

A Dead Poet's Society

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Ulrich Raulff studies Stefan George's tempestuous afterlife and the controversial interpretation of the poet's political and aesthetic positions. He undertakes a group biography of George's circle of disciples and shows how they furtively created specific focal points for German discussions about the Nazi past.

Reviewed: Ulrich Raulff, *Kreis ohne Meister. Stefan Georges Nachleben*, München: Beck, 2009

Ulrich Raulff's biography *d'outre-tombe* of the poet Stefan George has been the object of so many accolades on the part of previous reviewers that it seems almost awkward to add another voice to the chorus. Accordingly, the voice of this review essay will be an awkward one, adding the occasional dissonant remark, while by and large going along with the praise the book has so deservedly harvested. No doubt, it is at once a triumph of archival research of stylistic elegance, an incisive intellectual history and a sometimes exciting and sometimes unsettling ghost story.

The Poet Encircled

Stefan George, one of the dominant figures in German poetry from the 1890s until his death in 1933, famous for his formal perfectionism, his coldly elegant lyrical voice, his aesthetic detachment from the mundane, spent a great deal of time to mutate into his own art. A dazzling and arresting presence, he began collecting devout followers, the so-called "circle", before the turn of the century. The circle had a certain proximity to attempts at reforming the stiff *Lebenswelt* of the bourgeoisie and often required members to leave behind at least some aspects of their previous lives. The circle had no permanent base as George maintained a perambulatory existence without a home, without noteworthy property, living as a house guest with select admirers, mainly in Berlin, Munich, Heidelberg and the Ticino. Since most followers did not actually move around with George, the circle was a continuously changing arrangement. It attracted a surprisingly large number of great figures of German

intellectual life, the best known being the poet Karl Wolfskehl, the literary scholars Friedrich Gundolf and Max Kommerell, and the historian Ernst Kantorowicz. The periphery of the circle touched on the grand protagonists of the emerging social sciences, Georg Simmel and Max Weber (whose ideas about “charisma” partly drew on the phenomenon of George’s effect on his followers); and many other regulars of the intellectual sphere were, in some way or other, affected by “the master” as George was universally addressed by his acolytes. The circle was also a system of procuring young male lovers to George and entertained an often ridiculed cult of male adolescence. Although the group included also a number of women – and Raulff places a few of them in the limelight, innovatively if perhaps insufficiently – it was boys and young men who were consistently privileged in the circle’s economy of attention. Among the younger members at the time of George’s demise, the most prominent were the three Stauffenberg brothers the most famous of whom, Claus, was to plant the bomb that exploded next to Hitler on 20 July 1944. For the apologists and mythologists of the circle, the genealogy of the 1944 plot has served as a source of political vindication. By contrast, critical voices have stressed George’s ambiguous stance towards Nazism, maligning him as one of the forces that helped establish a proto-fascist ideal of the political, of anti-democratic authority and leadership, and hyper-nationalist imagination. Sure enough, the George circle used the swastika as one of its semi-esoteric symbols; and when George decided to push for a self-description of the circle as a quasi-political entity in the late 1920s, he embraced a vocabulary in which the dream of a new *Reich* was a central component. Yet at the same time, the “Third Reich”, when it actually came into being, was suspicious of the large number of Jews in and around the circle and in the end decided to omit George from its invented intellectual ancestry. In short: there is abundant material for a smashing group biography. Unsurprisingly, the George circle has been a favorite among literary and intellectual historians in and of Germany for some time. Their attention has consistently oscillated between fascination and derision – an oscillation Raulff embraces.

Inheritance, Bickering and Political Theory

Raulff radically dismisses George’s actual biography. He begins (ch. 1) with the poet’s funeral in December 1933 and the preceding months, after George’s ambiguous evasion to Switzerland. Leisurely sailing across Lake Constance, the poet feigned merely to pursue a more wholesome climate for the summer, yet never returned to Germany. Still, he carefully avoided clarifying his opinions on the new regime since the circle was split between pro- and anti-Nazi partisans (the latter being mainly his older, the former mainly his younger friends).

