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| Altenberg, Peter (1859-1919) |
| Richard Engländer |
| Born in Vienna on March 9, 1859, the Jewish-Austrian poet Peter Altenberg (birth name: Richard Engländer) became a literary sensation with his characteristically telegraphic writing style. The purpose of this narrative form, he explained, was to capture *Kleinigkeit* (the smallness) of modern life—fleeting, ordinary, and unembellished. His so-called prose poems went on to garner the admiration of contemporary artists, architects and writers who belonged to the Young Vienna. They included, among others, Hermann Bahr, Gustav Klimt, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Karl Kraus and Arthur Schnitzler. Suffering from pneumonia, Altenberg died in Vienna on January 8, 1919.  Opposed to the assignment and expectation of specific social roles in a conservative Austro-Hungarian Empire, Altenberg took on a nom de plume to redefine his cultural identity in the image of the oppressed, including children, women and non-Europeans. This act of political resistance in writing became a lifelong commitment to exposing the divided and hypocritical world around him, although some of his works portrayed those in suffering with a certain degree of eroticization and prejudice. By focusing on moments of ambiguity, contradiction, monotony and triviality in social interaction, he exposed the clash of cultures between old provincialism and new cosmopolitanism in contemporary Vienna while pushing new limits of mimetic representation. |
| Born in Vienna on March 9, 1859, the Jewish-Austrian poet Peter Altenberg (birth name: Richard Engländer) became a literary sensation with his characteristically telegraphic writing style. The purpose of this narrative form, he explained, was to capture *Kleinigkeit* (the smallness) of modern life—fleeting, ordinary, and unembellished. His so-called prose poems went on to garner the admiration of contemporary artists, architects and writers who belonged to the Young Vienna. They included, among others, Hermann Bahr, Gustav Klimt, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Karl Kraus and Arthur Schnitzler. Suffering from pneumonia, Altenberg died in Vienna on January 8, 1919.  Opposed to the assignment and expectation of specific social roles in a conservative Austro-Hungarian Empire, Altenberg took on a nom de plume to redefine his cultural identity in the image of the oppressed, including children, women and non-Europeans. This act of political resistance in writing became a lifelong commitment to exposing the divided and hypocritical world around him, although some of his works portrayed those in suffering with a certain degree of eroticization and prejudice. By focusing on moments of ambiguity, contradiction, monotony and triviality in social interaction, he exposed the clash of cultures between old provincialism and new cosmopolitanism in contemporary Vienna while pushing new limits of mimetic representation.  File: Altenberg\_Image1.jpg  Altenberg is considered a paradoxical figure in fin-de-siècle Austria, a writer whose self-proclaimed attempt to be a ‘Mann ohne Concession’ (man without concession) manifests itself in a double bind of moral idealism and social pathology. Gustav Jagerspacher’s portrait of the middle-aged poet in front of an advertisement for the Apollo Variety Theatre offers a glimpse of this acute tension between conformism and self-determination. Nervously walking down the street at night and with long, skeletal fingers holding onto his hat, Altenberg shows signs not only of a Baudelairean flâneur who absorbs every detail of his vibrant community, but also of a profound uncertainty that borders on physical illness and melancholy. Marked by such hypersensitivities to the world, Altenberg’s writings amount to works written by an ‘anti-modern modernist,’ a ‘misogynist feminist,’ an ‘anti-Semitic Jew,’ and a ‘drug-addicted health fanatic.’ And yet, it is the difficulty of describing Altenberg in one way or another that illustrates his artistic genius in Austrian cultural history. Key Works: Wie ich es sehe (1896)  Ashantee, first translated into English in 2007 (1897)  Was der Tag mir zuträgt (1900)  Der Nachlass, an autobiography published posthumously (1925) Music inspired by the author: Berg, Alban (1912) Altenberg-Lieder: Fünf Orchesterlieder nach Ansichtskarten Texten von Peter Altenberg. |
| Further reading:  (Barker)  (Nehring) |