IRRATIONAL EXPERIENCES, HEROIC DEEDS AND THE EXTRACTION OF SURPLUS

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Entbehren sollst du! sollst entbehren!

Faust I, 4

On April 19, 1944, when the defeat of Nazi Germany was almost certain, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, the novelist and collaborator, wrote in his diary that he wanted to die in the faith of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and the Bhagavad Gita. It would be pointless to ask whether Drieu had read Jakob Wilhelm Hauer’s analyses of the Bhagavadgītā, the ones in which the Tübingen indologist extolls prince Arjuna’s decision to fight, a virile decision brought about by Krishna’s mix of metaphysical sermon and emotional blackmail; or whether Drieu was familiar with the orientalist Giuseppe Tucci’s hymns to the saint and the hero. Death and sacrifice, virility and heroism, prominent already in fin-de-siècle works such as Richard Strauss’ Tod und Verklärung (1888–89), Also sprach Zarathustra (1895–96) and Ein Heldenleben (1897–98), and earlier among the romantics, had been very much in the air since the nineteen-twenties, as much among war veterans such as Drieu and Ernst Jünger, as among established orientalists such as Hauer and Tucci. From 1934 to 1958 Hauer had published three almost identical versions of his essay on the yoga of action (karmayoga) in the Bhagavadgītā. The first appeared in 1934 as Eine indo-arische Metaphysik des Kampfes und der Tat, a small volume, dedicated to “Dem kämpfenden Geschlechte,” in which Hauer, without betraying the spirit of the Indian text, validated the bellicose aims of

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2 See Gerhard Kaiser, Pietismus und Patriotismus im literarischen Deutschland. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Säkularisation, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1973), ch. 9, “Patriotischer Blut- und Wundenkult.”
the national socialists in power. This study was reprinted with minor modifications in 1937, as the fifth chapter, “Vishnu, der Wirkende und der tragische Heroismus des Gottgeborgenen,” of the first and only volume of Hauer’s Glaubensgeschichte der Indogermanen. It appeared, finally, in 1958, as the third chapter of Der Yoga. Ein indischer Weg zum Selbst. What concerns Hauer in this work is the need to forget oneself and to fulfill one’s heroic duty violently. For Hauer, as for the authors of the Bhagavadgītā, death is ultimately irrelevant, for in killing one does not kill the self, as this self – Ātman, puruṣa – relates to the body as bodies relate to clothes: We discard the old and soiled ones and put on new ones (II, 22). As Krishna tells Arjuna, one should fight because the highest form of yoga is karmayoga, the yoga of action, for, contrary to what some hypocritical renouncers claim, one cannot not act since the mere act of breathing constitutes an action (III, 5–6). One should act, then, but without becoming attached to the fruits of one’s deeds (IV, 18, VI, 1) – as it has been repeated admiringly by countless teachers of introductions to Indian philosophy and religion, without realizing the implications of this position.

At the time Hauer published the first version of his study of the Bhagavadgītā, we find the classicist Walter F. Otto writing about the need to have a will for the most difficult tasks and, more ominously, about regarding heroism with awe. Similarly, Tucci, the foremost Italian Buddhologist of the twentieth century, who as a member of the Fascist

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