

# H-Net Reviews

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Robert Norton. *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. 847 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3354-2.

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Every attempt has been made to follow George's own typographical conventions where technologically possible. Possible errors or confusions are due to technological limitations and not author errors. -Ed.

Stefan George (1868-1933) and his Circle are ciphers for powerful effects upon German public life. Stefan George's poetry helped to form modern literary German; Rainer Maria Rilke at the age of twenty-two looked up to the "Meister Stefan George." Stefan George's disciples and friends in time occupied important chairs in German universities in literature, history, psychology, economics and published some of the most influential works in their fields.

Robert Norton at the University of Notre Dame has done what no European scholar outside Stefan George's Circle has undertaken: he has produced a comprehensive biography of the man, poet, teacher and leader. Norton is profoundly familiar with Stefan George and his entire cultural ambiance, first in Paris and then in Germany, with the intellectual and political German ambiance from the 1880s to 1933 as well as the Circle's more immediate ramifications. Norton constantly probes and analyses the poet's character through his poems, letters, and relationships with his friends. He uses irony to maintain a detached distance but frequently also to express his disapproval of one or another episode.

The lack of a full biography of Stefan George by a scholar who is not a friend of the poet or well affected toward his ideas has been, in part, a matter of access to sources, indeed of the continuing cult of secrecy in the Secret Germany for decades after the poet's death. The poet did everything in his power to control the image of himself and his work that he wanted the outside world to have. In 1930 he had an uncritically devoted

follower and friend, Friedrich Wolters, produce an authorized history of his life and his Circle.[1] Not a single line in it appeared without the Master's approval. Another close friend, Ernst Morwitz, wrote an account of Stefan George's poetry.[2] George's friend and testamentary heir, Robert Boehringer, assembled many further details under the title *Mein Bild von Stefan George*, with a companion volume of photographs.[3] Other friends who published recollections include the economist Edgar Salin, the sculptor Ludwig Thormaehlen, and the philosopher Edith Landmann-Kalischer.[4] In 1972 three scholars in collaboration published a day-to-day chronology of the Master's life.[5] But only in the later 1970s did the papers that Robert Boehringer had inherited become generally accessible in the Stefan George Archiv in Stuttgart. The Castrum Peregrini archive in Amsterdam also preserves a great body of Georgeana; the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach holds Karl Wolfskehl's papers; and Friedrich Gundolf's papers are in London University's Institute of Germanic Studies. The papers of one of Stefan George's close friends, Ernst Morwitz, will remain closed for years to come. Persons who were close to the poet long protected his papers from scrutiny. This was partly routine among the initiates of an exclusive semi-secret society; but it had additionally seemed necessary because of all-too obvious affinities between ideas propagated by Stefan George and the National Socialists. Friends and custodians exerted pressure to suppress anything critical about the Master and his Circle. Failure to respond in an approved manner could lead to ostracism, denial of access to archival sources and refusal of interviews.

The title of this important biography deliberately sig-

nals what Stefan George systematically pursued: a small band of devoted followers sworn to his views of humanity, culture, influence, and power. After groping experiments with symbolist, anarchist and ostensibly apolitical beginnings in the 1880s, Stefan George soon became interested in replacing the bourgeois society that he despised with his own heroic male society (pp. 156, 160, 194). He became a poet and teacher with frankly political objectives by the time the First World War began, and he played the role continuously until his death on December 4, 1933.

Norton takes Stefan George through the stages of the construction of his spiritual-intellectual kingdom, from uncertain beginnings including an early wavering between becoming a French poet or a German one, through the gradual realization of his abilities and calling. By 1899 George had established his place as a German poet with an international reputation, combining poetic creativity with friendships and with his unorthodox erotic impulses. By 1908 he had severed unsatisfactory intellectual liaisons and become a pedagogue in his own right. He was ready for a further stage to which Norton gives the comprehensive heading "Politician: 1909-1918." The last phase, "Prophet: 1919-1933," is the culmination of the poet's life, and of Norton's analysis of his role. It is George's ambivalent yet purposeful and relentless ancestorship of The New Reich—the title of his last collection of poems published in 1928.

