

Marvels and Dreams.

Notes on Stefan George

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ABSTRACT

Together with Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan George was one of the most important German poets of the early 20th century. Described by Rilke as a “Master” and by Hofmannsthal as “the great poet of our time”, George contributed to the revival of poetry in Germany. His role in German cultural and political history was as important as it was controversial, and his poetic collections include “esoteric” tendencies, reflections on political events and philosophical instances. Unlike other great poets of his time, and despite the attention he received from philosophers, poets and composers in the first half of the 20th century, George has often been overlooked in critical studies. In this paper, some of the characteristics of his poetry are examined by contextualizing George’s poetic figure in the framework of one of the most fascinating and complex cultural, literary, political, and philosophical landscapes in the history of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Stefan George; Aesthetics; Literature; German poetry; Critical Studies.

In Stefan George there was a greatness that made it useless to place him at an artificial distance; he remained great, even if seen and lived close up. Certainly, a time that glorifies the resolute man and confuses the flatter worldliness with the reality that is the force that is built must be blind to the indigenous myth that is intimately suited to every genius, whether Goethe or George, but that can only reach the apex of its pristine splendour in distant times.

Seen in this light, hesitating to tell many people what only a few can know is something of value¹.

With these words, Sabine Lepsius concludes the preface of her book dedicated to Stefan Anton George (1868-1933) and written just two years after the death of the German poet. Lepsius’ words, both synthetic and effective, put George in the right critical perspective. They locate George’s intellectual figure at the crossroads of the historical events of his complex and tragic time, while showing at the same time the several different interests that characterized

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¹ Lepsius S., *Stefan George. Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (1935), Severus, Hamburg 2013, p. 10; my transl.

his poetic work: the fascination for a mythical past, the link with the great German literary tradition – the reference to Goethe is certainly not accidental –, the old-fashioned nature of his poetic voice in the sense of his inability to interpret a phenomenon that is still too close in time, the mysterious, profound and oracular character of his words.

These considerations, I think, may thus constitute an excellent starting point for our analysis.

1. *Forms of the “Living Poetry”*

In a letter written in November 1798 and addressed to his friend, the poet Friedrich Neuffer, Friedrich Hölderlin expressed clearly how important “living poetry” was for him and how far he still felt from being able to grasp it. In spite of this discouragement, Hölderlin argues for the vital importance of identifying and fulfilling the task of poetry in relation to the “living”:

To provide an adequate representation of the free relationship, raised above the physical and moral need, that man has gained with his fellow men and his world, so that, in the circulation of representations, men *poetically* extend the range of their personal spheres of action. In this sense, the poetic representations of the living act as an instrument for sharing experience and constitute the medium through which a human community can define and constitute itself².

In this position, he seems to echo an issue posed by Kant and then taken up by Schiller: the constitution of an aesthetic community. In the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant opens the way for a

An overall rethinking of transcendental philosophy, more precisely [...] a rethinking that would (re-qualify) its point of view in a more explicit and radical way, presenting it as a *look inseparable from the movement of an experience in progress*, with a correlative passage from a thought that themes the *Man* to a thought that themes the *plurality of men*³.

This rethinking, which corresponds to a transition from singularity to collectivity, depends on the nature of aesthetic judgement (meant as disinterested, contemplative, necessary and universal); a judgment that has universal validity without being logically demonstrable nor being able to refer to a concept of the intellect that could demonstrate its universality and necessity. The judgement of

² Portera M., *Poesia vivente. Una lettura di Hölderlin*, Aesthetica Preprint. Supplementa, Palermo 2010, pp. 9-10; my transl.

³ Montani P., *Bioestetica. Senso comune, tecnica e arte nell'età della globalizzazione*, Carocci, Roma 2007, p. 21; my transl.

taste enjoys a particular universality, which is neither conceptual nor objective but is rather subjective yet can be represented as objective with the assumption of a common sense⁴. This universality is founded

On the communicability of sentiment, on a “common sense” that does not derive from empirical-psychological considerations but from the transcendental plot of the intersubjective agreement that founds the universal and necessary subjectivity of aesthetic judgement⁵.

Rather than individualistically isolated, the subjectivity of aesthetic judgement can and must be read as “communicating subjectivity”. In the third *Critique*, what emerges is an open subject oriented towards communication with other subjects and a new theory of subjectivity communicable through feeling makes its way. Seen from this visual perspective, the subject tends towards the institution of community, without damaging however her own individuality nor that of other subjects. This enables us to make a transition from a purely aesthetic analysis of the *Critique of judgement* to a politically charged approach: aesthetic communicating subjectivity becomes political communicating subjectivity. In this perspective, aesthetics takes on a further function or a new role, because it draws attention to the individual understood in an active and productive relationship with the others.

We can trace back this approach to a general trend towards the ideal of an “aesthetic revolution”, something about which Friedrich Schiller was especially concerned. With his letters on the aesthetic education of man⁶, Schiller takes up Kant’s issues with respect to the conflict between sensibility and reason, trying to free them from their supposed intellectual rigorism. The objective (and the hope) that animates Schiller is to initiate a transition towards a model of man in which reason and feeling, *Vernunft* and *Sinnlichkeit*, are able to co-exist in mutual agreement with each other, which leads Schiller to openly criticize the bourgeois man and the “barbarism” that he represents, characterized by an absence of any intrinsic aesthetic value⁷.

⁴ See Kant I., *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2007, pp. 70-74.

⁵ Franzini E., *L'estetica del Settecento*, il Mulino, Bologna 1995, p. 160; my transl.

⁶ See Schiller F., *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1793-95), Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983.

⁷ The absence of an intrinsic aesthetic value to which Schiller refers stems from the cancellation, in man, of his “animality” and his “sensitivity”. Although bourgeois society has had the merit of having made a “rational” man, it has at the same time made the grave mistake of believing that only in a complete denial of sensitivity could a shelter against his aberrations be found.