Arguably, George's afterlife began precisely at the point at which, for fear of losing the circle, he relinquished his own voice, leaving to his followers the decision as to how his silence was to be interpreted. His actual death was only corroborative. Controversy began even before the funeral when the pharmaceuticals manager Robert Boehringer, George's formal heir and unrelenting protector of his posthumous integrity, had to push through the decision not to transfer the corpse back to Germany against the resistance of other followers present. A few days after the funeral, somebody cut the swastikas off the bows of the wreath the German envoy to Switzerland, Ernst von Weizsäcker, had discreetly deposited. Clearly, here was a corpse that was not to rest in peace.

Raulff is precise on the contestations of the less legitimate heirs. Conflict – about memory, legitimate continuation of the “master's” work, legitimate interpretation of his political and aesthetic positions – is the leitmotif of the book. Raulff makes clear that George himself had laid the groundwork for this tempestuous afterlife by his ever more pronounced and ever more enigmatic interpretation of the circle as a political entity. In the 1920s, in collaboration with one of his followers, the Marburg historian Friedrich Wolters (d. 1930), he had developed a historical self-description of the circle that framed in terms of a “state” what formerly had been imagined as a group of aesthetically like-minded friends. This was a divisive move. It aestheticized politics as much as it politicized aesthetics; and more importantly in terms of George's afterlife, it politicized the circle. Raulff includes, in his work, a number of highly interesting micro-studies of the patterns of actual political thought which were informed by the politicization of the circle as much as they informed it. These patterns were developed through a culture of references to great men of the distant past. The intellectual heroes of choice were Plato and Dante. Raulff's tracing of Dante motives in particular is an engaging pursuit of oblique notions, especially in the work of Ernst Kantorowicz, the implicit main character of the book. The idiosyncratic Platonism espoused by George and some members of the group, notably the very contrary and very forgotten philosophers Kurt Hildebrandt and Edith Landmann, recognized the *Symposion* as the most important source text and proposed a bizarrely poeticized vision of the philosopher who had so damningly denigrated the pursuits of poetry in *Politeia*. The unearthing of authors of such obscurity, from the middle of the 20th century, is a great achievement in the project of disrupting the canon of thinkers on which so far most intellectual histories of German political discourse in the 20th century have been based. Raulff succeeds in restoring a strange and

bewildering density to the undergrowth of the familiar ideologies. The George circle, in his presentation, becomes emblematic of these qualities.

After a steady flow of publications during the last fifteen years, the study of Ernst Kantorowicz has grown into a sophisticated branch of biographical historiography. It receives novel impulses by Raulff's discussion of the continuities in the work of the German-Jewish medievalist who emigrated to the U.S. and "secularized his *Georgian Reich*", as the philosopher Karl Löwith sarcastically wrote. Yet Raulff detects, in this "secularization" marking Kantorowicz's American oeuvre, a continuing commitment to an aesthetics and a notion of history inherited from George and his followers. This was an ambiguous heritage, and Kantorowicz took significant care to insulate himself and his ideas from the remainders of the "circle". Although Raulff's is an attractive account of Kantorowicz's life and thought, he displays a certain propensity to think in terms of ideas as constituting biographical continuities. He has a preference for regarding ideas as layered, proceeding to ever deeper layers marked by ever greater continuities (thus also the procedure in his landmark biography of Marc Bloch from 1995). It is perhaps possible to criticize this procedure as unquestioningly assuming the priority of biography over the "intellectual", or even discourse. At any rate, Raulff does not offer an in-depth discussion of this methodical feature of his work. Decidedly not a champion of explicit theory, he proceeds in a fashion that leaves aside much jargon of present fashion. Decidedly a champion of implicit theory however, he theorizes George's ghostly existence as an "afterlife" along the lines of Aby Warburg's thought, as the survival of a peculiar set of formulae of pathos, of symbolic patterns shaping affective life. Yet although this is an innovative and fascinating undertaking, it may also be pointed out that Raulff's study has a methodologically problematic bent where it stipulates rather than demonstrates biographical continuities and stable ideas.

Haunting Historical Method

After Raulff has dissected the political philosophies (chapter 2), the formation of novel sectarian circles among former Georgians (chapter 3), and the trajectories of the exiles (chapter 4), he moves into post-war territory. Particularly dazzling is his account of the Stauffenbergs, the resistance of 1944 (he is the first to make use of newly found and highly interesting letters by Claus von Stauffenberg from 1939), and its later representations (chapter 5). Raulff demolishes the widespread notion that Claus von Stauffenberg's last words, in front of the firing squad, had consisted of a reference to the political aesthetics of the George circle.

