

MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

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STEFAN GEORGE AND THE REFORM OF THE GERMAN LYRIC

In recent years the most powerful literary tendency that has been making itself felt is the revulsion against the realism of the last half century. The development of the Irish school of romanticists has had an important influence and the growth of the little theaters in this country is intimately connected with the revival of romanticism. Germany, too, has a large group of neo-romanticists who have been deluging the literary market with fantastic tales and tenuous dramatic productions. But none of these has outlined so careful a program or insisted with such vigor upon the acceptance of his principles as Stefan George, the Rhinelander. Born in 1869, he has the most vigorous years of his life already behind him, and yet it is but little more than a decade since Richard Meyer directed the attention of the public to his work. To speak of a public is rather to exaggerate the number of his readers. They are still relatively few and the seven or eight collections of his verse by their very outward aspect—binding, paper, and printing—appeal only to the select class which he wanted to reach. Indeed the poet is himself responsible for the scant attention which has been paid to him. With Olympian aloofness he wished to speak only to those whom he admitted to his guild and keep all others at a safe distance. Again and again he expresses his contempt for the mob, which, of course, includes the grubbing literary critic with his insatiate greed for unearthing sources and discovering “influences.” To be sure, this pose, for thus it must be called, does not proceed from sheer scorn of the masses as such, but because he feels that the socialistic and collectivist tendencies of the day are of their very nature inimical to individual artistic creation. “Niemals war wie

heute eine herrschaft der massen, niemals daher die that des einzelnen so fruchtlos." ¹ The poet must grow and develop far from the noisy babble of the world marts—*ein Talent bildet sich im Stillen*; the merest suggestion of professionalism in literature is a withering influence for delicate poetical growths. So George complains that the true poet is a thing of the past: "Die gestalt des dichters scheint den Deutschen ganz verloren gegangen zu sein. Es giebt jetzt nur den gelehrten, beamten, bürger der gedichte macht und das schlimmste: den deutschen litteraten der gedichte macht." ²

It was such considerations that impelled George and his disciples to gather behind closed doors and withhold their productions from the baneful influences of shallow literary critics. The meagre output of the school was published only for their own enjoyment in the privately printed *Blätter für die Kunst*,³ which George proudly calls "die einzige dichterische und künstlerische Bewegung." The great mass of this is still inaccessible to the general reader and only selections have been reprinted in the three small volumes of the *Auslese*⁴ by the venturesome Berlin publisher Bondi. The works which did not appear in the *Blätter für die Kunst* and the *Auslesen* were printed only in small editions. Even the publication of these volumes does not represent an abandonment of the earlier principles of an art for the few as the preface of the second volume explicitly states: the circle of the select has merely increased in size so that reprints and larger editions were desirable.⁵ Indeed, George credits himself with having defeated the realists and

¹ *Auslese aus den Blättern für die Kunst*, II, 22.

² *Auslese*, II, 15.

³ Published 1892 ff. by Bondi in Berlin.

⁴ Vol. I, *Auslese aus den Jahren 1892-1897*; Vol. II, *Auslese, 1898-1904*; Vol. III, *Auslese, 1904-1909*.

⁵ George's reserved attitude toward the masses is tempered by the admission that at times flashes of inspiration can be seen in the humbler man.

"Nur manchmal bricht aus ihnen edles feuer,
Und offerbart dir dass ihr bund nicht schände."

Teppich des Lebens, Vorspiel, p. xiv.

"Manchmal kommt es dass in einem volke weisheiten dämmern für die das neue wort und die neue geste noch nicht ausgebildet sind. Das sind dann in der tiefe gewühlte erze die nicht ans licht gefördert werden können." *Auslese*, II, p. 21.

inaugurated a new era of poetic creation: "alles was heute unsere jüngste dichtung ausmacht (hat) hier seinen ausgang genommen oder seine anregung empfangen. Die bemängelnden richter entlehnen hier ihre maasse; die übriggebliebenen der wirklichkeitsschule glauben sich in den schönheitsmantel kleiden zu müssen und die hüter der alltagslebendigkeit schreiben 'stilvolle' sonette. Was man noch vor zwanzig jahren unmöglich gehalten hätte: heute machen bei uns Dutzende leidliche verse und Dutzende schreiben eine leidliche rede, ja das neue Dichterische findet wenn auch in der zehnfachen verdünnung öffentlichen und behördlichen beifall. Damit ist ein teil der Sendung erfüllt." ⁶

What is this mission that he thinks he has partially fulfilled? As far as the form of his work is concerned he shows an intimate relationship with the French Parnassians. Like them he strove to regain the polished form which had been lost through the centrifugal forces at work in the naturalistic productions; like them he was unalterably opposed to unchecked subjectivism, slipshod or repeated rimes and all looseness in poetic form. The ending of the line seems to have engaged his attention particularly and nowhere in German literature has such a variety of riming syllables been used. He goes to the extreme of maintaining that a rime once used loses its value for the poet and should seldom or never be repeated. The inevitable result of such an exacting rule was that innumerable obsolete words had to be resuscitated and curious compounds invented to satisfy the demands of the rime. He went to the extent of composing in Middle High German for practice in strict metrical form. But even then George found it impossible to obey to the letter the rules which he had himself formulated. The metrical forms in his poems show far less variety, the four line stanza of four or five feet riming *abab* or *abba* being the favorite. His most recent volume consists largely of poems in unrimed lines of five feet, mostly iambic pentameters. Whatever may be the deficiencies of his work through over-artificiality it cannot be gainsaid that he has enriched poetic diction by his revival of obsolete and Middle High German words.