We are not so distant, here, from how Mariagrazia Portera understands the concept of “living poetry” in Hölderlin’s work. The “poetic representations” are means through which we can share an experience, a condition, a “common feeling”, the way through which a community structures itself and recognizes itself as such.

In the Germany’s poetic tradition, however, there is another great poet exemplifying a different form of tension towards the “living” and representing an emblematic model of a special relationship between soul, form, solitude, communication, secret and silence. I am talking about Stefan George, a poet whom, together with Rilke and Hölderlin, also Martin Heidegger referred to in order to support some of his most aesthetically relevant theses. George’s relationship with the living is well expressed by the following words by Theodor W. Adorno:

That the experience of artworks is adequate only as living experience is more than a statement about the relation of the observer to the observed, more than a statement about psychological *cathexis* as a condition of aesthetic perception. Aesthetic experience becomes living experience only by way of its object, in that instant in which artworks themselves become animate under its gaze. This is George’s symbolist teaching in the poem “The Tapestry”⁸.

Before going through some of the most relevant ideas in George’s poetics, it is appropriate however to briefly summarize Germany’s literary context in the second half of the 19th century.

2. *Naturalism and anti-Naturalism*

In order to better understand George’s historical and cultural position, we need to emphasize the anti-naturalistic character of his production. Very soon in his intellectual path, George distanced himself from Naturalism. As a cultural and literary movement, Naturalism was mainly characterized by two aspects in the Germany of those days. On the one hand, writers who referred to this movement tended to look beyond their borders, drawing inspiration from models that could be traced back to different literary experiences. On the other hand, German naturalists did not disregard the realist tradition to which they were debtors stylistically. To these aspects, another specific element of German Naturalism must be added, one relating to the approach it has to reality and to its description. The main need of Naturalists is indeed to look at people, things, nature, social

⁸ Adorno Th.W., *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Continuum, London-New York 2002, pp. 175-176.

environments, events with a photographic adherence, with an eye as objective and precise as possible, thus reaching the threshold of a coldness that does not seem to lend itself to imagination.

However, one cannot separate – in this as in many other cases – the field of the arts from the more general field of human activities. Indeed, the gaze that characterizes naturalist authors also springs from the relations of Naturalism with the natural sciences. The scientific method of those years, based on induction, cause analysis and experiment, led to an image of the causal-mechanical as emerging from the knowledge of facts and from experience and was considered so incontestable that it became the basis of the arts, thus putting speculative philosophy aside⁹.

German Naturalism, which Ladislao Mittner sees as beginning in 1885 and ending in 1900¹⁰, caused German literature to open to European culture, and involved the spread and inclusion of mainly French, Russian, Scandinavian, and Belgian authors in German culture. To be sure, one of the most peculiar aspects of the period between 1880 and the end of the century is exactly the great variety of styles, impulses, models, references, solutions. As Mittner defines it, a sort of “chaos of styles” characterizes it, an eclecticism that hardly manages to harmonize the voices animating it. Among the pantheon of writers that Germany looked at, we find for example Gabriele D’Annunzio and Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen and Stéphane Mallarmé, August Strindberg and Émile Zola, Lev Tolstoj and Maurice Maeterlinck, Paul Verlaine and Fëdor Dostoevskij.

German victory after the Franco-Prussian war, the process of industrialization, as well as the process that gave Germany a predominant position on the European chessboard led Germany to open to the outside world. This caused the assimilation of many styles as well as customs and ways of life, also perhaps in a chaotic way, into German culture. As a result, a new taste for luxury, new refinements and new pleasures also emerged, not always in a harmonious combination. It was, so to speak, a form of *anesthetic eclecticism*, that is, an eclecticism that behind an apparent tendency towards a new sense of beauty often concealed its opposite, hidden under the forms of an *ante litteram* kitsch. As Mittner points out, this eclecticism was in part the result of the action of the proclamation that dizzily imposed on the public a new “-ism” that could replace the previous one (or ones). Interestingly, as Mittner notices,

⁹ Rothmann K., *Kleine Geschichte der deutschen Literatur* (1978), Reclam, Stuttgart 2009, p. 218.

¹⁰ Mittner L., *Storia della letteratura tedesca. Dal realismo alla sperimentazione (1820-1970)*, t. II. *Dal fine secolo alla sperimentazione (1890-1970)*, Einaudi, Torino 1971, p. 869.

the “-isms” that are imposed in a dazzling and dazed way are in fact the most serious symptoms of an aesthetic-moral crisis, since they show “not only the skill and unscrupulousness of the regents of cultural life in imposing ever new fashions, but also, on the part of the public, an obtuse and often perverse will to let themselves be influenced, so as not to have to clarify with their own strength – or even to forget – the common crisis situation”¹¹.

At the end of the Nineteenth century, the tragic disorientation that pervaded German society was just an omen of the abyss into which the Nation would fall in the following decades. Mittner specifies that this crisis was mainly political and social, the most serious sign of which being the “interchangeability” of social and cultural problems, in particular naturalism and aestheticism – theoretical movements that Mittner considers respectively represented by Hauptmann and George:

Naturalism fought or pretended to fight for the working classes, aestheticism despised or ignored them; but Hauptmann soon allowed himself to be absorbed by various fashions that were increasingly distant from reality; on the other hand, George closed himself up in the ivory tower of pure art, above all to preach that from that tower the seer of the future should come out, that by shaping the brute matter, even the brute social-political reality, he would become a hero, a duce, a Caesar¹².