All eyewitness accounts stated that Stauffenberg had exclaimed the words: “*Es lebe das heilige Deutschland!*” (i.e., “Long live the holy Germany”). Yet, post-war authors from the ambit of the circle, in particular the exiled economist Edgar Salin, professor in Basle, propagated that the witnesses must have misunderstood and that Stauffenberg had actually yelled: “*Es lebe das geheime Deutschland!*” (“Long live the secret Germany”), a familiar phrase of innuendo referring to the imaginary state invented and revered by the George circle. Claus von Stauffenberg’s older brother Berthold, a jurist who was hanged three weeks after the failed coup, had been one of George’s favourites and belonged to a triumvirate originally in charge of the “master’s” literary estate (the other two were Boehring and another forgotten figure, the sculptor Frank Mehnert, George’s last companion, who died as a soldier at the eastern front). The Stauffenbergs’ connections to the circle were tight. But Raulff, while doing away with a teleological reading of the circle as a forerunner of Nazism, also destroys the notion that the circle was a source of resistance during the war. Instead, George could be deployed to legitimize whatever politics. Indeed, in 1933, the Stauffenbergs, along with Mehnert and others, had belonged to the pro-Nazi group plotting to bury the poet in Germany. Berthold von Stauffenberg and Mehnert had moreover pursued a strategy of monumentalizing George’s memory, a strategy with which Boehring, as Raulff ingeniously reconstructs, fundamentally disagreed. Yet the remembrance of these conflicts, and of the shifting positions of the Stauffenbergs, was to be purged after the war. The *heilig-geheim* semantic shift was the most momentous event in this purging.

George’s ghost did not only haunt the commemoration of the Stauffenbergs. It was also present at the *Wilhelmstraßenprozess* 1947-49, the second-last of the Nuremberg trials, in which high-ranking former officials of the ministry of foreign affairs were prosecuted. Most prominent among the accused was Ernst von Weizsäcker, indicted in particular for having signed deportation orders for French Jews in his function as *Staatssekretär* in the Foreign Office from 1938 to 43. Raulff, to be sure, is less interested in Weizsäcker than in the improbable constellation of Georgeans and quasi-Georgeans at the trial, a constellation that closely followed the lines of conflict that had emerged in the circle from the 1930s. The prosecution was represented by Robert Kempner, a lawyer and brother of one Walter Kempner, George’s doctor; both brothers had fled to the U.S. Weizsäcker’s defense was staged by Hellmut Becker, the son of the orientalist and former Prussian minister of education, Carl Heinrich Becker (1876-1933). The latter, while not part of the George circle, had been its staunch supporter and was connected to it by numerous protégés of his own. It

was, as Raulff argues, mainly thanks to Becker *père* that a number of Georgeans had managed to climb to professorships in the highly conservative ranks of German academia in the 1920s. Becker *fils*, an early war invalid, had taught at the University of Strasbourg from 1941. After the war, he had opened a law office that specialized in the whitewashing of tainted representatives of the state elite. In Strasbourg he had befriended Weizsäcker's oldest son, the physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker; and in Nuremberg, Becker was assisted by the youngest of Weizsäcker's sons, Richard, the future president of the Federal Republic. The Weizsäcker boys had been brought to visit George around 1930 by Robert Boehringer, long-time friend of the family. During the trial, Edgar Salin and his former student Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, East Prussian aristocrat, founding editor of the renowned weekly *Die Zeit* and monument of democratic journalism in the Federal Republic, contributed a widely resonating press campaign based on Becker's defense strategy. In the perception of the public, Ernst von Weizsäcker became the center of the trial. Against rather solid evidence, Becker painted the Württembergian aristocrat as a stalwart of active resistance. The prosecution prevailed, and Weizsäcker received a sentence that, in part due to the vigorous media campaign in his favor, was regarded as severe. He was pardoned after only one and a half years in prison. In a broad German public, his name had already been cleared during the trial. Ironically, as in the case of the Stauffenbergs, the internal divisions of the George circle, the rather peculiar preoccupations of a self-proclaimed elitist-poetic network, had a profound and entirely nontransparent impact on public political discourse. The motivation and the means to protect Weizsäcker's reputation derived entirely from his ties to a group of tarnished poetry lovers who desired to maintain faith in their own integrity by marginalizing the memory of those members of their group with better political judgment. For years, the George circle furtively created specific focal points for German discussions about the Nazi past in which George himself was never named.

