinct survey of one of Sesemann’s main areas of specialization, a field in which he published heavily. While his already alluded-to *Aesthetics* textbook (which contains reflections and investigations carried out as late as the 1950s) was one of the few books by him published posthumously in Soviet times, the papers collected here, including the encyclopedia article, were all composed in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thus “Aesthetic Evaluation in the History of Art: On the Relation Between Art History and Aesthetics” was originally written in Russian and published in the journal *Mysl'* (Petrograd: 1922, Nr. 1, p. 117–147), and

much later translated into Lithuanian by Juozas Tumelis. This Lithuanian version, from which the essay in the present volume was translated, was published, along with other papers on aesthetics, in the collection *Estetika* (Vilnius, 1970), of which the just-mentioned textbook constituted the bulk.

Not included in the present volume is an equally valuable essay, "On the Nature of the Poetic Image," reprinted in the 1970 collection and, again, originally written in Russian but first published in the Proceedings of the University of Lithuania Humanities Faculty (*Lietuvos universiteto humanitarinių mokslų fakulteto raštai*, Book One, Kaunas, 1925, p. 423–481). However, a much abbreviated version of this essay already appeared in English as Appendix II of Thorsten Botz-Bornstein's study *Vasily Sesemann: Experience, Formalism, and the Question of Being* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, New York, 2006), which is a useful guide, *inter alia*, to some of the literary and philological aspects of Sesemann's thought.

Another early paper on aesthetics, but now written in Lithuanian and not as explicitly scholarly, is included in this volume: "Aesthetic Culture and Aesthetic Education," first published in *Vairas* (1924, No. 8, p. 10–12) and republished in the 1970 collection, from which it was translated here.

Sesemann was much interested in body culture and physical education, as evidenced by his 1935 article on "Physical Education and Aesthetic Culture," first printed in *Fiziškas auklėjimas* (1935, No. 2, p. 3–8) and here translated from the 1970 collection.

The physical culture not of the human body but of man-made objects is the topic of the essay, "Protecting the Culture and the Beauty of the Past," first published in *Naujoji Romuva* (1938, No. 22–24, p. 511–512) and again translated here from its version in the 1970 collection.

"The Issue of National Culture" first appeared in the *Akademikas* student magazine (Kaunas, 1934, Nr. 15(32), p. 342–344). Here it was translated from its reprinting in the volume *Vosylius Sezemanas. Raštai. Filosofijos istorija, Kultūra* (Vilnius: Mintis 1997).

This article contains one of several passages in his works where Sesemann discusses Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), the curiously original Lithuanian painter and composer who probably would have become much more famous than in fact he was had he exhibited in Munich rather than St. Petersburg. This is not a claim that Sesemann makes (though we do); but what Sesemann does emphasize is that Čiurlionis embodies the national spirit in a way neither superficial nor showy nor exclusive yet still universal and at the same time unique. It is evident that the points Sesemann makes about Lithuanian national culture can be carried over, *mutatis mutandis*, to other cultures as well.

Čiurlionis's art is the main topic of Sesemann's review of a monograph by the art historian Nikolaj Worobiow. The review first

appeared in *Naujoji Romuva* (1938, No. 49). Here it is translated once more from the 1970 collection. The editors of this volume thought that in view of the importance both of Čiurlionis and of Sesemann's valuation of him it is entirely fitting that this book be illustrated with some characteristic reproductions of the Lithuanian painter-musician's work.

Finally, it is crucial to realize that Sesemann's interests embraced not only practical philosophy but theoretical philosophy as well, of which logic and epistemology were the most important.

In Kaunas he published his university lectures on logic in Lithuanian as *Logika* (1929) as well as some substantial studies in German, including "Die logischen Gesetze und das Sein: a) Die logischen Gesetze im Verhältnis zum subjektbezogenen und psychischen Sein. b) Die logischen Gesetze und das daseinsautonome Sein" in *Eranus*, Vol. 2 (Kaunas: 1931; 60–230) and "Zum Problem der logischen Paradoxien" in *Eranus*, Vol. 3 (Kaunas: 1935; 5–85). None of these have been translated here.

Even more weighty were Sesemann's writings on epistemology, most of which were also published in pre-war Kaunas, although some were written in German and only posthumously translated into Lithuanian. His essays on objectual and non-objectual knowledge, on rationality and irrationality, and on logical rationality have not been translated into English for this volume, as they would take up a separate volume by themselves. But they are available in Lithuanian in his *Raštai. Gnoseologija* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1987).

Originally written in Lithuanian (and published in Kaunas) was a series of university lectures on the topic titled *Gnoseologija* and comparable to the *Logika* mentioned above. That, too, has not been translated here. But there is one important epistemological essay (originally published in *Eranus*, Vol. 3, 1935) whose translation into English we have decided to include. That is his explorations of "New Directions in Contemporary Epistemology"; this lively study is significant for its views on thought's dynamism and its anticipations of, and harmonizing with, process philosophy.

Sesemann's appreciation of, and fascination with, change is evident in another important essay, "Time, Culture, and Body: Getting to Know the Challenges of Contemporary Culture." Since this work is discussed in great detail in Sverdiolas's Preface, we have not undertaken to translate it for this volume, although arguably we should have.

There is even more—much more—in Sesemann's *oeuvre* that has not been translated into English. Many of these texts are in the already referred-to Lithuanian collection *Raštai. Filosofijos istorija, Kultūra* (Vilnius: Mintis 1997). They concern ancient Greek philosophy and later history of philosophy, especially German, at least up to existentialism;

there are also lectures on toleration, the problem of freedom, the problem of suffering, the problem of the bourgeoisie, Christianity and socialism, the ideological significance of religion as well as sundry book reviews.

Another segment of Sesemann's output that awaits translation into English consists of his Russian writings. The existence and importance of these is poignant in view of the circumstance (reported by Botz-Bornstein on p. 14 of his aforementioned book) that Sesemann's Eurasian inclinations might have caused him to be sent to the Gulag; in any case this Russian angle once again underscores the fact that Sesemann was a proverbial Nordic philosophical bridge between East and West.

All in all, it seems that Sesemann truly was a prolific writer; the editors of the aforesaid collection indicate that there is enough material (published but for the most part unpublished) left behind for several more Lithuanian-language collections at least.

If this is so, then Vasily Sesemann's "return to (Western) Europe" is not that far behind his return to Lithuania, his adopted land, itself.

*Mykolas Drunga
Leonidas Donskis*