Compared to Naturalism, whose most exemplary model is perhaps Gerhart Hauptmann, Stefan George is in a critical position (as authors such as Jacobsen and Maeterlinck or Nietzsche had already done), reiterating his desire to abandon the crowded field of the people and the proletariat, metropolitan life, the new capitalism, to regain a more intimate, more delicate, diaphanous and sometimes impalpable dimension.

George’s reaction to Naturalism represented thus an attempt to react to Naturalism and brought him back to the bedrock of German Symbolist lyricism. According to Enrico De Angelis, this tendency was initiated already in the *Hymnen* (1890). Unlike Impressionism, which maintains a certain relationship with the sensu-alistic dimension, symbolist poetry is characterized by an idealistic, spiritualistic, and almost irrationalistic sense and tends towards abstraction and purity, qualities that makes it hermetic and aristocratic: “Continuously experiences minimal elements as a vehicle for a fracture that lacerates the rational, and in them the lyricism accepts to remain with all the integrations and corrections of the case”¹³.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 868; my transl.

¹² *Ibidem*; my transl.

¹³ De Angelis E., *Simbolismo e decadentismo nella letteratura tedesca*, il Mulino, Bologna 1987, p. 89; my transl.

3. Poetry and Politics?

Starting from 1892 (to 1919), George began the publication of his “Blätter für die Kunst”, a work written for a small circle of friend that would later become the manifesto of the new poetry and new poetics, testifying to his desire for an elitist closure and for delimitating the field of circulation of his ideas and works. In this regard, consider for example that the “Blätter” were sold only in four selected bookstores, in Berlin, Munich, Vienna and Paris. It is in such context that George could condense and express his strong personality, both human and poetic, a personality which partly emerged in the *Hymnen*, a work that had not been read in German literature for decades. Already in this work, according to De Angelis, it is possible to find traces of his clear poetic character in the use of motifs that are common to all symbolism.

Around the “Blätter”, the “George-Kreis” (George’s circle) was also created, a real *cenaculum* in which chosen members experimented and exalted new languages¹⁴. It was a group of “chosen” people, in which a “revelatory” and mysterious atmosphere reigned. On a closer inspection, however, the idea of language as prophecy or revelation had already its roots in the romantic tradition. As Nina Gutschinskaja points out, it can indeed be traced back to Hamann, Herder, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, finding its more effective expression in the works of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who understood language as an expression of the spirit of a people¹⁵. According to Gutschinskaja, Hamann’s idea of poetry as the “Muttersprache des menschlichen Geschlechtes” can also be applied to George’s poetic language in the early 20th century: “becomes the ‘innermost soul of the people’ language, it is given the highest dignity”¹⁶. A similar atmosphere surrounded George’s circle, a circle in which all members were men, mainly non-German and, above all, “beginners”, i.e., minor poets who

¹⁴ On “George-Kreis”, see Lepenies W., *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology* (1985), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988; Foucault M., *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, The New Press, New York 1998; Norton R.E., *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2002; Winkler M., ‘Master and Disciples: The George Circle’, in J. Rieckmann (ed.), *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George*, Camden House, Rochester 2005, pp. 145-159; Karlauf Th., *Stefan George. Die entdeckung des Charisma. Biographie*, Blessing Verlag, München 2007; Lane M., Ruehl M. (eds.), *A Poet’s Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, Camden House, Rochester 2011.

¹⁵ Gutschinskaja N., ‘Sprache als Prophetie: zu Stefan Georges Gedichtband *Das Neue Reich*’, in W. Braungart, U. Oelmann, B. Böschenstein (hrsg.), *Stefan George: Werk und Wirkung seit dem >Siebenten Ring*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 2001, pp. 114-124: 115.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*; my transl.

could not overshadow the star, George himself. Getting in touch with George's poetry and reading it meant taking a clear position: either one was inside, or one was outside. As Carsten Strathausen writes, it was a difficult decision, which also justifies why the debate was so clearly polarized:

George's poem, for one, does not tolerate any ambiguity in this point since the solution shall forever remain concealed from the many and revealed only to the chosen few – a stipulation that repeats the latently totalitarian gesture of in- and exclusion constitutive of the George Kreis. The reader, it seems, must either believe in the promise of art and accept George as its prophet or categorically refuse to do so, thus being caught in a binary scheme that leaves very little room for negotiating the question¹⁷.

As Mittner underlines, the cenaculum evolved in time in accordance with the evolution of his founder's works. The "Kreis" thus became the "Bund", i.e., the alliance of those who joined in the veneration of the young Maximin, died in 1904 at the age of sixteen and praised as the "star of the alliance" by George himself in his book *Der Stern des Bundes* (1914). Later on, the "Bund" underwent a further transformation and became the "Reich" ten years after the collapse of the Second Reich and five years before Hitler's Third Reich. According to Mittner, George's new program, utopian as well as obscure, was defined once again by the title of his latest collection of poems, *Das Neue Reich* (1928).

The cenaculum, however, did not widen over time but rather restricted its scope, so much so that

In 1928 it was no longer possible to hide the contrast between the aesthete closed in his proud solitude and the seer who proclaimed himself duce of his nation, of the "deep" soul of it. But where the seer failed, the severe and highly cultured priest of beauty triumphed in his own way, who created a vast and multiform aestheticism, who, in various ways, partly forgot and even repudiated the teachings of the master¹⁸.

The third moment of the circle's transformation, which took place a few years before Hitler's affirmation and was accompanied by the publication of the collection *Das Neue Reich*, made George appear as a poet who vantaged the rise of National Socialism. This accusation inevitably had consequences for the reception of George's poetry since the 1930s.

According to Mark Elliott, who authored an article about the

¹⁷ Strathausen C., *Of Circles and Riddles: Stefan George and the 'Language Crisis' around 1900*, in "The German Quarterly", 76/4 (2003), pp. 411-425: 419.