Yet, the passages on the *Wilhelmstraßenprozess* constitute a turning point in the book: here, Raulff moves from the actual members of the circle to a wider network of academics, officials and journalists who were, thus his argument, nonetheless haunted by George. But at the end of the day, their connections to the circle remained tenuous. While the research presented here is interesting as a pioneering if sketchy study of interweaving elite biographies in Nazi and post-war Germany, Raulff recognizes the problem himself and adds a lengthy methodical digression to the following chapter (chapter 6) in which he focuses on reform school movements in the Federal Republic. A good ghost does not actually leave traces; so

perhaps Raulff's treatment is legitimate as an ironical extension to George's afterlife. Certainly, there were analogies between the George circle and the elitist and vitalist reform ideas of the pedagogues of the fifties and sixties. Their awkward and subliminally violent eroticization of the teacher-student relationship equally echoed Georgean motives. Moreover, the network of educational reformism chillingly was a direct continuation of the group of Ernst von Weizsäcker's defenders. Hellmut Becker, energetically having turned himself into a scholar of educational matters, became one of the leading academics in the field for decades to come. Another semi-obliterated educator, the George admirer and free-time Plato scholar Georg Picht, was a close family friend of the Weizsäckers, too. Connections to Dönhoff and other figures from this milieu abounded, and everywhere, eerie evidence for impassioned readings of George's poetry can be dug up. And yet, and in full awareness, Raulff overstretches his argument. This is partly the result of the narrative model of the book, which the author ironically likens, not only to a ghost story, but also to the Book of Acts that reports the deeds of the Apostles. Yet at this point in Raulff's story, the Apostles have disappeared. The transition is supposed to be one towards "a phenomenology of the subliminal afterlife" (p. 435), as based on a loose web of biographical, prosopographical and discursive evidence. But if one can demonstrate someone's familiarity with George, one has not yet said anything about what other gods the person in question may have worshipped. The problem with the overall plotline is indeed that it treats the George circle as a group of Apostles that recognized one god and only one. For some members this is more plausible than for others. Although it concurs with the rhetoric of the circle, it does not necessarily concur with its reality. At times, Raulff's book seems to slide into a monotheism problem. Although there is potentially great merit in revealing possible connections between monotheism and ghost stories, the historian ought not to follow the commandment only to worship a single master explanatory context.

The Body Poetic

Then again, in defense of Raulff's procedure it may be responded that the book voluntarily crosses the border, not into fiction, but into artful literary form. The argumentative overstretch can also be read as a deliberate element of hyperbole that has the merit of highlighting the extent to which, possibly, elusively, the political culture of Germany even in the 1960s was molded by the stale poetry of a bygone era. Or at least the stale aesthetic enthusiasm of a bygone era, for Raulff is after archival treasures to such an extent that he mostly omits talking about the actual poetry. This is not uncommon in the literature on George; but it allows avoiding not only the crucial question of whether it is actually the poetry

that constitutes, for Raulff, the fascination of studying George (or, if not, what else?); but also the even more crucial question as to the extent to which the political might, in mid-20th-century Germany, might be deciphered as code for the poetical; the extent to which the body politic was a body poetic.

