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Figures of the poetic community in Walter Benjamin, reader of Stefan George

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For Gert Mattenklott, in memoriam

Towards a hermeneutics of the phantasm. Stefan George and his *Nachleben*

“Von den drei lyrischen Sternen, die am Himmel des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts standen, Rilke, Hofmannsthal, George, hatten alle drei eine große Wirkungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte. Ein *Nachleben* aber hatte nur George”.¹ So writes Ulrich Raulff almost at the very beginning of his majestic book dedicated to Stefan George, a book centered precisely on the notion of the *Nachleben* and its infinite aspects: intellectual history, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, sociology of German literary classes, or the “secret story” to be deciphered through the traces and clues scattered here and there throughout the years which however only cumulatively demonstrate their effects, though in a not infrequently uncanny² manner due precisely to the “spectral” character of that posthumous life. The great poet of form, the aristocratic and reserved creator of an exclusive circle of artists and scholars, had over time gradually withdrawn – to the degree that his figure had not already been marginalized – up until he abandoned Germany for good to die in Switzerland in 1933. Raulff’s book focuses on what happened to those companions, students, admirers and followers of magisterial Georgian poetics after December 4, 1933, when the earthly existence of Stefan George ceased to be and his *Nachleben* began. George’s story indeed truly seems to be, employing the famous Warburgian definition,³ a “Gespenstergeschichte

¹ Ulrich Raulff, *Kreis ohne Meister. Stefan Georges Nachleben* (Munich: Beck, 2009), p. 19.

² Here the term is used in the sense of Freud’s *unheimlich* from his famous essay of the same name. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche (1919)*, in *Studienausgabe IV* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1970), pp. 241-275.

³ Cf. Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Grundbegriffe II* (London: The Warburg Institute Archive, 1928-1929), p. 3 (annotated July 2, 1929).



für ganz Erwachsene”. This definition is for the most part taken up again and amply thematized by Raulff in his book, but it also describes different chapters in German intellectual history: from Bismarck’s foundation of the state to the National Socialists’ taking of power⁴ and beyond, moving toward that sinking into the depths of the “black twelve-year period” and the world war, and then once more in the post-war, according to developmental lines both unexpected and at times expected but always characterized by the “spectral” as a category of the philosophy of history. If, in any event, George’s “posthumous life” cannot be broken down only into the gathering of disciples around divergent existential, poetological and political options (which could be subsumed within oppositional disdain or enthusiastic adhesion to the fledgling regime), but, on the contrary, develops and branches out into a thousand rivulets, sometimes apparently distant from the source – this means that in that posthumous life too substantial chapters of the *Geistesgeschichte* of 20th century Germany are written.

Tracing the lines of German intellectual history as if they were “ghost stories for adults” thus means, from Warburg’s iconological perspective and according to the arguments of Georges Didi-Huberman, delineating “a cultural model of history in which times were no longer traced in biomorphic states, but expressed in layers, hybrid blocks, rhizomes, specific complexities, often unexpected returns and ever elusive results”.⁵ Such a model obviously entails the

⁴ We are indebted to Gershom Scholem’s memoirs for a rich indication of the mapping of this phase of intellectual history (at least) of German Judaism: “Ich pflegte die drei Gruppen um die Bibliothek Warburg, um das Institut für Sozialforschung von Max Horkheimer und die metaphysischen Magier um Oskar Goldberg als die drei bemerkenswerten ‘Jüdischen Sekten’ zu definieren, die das deutsche Judentum hervorgebracht hat”, in Gershom Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem*, new expanded edition (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), p. 162.

⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 2002). The book of the philosopher and French art-historian, which restores the notion of *Nachleben* to a central position as far as Warburgian iconology is concerned, is understood here however to be the real antecedent, both in conceptual as well as historical terms, of Raulff’s volume dedicated to George.



establishment of lines of historical philosophy that should not be understood as simple foundations and legitimizations of an organic *continuum* to that which we could incisively define as “history from the victors’ point of view”; rather, they matter in as much as they act as directors of a perspective connected to an extent to lines of systematic discontinuity as well as to a “phantastic [fantomal] model of history” – still employing Didi-Huberman’s definition –, “in which the times were no longer focused on the academic transmission of knowledge but were expressed through obsessions, ‘survivors’, remainders, ‘revenants’ of forms – that is, through non-knowledge [...]”.⁶ If, as these citations show, in the end Warburg’s method matters to Didi-Huberman in order to make the historical dismissal re-emerge, for Raulff the history of Georgian “tradition” after the master’s death in Swiss exile is that of a symptomatic “legendären Präsenz einer historischen Absenz”, which is to say “eine Geschichte nicht des Erscheinens, sondern des Erlöschens”.⁷ In this sinking of a presence into the historical continuum – which in its slow disappearance does not, however, imply simple oblivion, but on the contrary a strengthening of influence –, it is therefore unnecessary to see only the exemplary profile of Stefan George within German literature and culture – for which here only the eminently literary-historical category and even journalistic category of the rediscovery would be worthwhile; rather, it is an outright discursive paradigm which bases itself on the foundation of a philosophical-conceptual *principium individuationis* for the articulation of multiple histories of literature based on a “phantasmic” principle. In this sense George should not be considered a simple element within a typological and figural gallery that could be understood to articulate the history of German literature in an exemplary fashion (in bulk, according the old Burkhardtian and Carlylian conception of history, which, furthermore, George himself and his *Kreis* scrupulously followed: a “heroic” history of literature, in other words). Instead, he should be considered a veritable ghost which, having

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ulrich Raulff, *Kreis ohne Meister*, cit., p. 12 and p. 14.