¹⁸ Mittner L., *Storia della letteratura tedesca. Dal realismo alla sperimentazione (1820-1970)*, t. II. *Dal fine secolo alla sperimentazione (1890-1970)*, cit., p. 953; my transl.

poetic reception of George and Rilke, poetic research took very different directions during the National Socialist period: “in the ideologically driven world of cultural politics, in aesthetic debates among poets, and in the poetry itself”¹⁹. These directions corresponded, of course, to different possible interpretations of the problem. As Elliott writes, the question of “cultural heritage”, encapsulated in the concept of “Erbe” [heir], is central to the cultural politics of the Third Reich. It is renowned how all authoritarian regimes, including Nazism, tried to legitimize ideological positions, political choices and objectives by resorting to the cultural, literary, philosophical, artistic or musical tradition. There is no regime in history that has not tried to appropriate, almost always illegitimately, some of the greatest figures from the past. Nazism, for example, did that with Nietzsche, Schiller, Fichte or Hölderlin. To the same extent, George’s fortune may be also interpreted in light of Nazism’s misappropriation of his (poetic) thought and worldview.

In the narrower poetic circle, however, the reception of George’s poetry was much more complex. In this respect, ideological judgement takes a second place with respect to aesthetic concerns. In George’s case, his poetry is traced back to a gender paradigm: “George was largely equated positively with masculinity, discipline, and associated aesthetic categories, such as formal restraint”²⁰. In contrast, Rilke is considered the poet of femininity, decadence and of the fluidity of aesthetic form. Starting from this polarization, which Elliott believes reflects the Nietzschean distinction between “Apolline” and “Dionysian”, George and Rilke were presented as a perfect consolidated frame of reference against which poets could develop and define their literary identities and aesthetic goals. Following either the “George line” or the “Rilke line” had thus not only a poetic and aesthetic meaning, but also an ideological and political valence in terms of the alternatives between masculine/feminine, right/left, conservatism/progressivism, war/peace.

Thanks to this, Stefan George became a perfect icon for the Nazis and was presented as “spiritual guide and herald of Third Reich”²¹, a poet-seer who expressed in a poetic form the same sentiments that animated the ideological trousseau of Nazism. But we are faced with a forcing. Elliott provides some evidence of this:

¹⁹ Elliott M., *Beyond Left and Right: The Poetic Reception of Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933-1945*, in “The Modern Language Review”, 98/4 (2003), pp. 908-928: 908.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Naumann H., *Stefan George und das Neue Reich*, in “Zeitschrift für Deutschkunde”, 48 (1934), pp. 273-286: 273; my transl.

the poem 'Goethes letzte Nacht in Italien' contains the following lines, which could be read as prophetic: 'Knieen im staube ein weiteres tausendjahr | Vor einem knaben den ihr zum gott erhebt'. Although George was presumably alluding to his beloved Maximin, the deified 'knabe' could be interpreted as an allusion to Hitler and the noun 'tausendjahr' as a reference to the projected thousand years of the Third Reich²².

Even more importantly, as Elliott notices, George was associated with the "male" qualities of form and discipline ("Zucht", "Form", "Strenge"), which were considered superior and preferable to the "female" qualities of dissolution ("formlose Plebejertum", "Auflösung"). Things being so, the Nazi cultural world did not need much else to include George's poetry within its ideological perimeter.

Even if we can accept the idea that Nazism forced the interpretation of George's poetry by distorting its meaning, the relationship between the regime and George – who died in Switzerland a few months after Hitler's rise – remains problematic.

According to Robert E. Norton, one cannot escape the need to analyse the possible relationship between the poetic universe, between George's images and words and Nazi ideology. It is not possible to prove that George actually influenced Hitler directly. Likewise, it is not possible to prove that Hitler voluntarily appropriated the ideas of George and his disciples²³. But, says Norton, "Hitler in fact occupied, both in his own mind and in that of countless Germans at the time, a space – or, if you will, a realm – that had been

²² Elliott M., *Beyond Left and Right: The Poetic Reception of Stefan George and Rainer Maria Rilke, 1933-1945*, cit., p. 912.

²³ Peter Hoffmann writes: "Stefan George declared himself a revolutionary. When Ernst Robert Curtius visited him on 16 April 1911, George remarked: "Some people think that my books only contain artistic elements, not the will to create a new humanity. Quite wrong! *Algalal* is a revolutionary book". In 1919, again in conversation with Curtius, George described his books as prophetic, explaining that Geist always found the necessary solutions first, and that events lagged behind. But which solutions did George have in mind, and which events might be said to have resulted from them? Did he call for 'spirits from the vasty deep,' and did they come? Were these solutions, as certain terminological congruences suggest, proto- or para-National Socialist? Were they völkisch and antisemitic? If it is accepted that the Master controlled, authorized, and authenticated the principal published utterances of his friends, and if it is accepted that his friends could not be friends unless they essentially represented his views, then the most prominent examples of these views will be sufficiently representative. They reveal affinities between the ideas of the George Circle and 'völkisch nationalism'; between George's claim to political leadership and the Führer principle; and they point up shared assumptions regarding racial discrimination. They have to be set in the context of those remarks made by members of the Circle that highlight the fundamental differences between the views espoused in the Circle and those of National Socialism as well as the völkisch and the antisemitic movements" (Hoffmann P., 'The George Circle and National Socialism', in M. Lane, M. Martin (eds.), *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, Camden House, Rochester 2011, pp. 287-313: 287).

created in part by Stefan George”²⁴. Therefore, we could say that George played an important role in laying the intellectual foundations of a mixture of politics and aesthetics that would later be the basis of the new German order. Although it is difficult to accept, Norton concludes, if that was the case, Hitler then took the next step, turning all this into reality²⁵.