Equally severe is he in his dicta respecting the content of the individual poem and the forms of poetic writing. A poem should be abstracted from the world of daily endeavor, free from theories

⁶ Vorwort, *Auslese, 1904-1909*.

of life and problems of state and society; it should be simple and clear and present objectively one single picture without the reflections and personal opinions of the poet. Wherever George has consistently adhered to this principle he has succeeded in creating lyrics of the greatest delicacy, particularly in his nature poems, as, for example, in the much quoted lines beginning: "Komm in den totesagten park und schau," which are so highly praised by Hofmannsthal. But this relentless application of the principle *L'art pour l'art*, this complete withdrawal into the rarified atmosphere of superworldly observation; the excessive condensation of the sentence attained through an inordinate use of genitive phrase; coupled with the demands made upon the reader's attention by a text almost bare of capitals and marks of punctuation—all this tends rather to obscurity than the limpid clearness for which the poet strove.

Not only did George draw narrow boundaries within which the lyric poem must revolve, but he also restricts poetry almost entirely to the lyric category. With the novel, especially the novel of the realistic type, he has no patience; "litterarische Reportage, Berichtserstatterei" he scornfully calls it. Toward the drama he maintains a more conciliatory attitude, but believes the stage of the present day to be barren of poetic productions. The drama has reached a point where, in his estimation, the dramatists are chewing their cud, existing on that which has been handed down through the generations and that they are writing for a theater with a tremendous machinery demanding plays written expressly for it. "Was wir jetzt als Bühnenwerke sehen ist bei den mindern Schöpfungen eine Verarbeitung nach dem Muster der alten Tragödie; bei den besseren ein Lyriismus der zufällig in die Gesprächsform gegossen wird."⁷ It is the disuse into which verse has fallen in dramatic writing that is largely responsible for this condition: "Von einem halbgebildeten Volke liess man sich belehren der Vers habe die Schauspielkunst vernichtet; man gewöhnte sich Rhythmen zu sprechen gleichsam um Entschuldigung bittend und verlor damit jeden festen Grund."⁸ And so he sees the hopes for a rebirth of

⁷ *Auslese*, II, p. 14. Compare also the remarks on the drama in *Blätter für die Kunst*, erste Folge, dritter Band, and *Auslese*, III, p. 10; likewise those of Karl Wolfskehl, *Auslese*, III, pp. 66-70.

⁸ *Auslese*, II, p. 14.

the drama founded upon a restoration of the verse to its old place. To build the foundations for this new drama, for the drama receives furtherance rather through the coöperation of a group of poets with the same ideals than individual effort, he inaugurated a *Bühne der Blätter für die Kunst*. The object of this dramatic society was to give amateur performances in private houses in which particular attention should be paid to simplicity of grouping, æsthetic movements and to recitation ("Abrichtung der Stimme zum Hersagen der neuen rhythmischen Gebilde," *Auslese*, II, 13). George lays great stress upon this last point because the mannerisms arising from the stereotyped stage recitation have made all oral performances of poetry unrhythmical.⁹ Specimens of dramatic compositions probably produced at these private performances may be found in the *Blätter für die Kunst*, as, for example, *Die Aufnahme in den Orden, ein Weihespiel*,¹⁰ perhaps actually given at the initiation of a new member of the group.

George feels that it is his mission to recreate the world in a poetic sense, to develop a new power of joyous artistic contemplation. This conception is embodied in symbolic form in the *Vorspiel to Der Teppich des Lebens*. To the poet brooding in deep sorrow over his work there appears an angel strewing flowers—Art, and a dialogue ensues during which the poet seeks and receives consolation. He longs to regain the exaltation of youth and pleads stormily for Art's gifts so that he may overcome the discouragement of his isolation; but the angel gently restrains him with the admonition that his wishes are too wild and confused to be granted:

"Gewährung eurer vieler Kostbarkeiten
Ist nicht mein Amt: und meine Ehrengift
Wird nicht im Zwang errungen, dies erkenn!"

A strange intermingling there is here of confidence and joy in the ultimate success of his task and of terror at the difficulties that beset his path. Prayerful admiration of Hellenic art is contrasted with romantic pictures after the manner of Nietzsche in *Zarathustra*, as when he surveys from a mountain the mass of humanity struggling toward an unknown goal. It is the longest of his poems and the most obscure, but it contains the essence of his wishes and hopes for their fulfillment.

