

Karin Priem

### **Eduard Spranger's correspondence with women: detached intimacy as an instrument of self-knowledge and a basis for theoretical reflection**

On 23 February 1909, in a letter to the woman who was his closest female friend at the time, Eduard Spranger wrote: "when I think that, if at some later time, someone sought to understand my professional development, he would find the key to it in you and only in you." (S to H, 23/II/1909) Communication by letter played a central role in Eduard Spranger's intellectual biography and way of life. He cultivated particularly lively correspondence with women, prompted, as he himself once pointed out, by the "insatiable hunger of his feelings". Among his most important correspondents were Lou Andreas-Salomé, his closest friend of many years Käthe Hadlich, Spranger's later wife Susanne Konrad, and his "social godmother" Sophie Riehl besides numerous other women. Many of them had made Spranger's acquaintance during his years as a teacher at a lyceum for girls in Berlin, as students at the University of Leipzig and the Leipzig Hochschule für Frauen (Academy for Women).

Born in 1882, until well into the post-World-War-II era Spranger was an out-and-out embodiment of the German *Kulturnation* ("cultural nation") and *Bildung*, that particularly German ideal of erudition and quest for on-going cultural self-enhancement. He was one of those German intellectuals who, with apparent disinterest for political analysis, responded to the modernization and loss of tradition characterizing the early twentieth century by championing *Kulturpädagogik* – "cultural education" – which implied the endeavour to define the values underlying culture. Particularly during the Weimar Republic, this position earned Spranger admiration not only in the "professional community" but also in the realm of educational politics. As a result, he succeeded in becoming a prominent representative of *Erziehungswissenschaft* – literally: the science of education –, a discipline at that time still in the process of establishing itself at German universities. His success can be attributed to an approach to scholarship which rejected empirical experience – an aspect closely related, in turn, to his definition of gender dispositions. And Spranger tested this rapport himself in his written dialogues with women, exchanges which took place at the critical interface between cultural models and competing contemporary conceptions of masculinity and femininity. The outbreak of World War I interrupted the flow of these written exchanges, since at that point Spranger felt compelled to take stock of his role as a male intellectual and scholar in his letters to women. To lend greater clarity to the various lines of development, I will devote the first part of my lecture to the period before World War I, followed by a second part concerned with the outbreak of the war and the events that shaped it. I will conclude with a brief outlook and résumé of how Spranger's career proceeded from there.

#### *Inwardness and activity: the period preceding World War I*

The period before World War I was dominated to a large extent by his correspondence with Käthe Hadlich. Spranger was still a student when in Heidelberg in 1903 he made the acquaintance of this illustrator ten years his senior. He was travelling at the time, having been sent away from Berlin by his

parents because – as he later realized – he was suffering from a minor “nervous breakdown”. This encounter sparked a correspondence so intense that letters were sent back and forth daily for more than two decades.

At the beginning of his correspondence with Käthe Hadlich, Spranger’s ideal of manhood was inspired by Friedrich Hölderlin and one of the latter’s literary characters, Hyperion. For Spranger, Hölderlin was one of the first writers who developed a clearly anticipated “vision of modern man” (Spranger, 1904, p. 340) but ended up as a man broken by life. For the young Spranger, Hyperion was a faithful replica of Hölderlin himself. In the early years of his correspondence with Käthe Hadlich he accordingly stylized himself as a sensitive youth with an inclination towards moods of ecstasy and painfully intense yearning, a genius engrossed in the dramas of his own soul, however shy and formal the impression was he gave to the outside world. In his mind, Käthe Hadlich, a woman ten years older than himself, embodied the ideal image of woman. She was the female counterpart he sought: Hyperion’s Diotima, goddess, redeemer and muse.

But already one year after completing his doctorate, Spranger declared that his Hölderlin phase had come to an end: “the period in which I was Hölderlin would be over”, he wrote in August 1907, having now reached the age of twenty-five (S to H, 10/VIII/1907). A new model of masculinity now took Hölderlin’s place. Though initially not made explicit in the letters, this model was Wilhelm von Humboldt. According to the new tenor of Spranger’s words, the state of yearning inwardness was to be a thing of the past, once and for all, now to be replaced by productiveness, representation and outward impact. In other words, Eduard Spranger began to concentrate on the masculine qualities formulated in Humboldt’s proposed model of gender characters. The ideal female image could continue to exist untouched because, essentially, the mutual enhancement of the genders had only now been wholly attained. Spatial distance of the kind implied by the practice of writing letters was by no means detrimental but, quite to the contrary, proved very conducive to this form of veneration.