However, there is at least one other issue that needs to be mentioned. While it is true that there are similarities between the ideas of George Circle and *völkisch* nationalism, some of George’s younger friends became bitter enemies of the Nazis. This is the case of the Stauffenberg brothers who gave their lives in an attempt to overthrow Hitler. As Hoffmann writes, “They never abandoned their loyalty to their Master and to his belief that Germany was destined to save the world, or at least Europe. Claus Stauffenberg was still imbued with this belief at the time of his ill-fated coup d’état. Ascribing Stauffenberg’s deed to George’s teaching and influence, however, is mere speculation”²⁶.

The problem of relationship between the George’s thought and the Nazi reign can also be tackled, as Adorno does for instance, with respect to the dialectic between the autonomy and heteronomy of the work of art. The *Doppelcharakter* of art, its being autonomous but also a *fait social*, translates into unstable criteria: “Autonomous works provoke the verdict of social indifference and ultimately of being criminally reactionary; conversely, works that make socially univocal discursive judgments thereby negate art as well as themselves”²⁷. An immanent criticism, however, can overcome this alternative, as always in Adorno’s work. George deserves to be

²⁴ Norton R.E., ‘From Secret Germany to Nazi Germany: The Politics of Art before and after 1933’, in M. Lane, M. Rühl (eds.), *A Poet’s Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, Camden House, Rochester 2011, pp. 269-286; 279.

²⁵ On relationship between politics and aesthetics in Hitler, see Spotts F., *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, Overlook Press, Woodstock-New York 2003.

²⁶ Hoffmann P., ‘The George Circle and National Socialism’, cit., p. 304. According to Hoffmann, “Norton [...] places Claus Stauffenberg’s attempt to overthrow Hitler in the context of his Georgan discipleship; Karlauf [...], similarly, establishes a causal nexus between George’s thought and Stauffenberg’s actions in 1944; throughout his book ‘Geheimes’, Manfred Riedel, drawing on sources used by others more than a decade ago, suggests that the Stauffenberg brothers acted in the spirit of George’s work as well as his teaching; he fails to produce any concrete evidence. Ulrich Raulff, ‘Kreis ohne Meister. Stefan Georges Nachleben’ [...], argues that Stauffenberg remained indebted to George’s thought until the end of his life, but expressly stop short of ascribing his assassination attempt to George’s teaching” (ivi, p. 315); see Riedel M., *Gebeimes Deutschland: Stefan George und die Brüder Stauffenberg*, Böhlau, Cologne 2006; Karlauf Th., *Stefan George. Die entdeckung des Charisma. Biographie*, Blessing Verlag, München 2007; Karlauf Th., ‘Stauffenberg: The Search for a Motive’, in M. Lane, M. Rühl (eds.), *A Poet’s Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, Camden House, Rochester 2011, pp. 317-332; Raulff U., *Kreis ohne Meister. Stefan Georges Nachleben*, C.H. Beck, Munich 2009.

²⁷ Adorno Th.W., *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), cit., p. 248.

considered socially reactionary even before proposing the “maxims of his secret Germany”. However, he should be confronted with his own concept. As Adorno writes:

George’s self-staged aristocratic posturings contradict the self-evident superiority that they postulate and thereby fail artistically. The brutality of George’s social attitude, the result of failed identification, appears in his poetry in the violent acts of language that mar the purity of the self-sufficient work after which George aspired²⁸.

George’s poetry, from Adorno’s point of view, represents a certain way of making literature. Even when lyricism reaches its highest peaks, as in George’s case, the social and critical content of this literary production remains superficial. As always in Adorno, it is difficult here to separate the analysis of the works from a perspective that we could call, generically, philosophy of history. Adorno’s voice, however, remains a further testimony to George’s centrality in the literary and cultural landscape of early 20th century Europe²⁹.

4. *The Treachery of Word*

We have mentioned already that one of George’s main polemical targets is German poetry of his days, represented by naturalists and late Romantic epigons. Having abandoned an idea of poetry meant as an outlet of feelings, an instrument of immediate representation of emotions, George – also influenced by Mallarmé – chooses that of “Autonomous art, aristocratic in its isolation, which denies itself to any communicative intention”³⁰. As far as the relationship with French tradition is concerned, Mittner calls for caution. Compared to the influence that French poetry exerted on George, many things would have been said inexactly,

Also, because George was not too objective in his laudatory judgements but was more concerned with the person of the poet (for example, Villiers, Verlaine or Mallarmé) than with the value of his poetry; and above all because his pupils

²⁸ Ivi, pp. 248-249.

²⁹ It should be remembered that Stefan George was also a source of inspiration for the composers. For example, Anton Webern, between 1908 and 1909, wrote the double canon *Entflieht auf leichten Kähnen* op. 2 and the two cycles of Lieder op. 3 and op. 4 on texts by George. Adorno will do the same, writing the *Sechs Lieder aus “Der siebente Ring” von Stefan George* (1921-1922), the *Vier Gedichte von Stefan George für eine mittlere Stimme und Klavier* (1925-1928), the fragment of a draft for a lied (*Ohne Titel [Der lüfte schaukeln wie von neuen dingen <Stefan George>]*, 1943-1944) and the *Vier Lieder nach Gedichten von Stefan George für Singstimme und Klavier* (1944).

³⁰ Versari M., *La poesia di Stefan George. Strategie del discorso amoroso*, Carocci, Roma 2004, p. 10; my transl.

always endeavored to minimize the meaning of French experiences, seeing in them only the acquisition of purely technical expedients, such as the sound of vowels and the ‘audition colorée’³¹.