By the beginning of the twentieth century Stefan George had discovered the theme of the Secret Germany as the focus of his life's work. In the 1870s Paul de Lagarde had lamented the condition of his country and wished for a sworn "secretly open union which planned and toiled for the great tomorrow." [6] In 1904 Stefan George and his friend Karl Wolfskehl proclaimed "that every fruitful—every liberating thought originated in secret circles (cenacles)." George and Wolfskehl continued in the same piece to say that the great contemporary masses retained no trace of the vital forces of a nation, and that the initiated would not object if the contemporary intellectual overlooked the millions as if they did not exist since he knew them quite sufficiently through a few specimens, just as in antiquity no informed person objected to the treatment of "slaves and domestic animals (pecus et mancipium)." [7] George liked to refer to the Circle of his friends as "the state." The emphasis was on the sense of Socrates' response to Glaucon's remark that the state they were discussing existed only in their words: "In heaven perhaps it has been erected as a model for him who will see and for the seeing who will follow it. There

is no difference whether it exists or will exist anywhere; for only for the sake of this state the seeing will act, and never for the sake of any other." [8]

After the two world wars, the Circle's secretive elitism became an embarrassment. Stefan George's anti-Jewish utterances made it worse. In 1911 George told Ernst Robert Curtius that he never allowed Jews to become the majority in his Circle. He approved Friedrich Wolters' racial slurs against Karl Wolfskehl in the authorized biography. [9] George's friend Kurt Hildebrandt quoted the Master as saying that he wished at least to avoid any antagonism between himself and the National Socialists—"except for his holding with the best of his Jewish followers." But Hildebrandt wrote in the same letter: "As early as during the war St. G. taught [us] that the Jews were decomposing the political and the intellectual state. [ . . . ] He was increasingly dissatisfied with their attitude. In 1932 he told me the Jews ought not to be surprised if he joined the N.S." [10] The Master said to Edith Landmann in Basel in September 1933, concerning the persecutions of Jews, that he stood by his Jewish friends and that their presence in his Circle proved his open-mindedness. But he added: "I will tell you something: when I think of what Germany will have to face in the next fifty years, then the Jewish matter in particular is not very important to me." [11] Stefan George's statements make clear that, on the contrary, he understood the central importance of anti-Semitism in Hitler's ideology and practice. His supporters also understood it and discussed it with the Master.

In May 1933 the Hitler government wanted to co-opt the Master for the Prussian Academy for the Arts. George declined the offer but authorized the government to say: "I do not at all deny being the forefather of the new national movement and also do not put aside my intellectual collaboration. What I was able to do for it I have done—the youth who gather around me to-day share my view .. the fairy tale of my aloofness has accompanied me in my entire life—this only appears to be so to unaided eyes." [12]

In the poem "DER DICHTER IN ZEITEN DER WIRREN" ("THE POET IN TROUBLED TIMES"), the only one of his poems in which the word *voelkisch* occurs (first published in 1921 and in 1928 included in the volume of poems entitled *DAS NEUE REICH*), Stefan George called for

A young tribe [ . . . ] Who out of sacred dreaming doing enduring Brings forth the one the only one who helps ... Who breaks the chains sweeps order On the

fields of rubble—flogs those gone astray home Into eternal right—where great is great again Master once more master—discipline once more discipline—he fixes The true sign onto the national banner He leads through storm and horrifying signals Of early morning dawn his loyal troop to labour On the waking day and plants the New Realm.[13]

After the poem's re-publication in 1928, it seemed clear to many, not only to National Socialists, that Stefan George was referring to Adolf Hitler. Readers who knew that the poem had been published in 1921 and written probably as early as 1918 were even more impressed by the Master's prophetic power. Stefan George was a voice of his time, while imprecating a thousand curses upon it, and he expressed a pervasive although by no means universal mood in Germany when he called for a strong leader.

Norton's emphasis on the hard and cruel side of Stefan George raises the question of how much weight ought to be given to the testimony of the poet's friends and disciples. They testify to the Master's infinite kindness and wisdom in which they felt themselves warmly and securely enveloped. Words such as love, flower and happiness are as prominent or more prominent in George's poems than master, murder, victory, destroy, force and dead. Norton sees murderous mayhem and violence advocated in many of George's poems; using the poet's own words, he dismisses, as George did, the "flattering sweet tones" and arcadian murmurings as deliberate deception (p. 363). After reading Norton, there is certainly no need to read more of what the poet's enemies had to say. But perhaps the differing views of the Master's friends are too summarily dismissed.