It was during this same period, likewise following the completion of his doctorate at the University of Berlin in 1906, that Spranger – who now took up employment at a lyceum for girls in Berlin – came into contact with socially privileged girls and young women between approximately seventeen and twenty years of age. For Spranger, this teaching position was evidently highly inspiring. Following a reunion with former pupils in December 1910, he wrote to Käthe Hadlich (and it was by no means the first time he had formulated such thoughts): “And for the first time in quite a while, this young world once again filled me with a veritable aesthetic *Rausch*. You know that I owe my most profound metaphysical ideas to these impressions. Very simply, this semi-childish youth is a revelation [...]. I came away with an endless wealth of ideas. I then have an uncontrollable urge to lend them expression; [...]” (S to H, 5/XII/1910). These words point to possibilities of attaining truth through revelation and strong, immediate feelings engendered by dialogue with young women. At the same time, Spranger was using the medium of written correspondence as a means of self-exploration and self-observation in his dialogue with an older woman.

In 1911, Spranger was offered a chair the University of Leipzig, a turn of events which sparked in him a striving for power and renown: “You are content with the alpenglow, but I want to climb mountains”, he stressed in October 1912 in a letter to Käthe Hadlich (S to H, 8/X/1912). For him, the validity of Humboldt’s model of gender characters was, if anything, growing: as Spranger saw it, woman led an “ideal existence”, while man was confronted with the “realness” of human life. And, as he expressed in his letters again and again, this division of the sexes was compensated for in an emotional as well as intellectual man-woman symbiosis.

Sophie Riehl, Spranger’s mentor on the social dance floor in the years following the receipt of his post-doctorate in 1909, was of a strikingly similar opinion, which she expressed in her letters to him. She too held the view that the two sexes should enhance and perfect one another in the mutual exchange of feelings and thoughts. Women who were “true friends” or “great lovers” to a man – to use Sophie Riehl’s own words – could provide him with creative impulses and help him towards personal growth. Thus it is no coincidence that, in Spranger’s copy of Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth* (“Dichtung und Wahrheit”), we find a sentence underlined which points to the concept of education at the root of this model: “A [male] friend who makes it too obvious that he seeks to teach you something, makes you feel ill at ease, whereas a woman who educates you by seeming to spoil you will be adored like a celestial, joy-bringing creature.” (Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 23, p. 11) In June 1914, Käthe Hadlich confirmed to her friend that he possessed “supremacy over life”, dignity, grandeur, strength, confidence as well as professional success and reputability. This was her response to Spranger’s assurance that he was nothing but her “work”. The ideal relationship between the sexes, passed down by way of cultural models, had thus been fulfilled to the satisfaction of both parties.

Spranger’s notion of scholarship can perhaps best be expressed by quoting a question he put to Käthe Hadlich – more rhetorically than literally – in 1909: “What are books in comparison to a trace of real, live insemination [...]?”, he wrote to her in January 1909 (S to H, 11/I/1909). Spranger thus demonstrated an aversion to so-called dry erudition. For him, scholarly research meant nothing less than the “spoils” of his “existence”, formulated on a high level of abstraction. Accordingly, his scholarly activities centred on self-reflection – his own feelings and experiences presented in objectified form. Yet this process required a stimulus. As is hardly difficult to guess, he did not obtain that stimulus by participating in scholarly discourse, but by elevating his written dialogues with women – as a scientific persona’s way of life and a means of self-exploration – to a life strategy.

Before World War I, Spranger preferred to correspond with women like Käthe Hadlich and Sophie Riehl – women who, for him, embodied the so-called “pure feminine type” (Spranger, 1921, p. 395). Due to the fact that they did not lead professional careers, for Spranger his exchange with them possessed an unusually high degree of “experience”. He regarded this experience, in turn, as a prerequisite for the obtainment of knowledge, which – as a secularized form of revelation and the representative articulation of “life” – he felt would ultimately lend his work eternal character.

*Test of manhood and representativeness: the outbreak and events of World War I*

The outbreak of World War I and the course of events that followed brought about a number of changes and represented a test for Eduard Spranger's sense of manhood. He cultivated written correspondence with women to a greater degree than ever, and this exchange took on previously unknown nuances.