George arrives to a poetry that shuns the “banal tasting”, centered on an immediate harmony between the reader and the text, so as to privilege a “pure aesthetic enjoyment, for which natural beauty gives way to artistic beauty”. Poetry then offers itself as a way of escaping from feelings and individual personality, in the form of a “rhetoric of de-personalization”³² resulting from one’s own self-exclusion from time and history. The poet and his work must remain outside and above the crowd, they must live beyond their own time, consciously avoiding the most chaotic and noisy aspects of their own century: “Mechanicism, the mania for organization in which the individual is submerged, the cult of the machine, material civilization, the industrialization of life and, in art, the tendency, materialism intent on bringing social and cultural problems onto the scene and into the novels, an art applied and not aimed at itself”³³.

George’s poetry has poetry itself as its privileged object. This also justifies its historical importance. Such importance

Lies in having affirmed the value of poetry in itself, beyond and above personal experiences and psychological elements, in having felt and revealed the importance of the word and its decorum, in having raised the word to a new height where it surpasses its common task and becomes, with sound and accent in it, the means by which what is divine, and eternal is expressed³⁴.

Putting poetry itself at the center of poetry means decentralizing the role of the environment and nature³⁵. The latter – although present in George’s poetry in the form of artificial landscapes – is almost a disturbing element that we must overcome going beyond its two fundamental categories, namely space and time. George favors the artificial to the natural: either meant as artificial objects or artifice as a concept on which to base a coherent lexical system, which nonetheless stands as a way through which to seek, reach and reveal the essence of things, something to which – as De Angelis points out – the poet lends a sacred language: “His first two

³¹ Mittner L., *Storia della letteratura tedesca. Dal realismo alla sperimentazione (1820-1970)*, t. II. *Dal fine secolo alla sperimentazione (1890-1970)*, cit., pp. 956-957; my transl.

³² Versari M., *La poesia di Stefan George. Strategie del discorso amoroso*, cit., pp. 10-11.

³³ Amoretti G., *Storia della letteratura tedesca*, Giuseppe Principato, Milano-Messina 1970, p. 429; my transl.

³⁴ *Ibidem*; my transl.

³⁵ See Hannum H.G., *George and Benn: The Autumnal Vision*, in “PMLA”, 78/3 (1963), pp. 271-279.

collections are called *Hymnen* and *Pilgerfahrten* (Hymns and Pilgrimages) instead of Odes and Itineraries”³⁶.

George’s genius emerges in all its grandeur in the collection of poems *Das Jahr der Seele* [The Year of the Soul] of 1897, although also *Der Teppich des Lebens und die Lieder von Traum und Tod* [The Tapestry of Life and the Songs of Dream and Death] of 1900, *Der siebente Ring* [The Seventh Ring] of 1907, *Der Stern des Bundes* [The Star of the Covenant] of 1914 and *Das Neue Reich* [The Kingdom Come] of 1928 are fundamental in the construction of his poetic complex, one of the most interesting in the literature of the time. George’s case – as Maurizio Serra writes – is indeed very special. George was “The most neglected of the great German poets of his time, even in Italy where almost all his major and minor contemporaries were rediscovered”³⁷. George occupies this anomalous space by virtue of certain ideological choices, mainly of a poetic kind. This, as we have said, results partly from French influence on his poetry, partly from his very personal re-elaboration.

George’s lyric poetry is original both on a syntactic, semantic, lexical, and graphic level: capital letters are abolished, punctuation marks are reduced to a minimum, a new type of character is used which is not always easy to read, new words are coined but also old and rare words are used, vowels and consonants are chosen and distributed with a certain musical sense, rhythms and meters are constructed with particular precision. In short, “a language, a syntax, a form, a lyric for the chosen. An aristocratic poem shies of the public and external success, a voice coming out of a temple where the poet-priest sits alone and far away”³⁸.

The distance that George was careful to put between himself and the world finds its maximum expression in the difficulty to read and understand his lyrics. The obscurity that envelops most George’s poems is due, in particular, to the difficult poetic language he uses. As Margherita Versari reminds us, studies have revealed the main elements determining such obscurity: “Neologisms, selective and often archaizing vocabulary, syntactical brachylogy, extreme savings in punctuation and, last but not least, the abolition of capital letters for nouns – as is customary in German handwriting – impose an interpretative effort that distances the tasting of the verses”³⁹.

³⁶ De Angelis E., *Simbolismo e decadentismo nella letteratura tedesca*, p. 90; my transl.

³⁷ Serra M., *L'esteta armato. Il poeta-condottiero nell'Europa degli anni Trenta*, il Mulino, Bologna 1990, pp. 149-150; my transl.

³⁸ Amoretto G., *Storia della letteratura tedesca*, cit., pp. 429-430; my transl.

³⁹ Versari M., *La poesia di Stefan George. Strategie del discorso amoroso*, cit., p. 10; my transl.

These properties make George's poetry interpretable on several different levels. His poetry offers itself to multiple reading and decoding, also because of the evident and intentional polysematicity of his verses. In this regard, Giuseppe Bevilacqua has referred to a "forgetful impressionism", aimed at the dissolution of the logical-conceptual relationship that connects images and thoughts that are transformed "into vague perceptions and musical impulses"⁴⁰.

Here is one among the many possible examples:

[*Nun säume nicht die gaben zu erhaschen*]
Nun säume nicht die gaben zu erhaschen
Des scheidenden gepränges vor der wende
Die grauen wölken sammeln sich behende
Die nebel können bald uns überraschen.

Ein schwaches flöten von zerpfücktem aste
Verkündet dir dass lezte gute weise
Das land (eh es im nahen sturm vereise)
Noch hülle mit beglänzendem damaste.

Die wespen mit den goldengrünen schuppen
Sind von verschlossnen kelchen fortgeflogen
Wir fahren mit dem kahn in weitem bogen
Um bronzebraunen laubes inselgruppen.

[*Now do not lag in reaching for the boon*]
[Now do not lag in reaching for the boon
Of parting pomp, before the turn of tide,
The clouds are grey, they swiftly mass and glide,
Perhaps the fog will be upon us soon⁴¹.

