STEFPAN 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 1863, 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
STEFAN GEORGE AND THE GERMAN LYRIC

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 entleihen hier ihre maasse; die übriggebliebenen der wirklichkeitschule glauben sich in den schönheitsmantel kleiden zu müssen und die hinter 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 zahnfachen verdünnung öffentlichen und behördlichen beifall. Damit ist ein teil der Sendung erfüllt.”

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 rimes abab or abba being the favorite. His most recent volume consists largely of poems in unrhimed lines of five feet, mostly iambic pentameters. Whatever may be the deficiencies of his work through over-artificity 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.

1 Auslese aus den Blättern für die Kunst, ii, 22.
2 Auslese, ii, 15.
3 Published 1892 ff. by Bondi in Berlin.
5 George’s reserved attitude toward the masses is tempered by the admission that at times flashes of inspiration can be seen in the humberman.
   “Nur manchmal bricht aus ihnen edles Feuer,
   Und offebart dir dass ihr band nicht schände.”
   Teppich des Lebens, Vorspiel, p. xiv.

6 Manchmal kommt es dass in einem volke weisheiten dünmmern für die
das neue wort und die neue geste noch nicht ausgebildet sind. Das sind
dann in der tiefe gewühle erze die nicht ans licht geförder werden können.” Auslese, ii, p. 21.

7 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 togetsgaten 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, Berichterstatterei” 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 lyrismus der zufällig in die gesprächsform gegossen wird.”

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 behelen der vers habe die schauspielkunst vernichtet; man gewöhnte sich rhythmisch zu sprechen gleichsam um entschuldigung bittend und verlor damit jeden festen grund.” And so he sees the hopes for a rebirth of 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 co-operation 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, aesthetic movements and to recitation (“abrichtung der stimme zum hersagen der neuen rhythmischen gebilden,” 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. 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 Wettspiel, 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 streweing 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 ant: 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.

"Auslese, II, 14.

"Auslese, II, 42.

"Auslese, II, 42.
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 Choruses 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.)

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. Lewisohn's The Spirit of Modern German Literature also contain short articles:


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 literateurs 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 vergisse auch nicht dass die grenze des erreichbaren noch fern ist und dass die von diesen kreise abgesprengten die sich noch nicht zur gänzlichen entwidrigung ihrer muse inschliessen 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 zurueckzuziehen, und alle die es mit unserer kunst und bildung ernst meinen, werden sich der gelben Blätter-regel aus der zeit ihrer morgenfuehre 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.'"

None of the followers of George has done more than remotely approach him. Hugo von Hofmannsthals 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 Lochter and Ernst Gundulf, of whom the first prepared most of the decorations for the Blätter für die Kunst and the published works. How

Auszugs, iii, Vorrede.