Whereas up to mid-1914 Spranger had devoted himself chiefly to the subject of "femininity" and his apparently great yearning for feelings, his attitude changed abruptly with the outbreak of World War I. The eruption of war put Spranger's self-construction as a man to a rigorous test, and so, in almost downright desperation, he tackled the topic of "masculinity".

War favours a masculine ideal which made Spranger feel somewhat helpless: the soldier, physically robust and prepared to make sacrifices. In contrast, as an intellectual Spranger felt weak; indeed, he even thought himself in danger of being branded a coward. Initially he tried holding patriotic farewell speeches for students called up for military service as a way of participating in the type of emotional solidarity men are generally meant to share with one another. But soon it could no longer be denied that he just did not correspond to the ideal image of a soldierly man. He suffered from a sense of inferiority, felt inadequate and began avoiding contact with his muse. The previously adopted and celebrated model, in which the woman – Käthe Hadlich, to be specific – admired Spranger for embodying the ideal masculine type and impressively representing the principle of *Bildung*, had been shaken to the core.

Spranger found himself in a dilemma and needed a way out – also with regard to his scholarly productivity. He began by seeking far more contacts with other women than before. He bolstered his masculine self-image by intensifying his personal contact and written correspondence with women who were in love with him, and then, in long descriptive passages, informing Käthe Hadlich about these "storms". One of these women was Susanne Konrad, a student at the time, whom he would later marry (in 1934) during his second masculinity crisis prompted by National Socialism. Here it should be noted that, prior to the World War I, Spranger had never previously written about sexual attraction. He had rejected such feelings for himself, being afraid that they would prevent him from fulfilling his great ambition – of becoming a representative of "German intellect". During the war, however, it was convenient for him to upgrade sexuality as a sign of masculinity.

Ultimately, Lou Andreas-Salomé and Johanna Wezel – herself a person driven by strong professional ambition – were the women who inspired Spranger to define his concept of masculinity and femininity more precisely.

By 1914, Lou Andreas-Salomé had become very well known and gained the reputation of being a fascinating woman. The suffragette Gertrud Bäumer (1950, pp. 485–6) described her as possessing "bold intelligence with a natural confidence in orientation which is reinforced by thinking". This blend, of

which she herself was somewhat suspicious, had an extraordinarily stimulating effect on Spranger: in his brief correspondence with Lou Andreas-Salomé (limited to the year 1914), he emphasizes the profundity of experience and resonance he encountered in his communication with her. In a letter dated 28/VI/1914 he even went so far as to speak of a “total encounter”. This was a period in which Spranger’s thoughts revolved around the topic of “feminine youth”, and his question was how he could translate his “individually experienced [...] world into universal forces” (S to A-S, 29/V/1914). Behind these thoughts lurked the question of masculine activity, the exertion of masculine influence through objectification. As early as May 1914, Spranger stressed to Lou Andreas-Salomé that “in some form or other” she undoubtedly possessed that “quality he sought”, and that all he now needed to do was to “translate it into his own thinking” (ibid.). “That which you have aroused in me I will harbour in silence until it finds its expression” – “I will not return until something has *taken shape*”, Spranger wrote on 28 June 1914 after a personal encounter. By the same token, in his letters he emphasized that women would be content with a purely aesthetic and internalized world view, while he, as a man, was compelled to take action, to create things that had never existed before in individual acts of volition, and in this way to prove himself.

It was in terms of this ever-widening disparity he saw between the two sexes that Spranger also voiced his views to his correspondent Johanna Wezel in December 1915. The discrepancy between subjective experience and the outer world which had tormented Spranger at the beginning of the war found an unexpected solution: he now considered it the catalyst for the masculine urge to reflect. In his letter to Johanna Wezel he stressed that, unlike men, who lived in an alienated world, women were incapable of perceiving this difference. On this basis he concluded that women lacked the capacity for analytical thought.

In March 1916, his tendency to polarize gender dispositions further increased (cf. Hausen, 1979). The addressee was once again Käthe Hadlich. But unlike the period before World War I, Spranger now extolled the merits of the male instinct for rational analysis in the service of mankind’s general perfection, and contrasted this genuinely masculine ability with feminine naivety and lack of reflection.

