**Stefan (Etienne) George (1868-1933)**

Stefan George was one of the most original and influential poets to have written in German in the last one hundred and fifty years. During his life, some regarded him as the greatest German poet after Goethe, and not a few thought he was the greatest one of all. Yet, for a variety of reasons, George almost completely disappeared from view shortly after his death, and only recently has he been rediscovered by a wider reading public. Notably, however, this renewed interest in George has focused less on his poetry than on his life, and in particular on the nature of his sexuality and his political views. No matter how one evaluates these aspects of his extra-literary significance, George can rightfully claim our attention as the author of some of the most remarkable and powerful verse in the German language.

**Timeline of Life**

1868 Born Etienne George in Büdesheim

1889 Meets Stéphane Mallarmé and adopts first name “Stefan”

1902 Meets Maximilian Kronberger (“Maximin”)

1910 The notion of “the Secret Germany” first appears

1933 Dies

**Selective Timeline of Works Published**

1890 *Hymnen* (poetry)

1897 *Das Jahr der Seele* (poetry)

1907 *Der Siebente Ring* (poetry)

1914 *Der Stern des Bundes* (poetry)

1928 *Das neue Reich* (poetry)

The story of George’s life is compelling. Born in 1868 in Büdesheim on the Southwestern bank of the Rhine river, George grew up in an atmosphere that was dominated both by the Catholic church and by the French language and culture of his ancestors who had moved there from France only two generations before. Indeed, George was baptised as “Etienne”—the locals of the town where he grew up pronounced his last name in the French manner as well, referring to him as “Herr Shorsh.” Only after he had met the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé in Paris in 1889 did he decide to call himself—partly in homage to the revered master, and partly to establish himself as a distinctly German presence—“Stefan.” The encounter was fateful in other ways as well: George returned to Germany with the resolve to bring the Symbolist creed to his compatriots. Eventually, he not only transformed the understanding and practice of poetry in Germany, he also sought to refashion German culture as a whole. By the time he died on December 4, 1933, he was one of the most famous and revered figures in the land.

No one could have predicted such success. George’s first books of poetry, the *Hymnen* (1890), *Pilgerfahrten* (1891) and *Algabal* (1892) were privately published and issued in editions of only one hundred copies. The poems they contained closely conformed to the Symbolist code of formidable linguistic difficulty: their exotic vocabulary and abstruse images seemed designed less to invite readers into their realm than to keep them at bay. It was, as he elsewhere declared, “art for art”: not so much art created merely for the sake of being beautiful, but art intended to be self-sufficient, existing separate from, indeed ideally as a substitute for, ordinary reality. Even visually, the books presented an air of remoteness and detachment: George flouted many of the conventions of German orthography and grammar—he left all nouns except names uncapitalized, punctuation was minimal and spelling often eccentric—and the typefaces he used lacked all ornamentation and seemed chosen to convey a decisive break with the past. As it turned out, this cultivated exclusivity contributed, perhaps paradoxically, to George’s appeal: the esoteric purity of his vision increasingly came to be seen as the only viable, and certainly the most attractive, alternative to a debased and degraded world.

Initially, the world George wanted to supplant with his own counter-creation was solely, or at least largely, the literary one: Naturalism he regarded as an obscene offense to good taste, and every other form of contemporary poetic expression fared no better in his judgment. But what began as the effort to reform what in George’s eyes was a degenerate literary culture gradually transformed into a broad assault on virtually all aspects of modern life. In his next volumes of poetry, *Das Jahr der Seele* (1897), *Teppich des Lebens* (1899) and especially in the monumental *Der Siebente Ring* (1907), George turned ever more explicitly toward imagining a sphere set apart from the squalor and banality he saw engulfing the contemporary world—a separate, rarified realm reserved solely for himself and those who thought as he did—while condemning with ever greater ferocity and bitterness everything else. *Der Siebente Ring* contains poems that suggest that the only remedy to the ills of the world was the elimination of the better part of its inhabitants—“Your very number is sacrilege” one poem states, referring to the inhabitants of a prosperous but morally corrupt city—and others that seem to predict that such a fate was indeed in store for them. At the same time, those privileged few who proved worthy of salvation were bound by ties of reverence and love for their master and leader, and held together by their shared faith in the new god of their private religion, called “Maximin.”

This positive vision offered in *Der Siebente Ring* stands as the poetic correlative of the relationships George had formed with numerous friends over the preceding two decades. George never explicitly acknowledged his homosexuality. Apart from the legal prohibition of “unnatural fornication” formulated in the notorious Paragraph 175 of the German Legal Code, there were of course countless social and practical reasons to conceal, or at least veil, one’s sexual orientation in the first half of the twentieth cenutry. But the predominantly homosocial character of his exclusive circle of his admirers, collaborators and friends, as well as the imagery and themes of many of his poems, left little doubt about the direction of his erotic energy. Indeed, at the physical and ideational center of *Der Siebente Ring,* in the fourth of its seven sections, stands the literal apotheosis of a young boy. The image of Maximin was the literary transfiguration of a certain Maximilian Kronberger, an adolescent George had met in 1902 when Kronberger was 14 and who died suddenly of illness two years later. Stunned with grief at the loss, George attempted to overcome Maximilian’s physical death with the spiritual, or at least poetic, immortality of Maximin. From then on, George elaborated an ever more detailed vision of a closed community of adherents wholly devoted to a creed presided over by a vatic leader, who demanded absolute loyalty to himself and recognition of his divine creation. It was here, in what became known as his “Secret Germany,” that George’s conception of an alternate domain achieved its fullest form.

George would publish only two more volumes of poetry in the twenty-six years after *Der Siebente Ring*. In 1914, only a few months before the outbreak of World War I, *Der Stern des Bundes* appeared that was, in essence, the codification of the rules governing his society apart. Finally, in 1928, the year he turned sixty, his last book, *Das neue Reich*, received the kind of rapt reception enjoyed only by cultural heroes, religious leaders—or politicians. When the National Socialists came to power under Adolf Hitler on January 30, 1933, ten months before George’s death, many initially believed that the Third Reich was the realization of the values and ideals George had espoused all his life. It quickly became apparent that Nazi Germany was not in fact the “Secret Germany” he had envisioned. But in the decades following 1945, the distinctions setting them apart seemed less salient than their congrueties, and George and his world largely sank from sight.

Bibliography

Melissa Lane and Martin Ruehl, eds. (2011) *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Kreis*, Rochester: Camden House.

Robert E. Norton (2002) *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press..

Jens Rieckmann, ed. (2005) *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George*, Rochester: Camden House.