A faint and fluted note from tattered tree
Tells you that goodness, ultimate and wise,
Will dip the land – before it feels the vise
Of freezing storms – in damask lambency.

The wasps with scales of golden-green have gone
From folded cups of flowers, and we swerve
Within our boat in widely sweeping curve
Around the isles of leaves in bronze and fawn]⁴².

We can notice an attempt to overcome the immediacy of meaning, almost an *analogon* of René Magritte's "treachery of images".

⁴⁰ Bevilacqua G., Presentation of George Stefan, *Poesie*, Italian trans., Le Lettere, Firenze 2003, p. 6; my transl.

⁴¹ George S., 'Nun säume nicht die gaben zu erhaschen', in S. George, *Das Jahr der Seele* (1897), Hofenberg, Berlin 2017, p. 12.

⁴² George S., 'Now do not lag in reaching for the boon', in S. Stefan, *The Works of Stefan George*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill 1974, p. 83.

Here, however, treachery is embodied in words. The derealizing, maybe distorting, but nevertheless bewitching and seductive effect is grafted into a procedure of putting logics under continuous checkmate. It is not surprising, then, that Bevilacqua suggests a triple reading of George's verses: "first to perceive the sound and rhythmic reality in its targeted autonomy, then to recover the conceptual material that lurks between the joins and finally to assemble the two levels and thus reach a stereoscopic vision of the text in its integrity"⁴³.

Having considered Bevilacqua's interpretation, it may be worth now to shift our attention to a further reading, this time strictly philosophical, which was proposed by Heidegger. As we know already, Heidegger recognizes in some examples of German lyric poetry the models that could lead to understanding the realization of the truth in the form, which, for the philosopher, constitutes the essence and meaning of the work of art ("Festgestelltsein der Wahrheit in die Gestalt" [Establishment of the truth in the form]).

In his essay on *The Nature of Language*, Heidegger repeatedly dwells on George's lyric poetry, and particularly on his 1919 composition entitled *Das Wort* [The Word], included in the *Das Neue Reich* collection:

Wund er von ferne oder traum
Bracht ich an meines landes saum.

Und harrte bis die graue nom
Den namen fand in ihrem bom -

Drauf konnt ichs greifen dicht und stark
Nun blüht und glänzt es durch die mark...

Einst langt ich an nach guter fahrt
Mit einem kleinod reich und zart

Sie suche lang und gab mir kund'
<So schläft hier nichts auf tiefem grund>

Worauf es meiner hand entrann
Und nie mein land den schatz gewann...

So lernt ich traurig den verzieht:
Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht⁴⁴.

⁴³ Bevilacqua G., Presentation of George Stefan, *Poesie*, cit., p. 6; my transl.

⁴⁴ George S., 'Das Wort', in S. George, *Das Neue Reich* (1928), Hofenberg, Berlin 2015, p. 64.

[I carried to my country's shore
Marvels and dreams, and waited for

The tall and twilit norn to tell
The names she found within the well.

Then I could grasp them, they were mine,
And here I see them bloom and shine...

Once I had made a happy haul
And won a rich and fragile jewel.

She peered and pondered: "Nothing lies
Below," she said, "to match your prize."

At this it glided from my hand
And never graced my native land.

And so I sadly came to see:
Without the word no thing can be]⁴⁵.

The final verse of this poem ("Kein ding sei wo das wort gebricht" [Without the word no thing can be]) especially attracts Heidegger's attention. He regards it as an example of how the poet is able to bring to words the experience that makes language in an authentic way, which is as poetic as saying⁴⁶. Where the word is missing, where it is missing, there can be no "thing", since it is waiting to be named by the word. Poetic language can thus tell us something more than common and ordinary language: it can reveal the relationship between word and thing, or rather between the essence of language and the essence of things.

According to Costantino Esposito, while analyzing George's poetry Heidegger identifies the traces of the experience of what is essentially "poetic", that is, the relationship between the word and the thing:

In order to experience language, we must discover the power of the word, which is never limited to being a simple sign or indication of things, but is what, by giving the name, 'only procures the being to the thing'. And therefore, in order to ask what language is, it must already be addressed to us. We, the speakers, are not the subjects who produce the words; rather, we find the words, but we can find them because we have listened to them⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ George S., 'Now do not lag in reaching for the boon', in S. Stefan, *The Works of Stefan George*, cit., p. 408.

⁴⁶ See Heidegger M., 'The Nature of Language', in M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (1959), Harper and Row, New York 1982.

⁴⁷ Esposito C., *Introduzione a Heidegger*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017, pp. 231-232; my transl.

The being of things, both understood in an existential and a preaching sense, coincides with the word or language, where language is not simply meant as a communication device, but rather corresponds to the way through which the epiphany of being is realized. In this sense, language is really the “house of being”, in the sense that being can only manifest itself in the presence of language. As Gadamer would later put it, the “being” that can be understood is language. For Heidegger, the criterion of originality of the work of art is encapsulated in its ability to “open a world” and to establish truth. It is the truth of being, a truth without foundation, unfathomable as an abyss, but which manifests itself in the dimension of listening to the poetic word. So, “in the age of nihilism, it is up to poets to *say* [...] the extreme ‘lack’ of our age, showing it as the hidden truth of being itself”⁴⁸. Truth is thus *Lichtung*, *alétheia*, a game of oscillation between opening and closing, light and shadow, presence, and absence. This game is emblematic in poetry, particularly in the poetry of authors such as Hölderlin, Rilke and, indeed, George.

