

George, Stefan

Life and work of Stefan George. Stefan George (1868-1933) was a German poet, translator, and editor, who was born in Bingen, in Prussia. Already as a teen ager he was actively creating poetry, some of it in a private language he invented; thus representative, already, of George's drive toward the pure and hermetic in language. In the late 1880's he found himself for a while in Paris, where he met the eminent poet Paul Verlaine, and became a member of Stephane Mallarme's famed Tuesday soirees, at which many leading French poets appeared. Upon returning to Germany he founded a literary review—*Blaetter fuer die Kunst; Art Journal*—which was to become a style setter for the new and arcane wave of German post Romantic lyric. (It might more precisely be said that the aesthetic forged in the Art Journal was one in which the Symbolist movement—which George was introduced to in Paris—was grafted onto the most recent versions of Romantic poetry. A cult of poetry was under construction here, in which George came increasingly to think of himself as high priest.)

The aesthetic of George and his Circle. Around him George promoted the creation of a Kreis, a Circle, of devotees of him and his work; devotees who were expected to call George Meister, and among whom were a few of the best of German poetry. George boldly formulated the qualifications for entry into the poetic priesthood of pure language: 'in poetry...anyone still desirous to 'say' or 'bring about' anything is not worthy even to enter the forecourt of art.' (The reigning mode of this circle was homosexuality, which was George's life-slant, and the purity of poetry seems here to do with the non-parturitive; virginity on all sides, enforced, furthermore, by George's strong recommendation that all the homosexuals in his *Kreis* should remain chaste, like him.) The exclusivity of this *Kreis* was not, however, a sign of indifference to the world situation evolving around every member. George, the aesthete, was also a prophet, by self-proclamation, and in the years during which he saw his country wiped out in WWI, swept into a dull and weak Weimar Democracy, between the two wars, and finally drawn toward an alarming take over of civic life by a prophesied violent solution, was deeply sensitive both to his country's need for a 'way out' of civil chaos and economic, and to the horror of the impending solution—he died in 1933.

The work of George. Consider two poem cycles, *Algabal (Helagabalus)* (1892), and *Das Neue Reich (The New Empire)* (1928), which enter George's reflection on the condition of life itself and of his own world. The first sequence concerns the effete and self-indulgent Roman Emperor, Helagabalus, The work shows a fascination with the ultimate in narcissism—a king who can only relate to a marble statue, being incapable of human relations. And ultimately isolated. The later poem sequence, *The New Empire*, anatomizes the new Germany of the late twenties, which has suffered nothing but defeats, and which is boiling to promote some overwhelming and catastrophic revenge triumph. 'The poet in times of tumult,' written in 1921, anticipates the coming of a powerful leader surrounded by committed followers. Many such prophetic poems crowd the pages of *The New Empire*, some predicting precise events, like the substitution of the swastika for the cross. All these later poems appear to speak for a nation humiliated, hopeless, potentially violent, and closing in on itself

Reading

Primary source reading

The Works of Stefan George, trans. Marx and Morwitz, 1974.

Secondary source reading

Norton, Robert, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle*, 2002.

Further reading

Rieckmann, Jens, *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George*, 2007.

Original language reading

Karlauf, Thomas, *Die Entdeckung des Charisma*, 2007.

Suggested paper topics

Stefan George and his aristocratic artistic Kreis embraced certain plotters—von Stauffenberg at their head—who attempted to assassinate Hitler. At the same time George has been accused of Nazi sympathies. Where do you think the truth lies, concerning George's attitudes toward the Nazis?

As a teen ager, George invented a private language of his own, using words and phrases of his own making. What traces of that youthful impulse do you see in George's mature work as a poet?

Excerpt poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/.../stefan-george-you-like-flames

Thanks

The summer field is parched with evil fire,
And from a shoreland trail of trodden clover
I saw my head in waters thick with mire
That wrath of far-off thunder dimmed with red.
The mornings after frantic nights are dread:
The cherished gardens turned to stifling stall,
Untimely snow of bane the trees filmed over,
And upward rose the lark with hopeless call.

Then through the land on weightless soles you stray,
And bright it grows with colors you have laid,
You bid us pluck the fruits from joyous spray,
And rout the shadows lurking in the night...
Did I not weave-you and your tranquil light-
This crown in thanks, who ever could have known
That more than sun, long days for me you rayed,
And evenings more than any starry zone.