⁹ *Auslese*, II, 42.

¹⁰ *Auslese*, II, 42.

A careful study might reveal a strong Nietzschean strain in George's work; and indeed it is in one sense essentially that of a romanticist. The ever recurring *Sehnsucht nach der Sehnsucht*, the insistence on the unity of the arts, the glorification of night and sorrow; all this recalls to us the early romanticists. The list of his translations, which includes Rossetti, shows strong leanings toward this school and it is no mere accident that he, like Novalis and the Schlegels, is an ardent Roman Catholic. But, on the other hand, the avoidance of multiplicity of detail, the preference of classic outlines to the wild confusedness of a Brentano makes us hesitate before assigning him to his place.

Not all the members of the school let themselves be bound by George's narrow delimitation of the field of composition and we find Max Dauthendey writing novels and short stories like the rest of the professional litterateurs of the day. In George's review of the influence of his teachings on the literature of the present he refers somewhat bitterly to the defection of several of his disciples: "Man vergesse auch nicht dass die grenze des erreichbaren noch fern ist und dass die von diesem kreise abgesprengten die sich noch nicht zur gänzlichen entwürdigung ihrer muse entschliessen konnten vergeblich des beifalls harren. Das giebt denen die den tempel verlassen haben, in den vorhof ja auf die strasse geschritten sind eine mahnung sich wieder ins innerste zurückzuziehen, und alle die es mit unsrer kunst und bildung ernst meinen, werden sich der goldnen Blätter-regel aus der zeit ihrer morgenfrühe erinnern: 'dass nichts was der öffentlichkeit entgegenkommt auch nur den allergeringsten wert hat' und dass nur eines not tut: "ein weiter-schreiten in andacht arbeit und stille."¹¹

None of the followers of George has done more than remotely approach him. Hugo von Hofmannsthal had only a distant outward connection with the school and has since gone his own ways. The inordinately self-centered Max Dauthendey's work is slipshod and uninspired in comparison with that of his former master. Richard Perls gave promise but died early, and of the others Paul Gerardy and Karl Wolfskehl perhaps stand out as most gifted. With these poets are associated also the artists Melchior Lechter and Ernst Gundolf, of whom the first prepared most of the decorations for the *Blätter für die Kunst* and the published works. How

¹¹ *Auslese*, III, Vorrede.

lasting the influence of the school will be remains for the future to tell.¹²

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SHAKESPEARE STUDIES

III. THE EPIC CHARACTER OF HENRY V

In the play of *Henry V*, why does Shakespeare feel so intensely the limitations of the stage? The Chorus express this feeling very fully.

Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon!
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.

(Prologue-Chorus to Act I, 11-15, 23.)

¹² The following bibliography of works and articles on George may be acceptable since it is at present difficult to gather information about the poet. The literary histories of Albert Sörgel, Kummer, and Vogt and Koch, and L. Lewissohn's *The Spirit of Modern German Literature* also contain short articles:

Kuno Zwymann, *Das Georgese Gedicht*, Basel, 1902; Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "über Gedichte," *Neue Rundschau* xv (1904), 129-139; Franz Dulberg, *Stefan George. Ein Führer zu seinem Werke*, München, 1908; E. Bertram, "über George," *Mitteilungen der literarhistorischen Gesellschaft Bonn*, Dortmund, 1906, III, No. 2; G. Brandes, "Stefan George: Neue Poesie," *Wiener Zeit*, October 9, 1903; H. Ubell, "Stefan George," *Das literarische Echo*, 1904, pp. 1201-1204; E. Felder, "Stefan George," *Die Gegenwart*, 1904, No. 52; K. W. Goldschmidt, "Stefan George," *Das literarische Echo*, 1906, pp. 1493-1500; B. Baumgarten, "Stefan George," *Preussische Jahrbücher*, 1907, Vol. 128, pp. 428-469; F. Wegwitz, "Stefan George," *Westermanns Monatshefte*, July, 1911, pp. 659-664; W. Scheller, *Die Gegenwart*, 1912, No. 23; F. Kuntze, "Die innere Form der Lyrik Stefan Georges," *Kunstwart*, May, 1913, p. 280; E. Bertram, *Mitteilungen der literarhistorischen Gesellschaft Bonn*, VIII, 1-23; H. Benzmann, *Die Lichtung*, Leipzig, 1907, p. 485; Marie von Bunsen, "Stefan George: der Dichter und seine Gemeinde," *Vossische Zeitung*, Berlin, 1898, No. 2, Sonntagsbeilage; H. Eick, "Drei Briefe über Stefan George," *Hamburger Correspondent*, 1908, Beilage No. 23; W. K. Stewart, "The Poetry of Stefan George," *The Dial*, LXIII, 567-570; Ludwig Klages, *Über Stefan George*.