Thus in his letters to women, Spranger also chimed in with the glorification of masculinity typical of times of war, and corrected his notion of scholarship accordingly. By 1917 at the latest, this masculinity crisis prompted him to extend his working method to embrace a further stage of reflection: the process of self-exploration through letters as exemplary *praxis* of the concept of *Bildung* and the related objectification of feelings as triggered by women should now to be subjected to further abstraction through typification, and thereby assume representative form. Hence, in the foreword to his *Lebensformen* (Life Forms), evolved in the final years of the war and published in 1921, Spranger emphasized the high degree of objectivity manifested by his study. Speaking to himself, as it were, he stresses: “For he who lacks the courage to draw rational lines through the context of life also lacks the courage for scholarship and thought.” (Spranger, 1921, p. IX)

## *Outlook and résumé*

The end of the war and the call to Berlin University shortly after put Spranger into a euphoric mood: “Now my time has come”, he wrote to Käthe Hadlich in January 1920 (S to H, 24/1/1920). Spranger’s literary debt to the war – the *Lebensformen* – was positively received in a period of political uncertainty. Moreover, he prided himself in being an intellectual leader whose influence now came to bear in “exclusively male lecture halls”. As a long-term consequence of the war, his explicitly masculine role apparently remained the central question, not only for Spranger himself, but also for Käthe Hadlich. To characterize his professional role she used the word “struggle”, which, in her eyes, Spranger conducted with “wholeheartedness”, “passion” and “energy”. Thus, following the publication of his *Lebensformen*, she granted him late, but face-saving amnesty and attributed to him “true leadership”. This could explain why, in 1927, Siegfried Bernfeld came to the conclusion that Eduard Spranger cultivated the “plaintive, romantic and resentimental concept of scholarship” typical of Germany, preferring the “role of leadership to scholarship”.

*My conclusion:* Spranger’s correspondence with women mirrors the neo-religious structure of the field of educational theory in its formative phase. This structure is directly linked with the assumption of a difference between the sexes as society’s basic structure, coupled with the *underestimation* of scientific criticism and the *overestimation* of intuition and feeling. Spranger’s concept of scholarship was founded in self-exploration exercised within the framework of written correspondence with women, an activity which – in his view – embodied the principle of *Bildung* in exemplary manner and was tantamount to an act of secularized revelation.

### **Archival Sources:**

Bundesarchiv Koblenz

N 1182 (Nachlass Eduard Spranger, no detailed index available to date)

### *Bibliography:*

Bäumer, Gertrud (1950): *Gestalt und Wandel. Frauenbildnisse*. Berlin.

Bernfeld, Siegfried (1927): "Die heutige Psychologie der Pubertät. Zur Kritik ihrer Wissenschaftlichkeit", in: *Imago*, vol. 13, pp. 1–56.

Gay, Peter (1989): *Die Republik der Außenseiter. Geist und Kultur der Weimarer Zeit (1918–1933)*. Frankfurt/M.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang (1902–1912): *Sämtliche Werke*. Vols. 22–25: *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Stuttgart & Berlin (Spranger Bibliothek, UB Tübingen)

Hausen, Karin (1976): "Die Polarisierung der 'Geschlechtscharaktere' – eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben", in: Werner Conze (ed.): *Sozialgeschichte der Familie in der Neuzeit Europas*. Stuttgart.

Kühne, Thomas (ed.) (1996): *Männergeschichte – Geschlechtergeschichte. Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne*. Frankfurt/M., New York.

Lethen, Helmut (1994): *Verhaltenslehren der Kälte. Lebensversuche zwischen den Kriegen*. Frankfurt/M.

Mosse, George L. (1997): *Das Bild des Mannes. Zur Konstruktion der modernen Männlichkeit*. Frankfurt/M.

Planert, Ute (1998): *Antifeminismus im Kaiserreich. Diskurs, soziale Formation, politisches Milieu*. Göttingen.

Priem, Karin (2000): *Bildung im Dialog. Eduard Sprangers Korrespondenz mit Frauen und sein Profil als Wissenschaftler (1903–1924)*. Cologne.

Ringer, Fritz (1983): *Die Gelehrten. Der Niedergang der deutschen Mandarine 1890–1933*. Stuttgart.

Spranger, Eduard (1904): "Friedrich Hölderlin. Ein Beitrag zur Psychologie", in: *Die Gegenwart*, pp. 340–344.

Spranger, Eduard (1909): *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee*. Berlin.

Spranger, Eduard (1921): *Lebensformen. Geisteswissenschaftliche Psychologie und Ethik der Persönlichkeit*. Halle, 2nd completely revised and extended edition.