Norton states in his preface that "it was not the poet George who originally interested me when I set out to write this biography," but his role in helping to make the monstrous crimes of Hitler's National Socialists thinkable and possible: "If this book has any larger purpose, then it will be that it succeeds in making comprehensible how sensitive, intelligent, and deeply cultivated people, how humane lovers of poetry and beauty, and not just brutish, bloodthirsty thugs, could have embraced an ideology that held death at its core" (p. xvii; cf. pp. 546-48).

Stefan George's contribution to the most murderous time in German history is intangible. It may be seen in his insensitive lack of humanity toward those who did not measure up to his standards and who could not be his followers, that is to say, most of mankind. To appear to welcome "the extinction of large segments of human-

ity" (pp. 343, 546-48), to propose the total annihilation of the United States of America as "the enemy of all culture" (pp. 483-84), does seem to be an extreme form of disdain.

There will always be admirers of Stefan George who will emphasize what they see as the attractive elements in his ideas. But Norton has concluded that the pernicious predominated in Stefan George's ideas and conduct. He quotes Walter Benjamin's remark to his friend Gershom Scholem in June 1933 that "if ever God has punished a prophet by fulfilling his prophecy, then that is the case with George." Norton agrees: "Only time would tell how right Benjamin had been" (p. 742).

#### Notes:

[1]. Friedrich Wolters, *Stefan George und die Blaetter fuer die Kunst. Deutsche Geistesgeschichte seit 1890* (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1930).

[2]. Ernst Morwitz, *Kommentar zu dem Werk Stefan Georges* (Duesseldorf and Munich: Helmut Kuepper vormals Georg Bondi, 1960; 2nd ed., 1969).

[3]. Robert Boehringer, *Mein Bild von Stefan George* (Munich and Duesseldorf: Helmut Kuepper vormals Georg Bondi, 2nd ed., 1968).

[4]. Edgar Salin, *Um Stefan George. Erinnerung und Zeugnis* (Munich and Duesseldorf: Helmut Kuepper vormals Georg Bondi, 2nd ed. 1954); Ludwig Thormaehlen, *Erinnerungen an Stefan George* (Hamburg: Dr. Ernst Hauswedell & Co., 1962).

[5]. H. J. Seekamp, R. C. Ockenden, M. Keilson, *Stefan George. Leben und Werk. Eine Zeittafel* (Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini Presse, 1972).

[6]. [Paul de Lagarde], *Deutsche Schriften* (Goettingen: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1878), pp. 68, 101-102, 248-249; idem, *Deutsche Schriften*, Gesamtausgabe letzter Band, Vierter Abdruck (Goettingen: Dieterichsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1892), pp. 98, 125, 241-242; idem, "Das verborgene Deutschland", privately printed (Offenbach a.M.: Gebr. Klingspor, 1920), pp. 1-2.

[7]. *Blaetter fuer die Kunst* Siebente Folge. Begruendet von Stefan George, ed. Carl August Klein (Berlin: Verlag des Herausgebers, 1904), pp. 3-4.

[8]. *Politeia* (end of 9th book), translated by Edgar Salin, *Von Mensch und Staat* (Basel: Schwabe, 1942).

[9]. Wolters, pp. 243-244.

[10]. Kurt Hildebrandt to Arvid Brodersen, January

7, 1935 (Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini).

[11]. Edith Landmann, *Gespraeche mit Stefan George* (Duesseldorf and Munich: Helmut Kuepper vormals Georg Bondi, 1963), p. 209.

[12]. Ernst Morwitz to Stefan George May 10, 12 and 25, 1933; Stefan George to Morwitz May 10 and 15 1933; Morwitz to Kurt Zierold September 10, 1933; Morwitz to Karl Wolfskehl December 25, 1933 (Stuttgart: Stefan George Archiv).

[13]. Stefan George, *Gesamt-Ausgabe der Werke. Endgueltige Fassung*, vol. 9 (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1928), p. 39.

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