Interestingly, Heidegger’s point of view finds perfect correspondence in George’s verses:

George’s poem claims to become alive because the meaning and being of life is always already inherent in the very language it speaks. [...] The poem thus relocates the relationship between linguistic sign and material referent within the interior of the sign itself where it figures as the movement of presence and absence, signifier and signified. Truth (about the carpet, the poem, about life) materializes only after the reader understands that there is nothing beyond language [...]. The reader must finally regard language itself to be the truth both the poem and the carpet promised to reveal. Language is Being, Being is meaning, meaning is language. The circle closes⁴⁹.

5. Epilogue

One may say that George’s poetry is marked by the demon of research or by the restlessness of discovery and seems to have the essence, the soul, and the spirit as its own purpose.

What immediately emerges from George’s lyrics – the lyrics of a poet who, like few others, inflamed German youth at the beginning of the twentieth century – is the abysmal mystery and the unbridgeable distance between the author and the reader. His verses are

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 224; my transl.

⁴⁹ Strathausen C., *Of Circles and Riddles: Stefan George and the ‘Language Crisis’ around 1900*, in “The German Quarterly”, 76/4 (2003), pp. 411-425: 419.

like “the cry that bursts out involuntarily through clenched lips, the ultimate confession that is whispered with head averted in a darkened room”⁵⁰. Approaching his profoundly and dramatically intimate poetry produces a kind of apnea that keeps us forced on its threshold. Despite the fact that George’s activity pre-dates the turning point Thomas Harrison (1910)⁵¹, this “spiritual question” can already be found in the German poet. In this sense, George’s quest is the quest for a supreme sense that surpasses and dominates the world of things.

To remain faithful to Lukács’ interpretation, George’s lyrics has little to do with the production of a “mass feeling”, since these songs “were, in the ideal sense, written for just one person, and only one person can read them, withdrawn and alone”⁵². It is a form of writing that results from, and is done in loneliness, both in the sense of a loneliness that becomes a poetic word and in the sense of a poetic word that expresses and communicates loneliness. A chiaroscuro nuance and a blurred intonation crosses George’s literary production, in an almost impressionistically luminous gallery of images.

His poetry attracts the solitary reader in the magma of its own in-definitions. The man who lives outside the plot of social ties but, despite this, caresses the possibility of approaching another human being and of being able to belonging to her, though in the very short duration of a glance, a handshake or a dance of hearts. This dream, however, disappears instantly because “two human beings can never become one”⁵³.

Surprisingly, however, as Lukács notices, George’s poetry is also the poetry of human relations, friendships, approaches, and intellectual understanding. The relationship is enkindled and lives in a delimited, transient, fragile space-time, where the distance between souls becomes a small crack that tends towards its own dissolution and, even if only momentary, becomes contact and union. And “when there is a parting, one knows that something is no more –

⁵⁰ Lukács G., ‘The New Solitude and Its Poetry. Stefan George’ (1908), in G. Lukács, *Soul and Form* (1911), MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1974, pp. 79-90: 84.

⁵¹ According to Thomas Harrison, the tragic ring made up of “the silence of the language/silence of art/tragedy from which the art/tragedy it comes” became self-aware around 1910, the year of publication of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, of Lukács’ *Die Seele und die Formen*, Kandinsky’s reflections on the “spiritual” in art, the research of Arnold Schönberg and expressionist painters, and the poem *Silentium*, in which the Russian poet Ossip Mandel’shtam equates music with the original silence from which the word is born and to which it returns.

⁵² Lukács G., ‘The New Solitude and Its Poetry. Stefan George’ (1908), in G. Lukács, *Soul and Form* (1911), cit., p. 86.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 88.

but never what it was that has now ceased to be”⁵⁴. What George is looking for is a dialogue between one soul and another, through forms and images.

The strong imaginative and symbolic connotations that characterizes George’s lyricism can be traced back to the intimate need to free one’s soul from the will and bring it to a dimension of enchanted contemplation, for in the image every impulse is released⁵⁵. The use of images and symbols is closely connected to the question the possibilities of language, where language’s essence is not only to make the being flare, but also to give it an image. At the same time, however, this almost objective evidence – this greater presence – manifests itself in an opposite illusory exhaustiveness. Like a wave, the poetic word approaches the being of things never to reach it but just to withdraw it again.

In harmony with Kandinsky’s visionary and prophetic spirit in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, George’s “symbolic snapshots”⁵⁶ – engaged in an exhausting race aimed to conquest the Spirit before witnessing its disappearance – seem to foreshadow the course of the twentieth century; a century in which splendor, glory, destruction, misfortune, the cult of life and the cult of death are intertwined in a single dramatic plot. Splendor, which is followed by the fall, a dream that is dispersed by a distant cry, to the point of leaving naked before death, in short. George constructs his verses with rigor and precision, and we can wonder whether they express coldness or involvement, detachment, or emotional warmth. In this regard, Lukács proposes the following answer:

He is cold because the notes he strikes are so delicate that not everyone can hear them; because his tragedies are such that the average reader of today does not yet feel them as tragic, and therefore believes that the poems in question were written only for the sake of their exquisite rhymes; because the sentiments expressed in ordinary poetry play no part in his life⁵⁷.

George’s symbolic and linguistic apparatus gives rise to an explosion of images which are absolutely unattainable in their essentiality. These images follow one another harmoniously, even if they seem to defy any logic of meaning. Everything, in George’s poetry, rages, shakes, and burns.

The darkness and sadness of the night is looming, a desolating and yet evocative dimension of silence and of the turbulence of the

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ See Klages L., *Stefan George*, Georg Bondi, Berlin 1902.

⁵⁶ Lukács G., ‘The New Solitude and Its Poetry. Stefan George’ (1908), in G. Lukács, *Soul and Form* (1911), cit., p. 83.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 80.

soul. This soul is what George's poetry wants to awaken, what he appeals to: a soul escaping into silence and solitude and sheltering into the lyrical expression of a truth that is hidden behind the perfect and mute form.

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