In the epilogue (chapter 7), Raulff suggests a course of argument – already envisioned by his deceased teacher Gert Mattenklott – which connects *fin de siècle* aestheticism in general and George in particular with the pop-cultural vitalism of the “live fast, die young” crowd of the 1960s. 1968 also marked the centennial of George’s birth, formally the end point of Raulff’s narration. At first glance, the pompous, monumental aesthetics and the authoritarian lifeworld of the George circle seem utterly removed from the emancipation narratives characteristic of the 1960s. Still, the idolization of (male) youth and rebellion was a major shared theme. Perhaps it even travelled from the European *fin de siècle* to the U.S. and back; and in Germany, it may in addition have trickled down the generations from the bourgeois admirers of “the master” to their children and grandchildren. This imaginative intersection illustrates Raulff’s pleasure in creating surprising connections. Yet the problems touched upon in this respect reach further into territory the book marginalizes. A recurring phrase of Raulff’s is that of “the dirty little secret of sex and the dirty big secret of politics” as constituting the two arcane taboos of the George circle. Yet, wary that he might end up reducing George to his sexual orientation, Raulff chooses not to discuss the way in which these “secrets” interwove; perhaps also because this is too un-subtle an intersection. But let us continue on a plainer and flatter note and point out that the George circle defined its departure from mainstream morality and political sobriety precisely through the constant innuendo of sexual difference. The circle created more or less ritualized moments of initiation. It was generally a seductive group, and the act of seduction was symbolically, and at least sometimes practically, sexual. However, the question as to what was to follow once one had been seduced remained precariously unanswered. There was no further ritualized agenda. At most, the circle offered a few vague notions of a freer, more festive, more poetical, generally enhanced existence. As Raulff points out in one of his rare discussions of George’s poetry, the arcane core of the circle was theatrical, empty and banal when the make-belief was exposed. Those members of the circle who at some point in their lives broke away from George (most prominently Gundolf and Kommerell) all appear to have done so at least partly because they had come to resent the group in general and the “master” in particular as inhibiting their own

creative projects. In short, the circle was a dead end; which presumably accounts for all the biographical dead ends haunted by the dead poet.

Perhaps one could say, using one of the abstract terms of reference Raulff so diligently eschews, that the George circle was a makeshift heterotopy, a space defined by its carefully instituted non-inclusion in the discursive and practical frameworks of surrounding society. Whether within the circle sexuality expressed politics or vice versa is a moot question, precisely because the distinction was one of surrounding society, and hence void to those initiated in the circle. The dead end character of the group might be attributed precisely to its status of non-inclusion and non-participation. The circle created a bizarre mixture of beauty and hierarchy, gravity and mischief, violence and joy – and never declared an unambiguous project. Instead of having rigid rules and laws it had poetry. George's ambition, arguably, was the creation of a *corpus* of poetry in the sense of an organically coherent oeuvre, an actual body of work the perfect (and subtly sexualized) shape of which was to either mock or educate or, eventually, supplant the Leviathan (be it that of the state or that of the church). In a way, it was a logical step of escalation for George to reinvent the circle as a "state" once he felt that his oeuvre had achieved the corporeal form he aimed at, sufficient for imitating or replacing the theatrics of law. This was the theatrics of the recital. It required a system of quotation, of verse to be rehearsed and repeated endlessly. The practice in which the Georgeans engaged when throwing the master's lines at each other imitated that of legal citation. They acted as mock lawyers in a dead-serious political-historical charade. The most generally deployed political *topos* in the entire literary output of the circle until 1933 was that of the imminent reform and restoration of the German nation, albeit in strange disguises, as a staged "secret Germany", an enactment not merely of the nation state, but also of eschatology. The heterotopian character of the circle was stabilized by a target, an internal teleology. This target was provided by the play of the transformation of the nation. It was meaningful primarily under the conditions of the circle; outside, it was not pursued in earnest. The poetics and the enhanced notion of life cultivated by the Georgeans parodied not only the forms of the political, but also those of the historical. But their politics and their history were unreal, deliberately disconnected and self-enclosed. When the nation had transformed, prodded by other "circles" and a different "master", the game was up.

And yet, the game had an afterlife perhaps more powerful than its actual life, since it molded at least some of the multiple Germanies of the 20th century, including some of those

the émigrés carried abroad. This is what Raulff pursues. For the first time, his book explores the mangled, fragmented, and distorted reprisals of the “secret Germany” in the Federal Republic and the ways in which these reprisals shaped the political sphere of the post-war period. Yet eschewing such abstractions (and others), he also leaves much to explore in the history of German political culture in the 20th century. We are accustomed to recognize narrative as an indispensable category for understanding political history as shaped by literary form. The attraction of George and his circle might well be that they extend an open invitation to reconsider this habit and take seriously poetry as another literary form indispensable for the historical understanding of political culture. And it is in the study of such phenomena that the historical examination of the George circle might, in the future, find its actual prize.

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