disappeared from the contemporary cultural and intellectual panorama, was destined – as it was founded on the sudden apparition of the *revenant* – to impose its disturbing presence, and, in its turn, foster the “secret story” of German culture with its mysteries, myths and improvised returns. A “phantastic” history of literature is realized, in other terms, on the one hand in the “extra-sensory” procedure of the evocation of single figures; on the other, however, in the spectrality implicit at those figures’ appearance, a fact which displays a profound attitude, on the part of German culture, to interiorize precisely this spectral and disquieting character. In this sense, the destiny of a syntagma like “secret Germany”, which enjoyed great success in both the Georgian *Kreis* and the poet’s *Nachleben*, is exemplary (an aspect which constitutes the most stimulating and surprising part of Raulff’s book); and thus seems to pass from the magical evocation of a *Pathosformel* (to employ yet another felicitous formulation of Warburg’s), as appears in George⁸ and then in the young Kantorowicz’s *Antrittsvorlesung* with the same name,⁹ to its spectral restatement in the phrase that some maintain Claus von Stauffenberg yelled the night of July 20, 1944, before being executed after his failed attempt on Hitler’s life: “es lebe unser geheimes Deutschland”.¹⁰ In that sense, beyond being a great and fascinatingly successful *slogan*,¹¹ the

⁸ As is known, “Geheimes Deutschland” is the title of a composition contained in the 1928 collection *Das neue Reich* (though it had been composed earlier).

⁹ Cf. Ernst Kantorowicz, *Das geheime Deutschland. Vorlesung, gehalten bei Wiederaufnahme der Lehrtätigkeit am 14. November 1933*, in “George-Jahrbuch”, 3 (2000/2001), pp. 151-175.

¹⁰ Cf. Hans-Christof Kraus, *Das Geheime Deutschland. Zur Geschichte und Bedeutung einer Idee*, in “Historische Zeitschrift”, 291 (2010), 2, pp. 385-417.

¹¹ A perfect example of this tendency – which makes inroads not only, as is obvious, in those layers of *Öffentlichkeit* that the German language interested in re-elaborating a “new German mythology” in terms more easily useful to a wide public, but also in the most informed academic research – is the book of Manfred Riedel, *Geheimes Deutschland. Stefan George und die Brüder Stauffenberg* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006). The author had already underlined the phrase’s fortune with an interesting counter-intuitive paradox, as Thomas Karlauf recounts in his recent biography on George: in an interview Riedel maintained that if the attempt on Hitler’s life in 1944 had been successful today George would be known as “der größte deutsche Dichter”, in Thomas Karlauf, *Stefan George. Die Entdeckung des Charisma* (Munich: Pantheon, 2007), p. 770. Moreover,



formula “secret Germany” reproduces *in nuce* all the variations of the *Nachleben*, through phantasms and specters; and with them it re-establishes the entire whole in its mitogenic, dense, multi-faceted and, above all, ambiguous dimension, just as every respectable myth. Every phantasmal (re) appearance is such due precisely to its ambivalent nature from the moment it lends itself to multiple and divergent interpretations. In that way, departing from a mitogenic conception of the history of German thought and literature, the way to a hermeneutic bet of establishing a science of the “phantasmal” which does not ignore the implicit disconnections, fractures, and evasions and thus manages to unlock new and as of yet unimagined interpretive lines opens up. A hermeneutics of the phantasm, it goes without saying, necessarily implies the re-stating of an intrinsic dual element (in extreme synthesis: the Greek *daimon* and its successive reinterpretation in a diabolical sense), the undecidable alternative that thus surrounds the benign or malign nature of the apparition; a demonic duality that is a constant presence within German literature.¹²

in his essay dedicated to George, Lukács too had cautiously prophesized a possible “popular” fortune of the teachings of Georgian poetics: “Einmal, vielleicht, können trotzdem auch aus diesen Gedichten Volkslieder werden”, in György Lukács, *Die Seele und die Formen* (Berlin: Fleischel 1911), p. 176. The same Walter Benjamin, finally, in the unpublished preface to the 1936 collection of letters which he later titled *Deutsche Menschen*, affirms: “Die Absicht dieser Reihe ist [...] das Antlitz eines ‘geheimen Deutschland’, das man heute so gerne in der trüben Nebeln sucht, zu zeigen. Den ein geheimes Deutschland gibt es wirklich Nur daß dies sein Geheimsein nicht allein der Ausdruck seine Innigkeit und Tiefe sondern – wengleich in anderm Sinn – das Werk von Kräften ist, die lärmend und brutal, ihm öffentliche Wirksamkeit verwehren und zur geheimen es verurteilt haben”, in Walter Benjamin, *Deutsche Briefe*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), vol. IV-2, p. 945. Here and following indicated by GS and followed by the number of the volume.

¹² The indisputable master of that science of the “phantomatic” is, as far as studies in Italian are concerned, Furio Jesi, a scholar who always pays careful attention to, beyond a heuristically fascinating archeology of the myth, ethical-political corollaries: “Demonism is inevitable for the artist in the bourgeois era only if he does not refuse the sins and limits of the civilization that surrounds him and if he does not humbly desire to let the voice of nature speak, in order to maintain his moral conscience lucid”, in Furio Jesi, *Germania segreta. Miti nella cultura tedesca del '900* [1967] (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995), p. 36.



What is thereby taking shape is a history of literary fact that, above all, is a history of occult fascinations, secret attractions and distances centered around a gallery of “great spirits” who in no way can be excluded, either positively or negatively, and in which the “phantasmal” – with all of its unsettling and magical baggage – plays a cardinal role. Here one can find the most intimately *literaturgeschichtlich* plan of the *Pathosformel* of the “ghost-stories for adults”: the capacity to believe the myths and to construct history around them, evoking spirits that sometimes appear as gods and sometimes as demons. The young Lukács, for example, in that great figural and typological gallery that comprises *Soul and Form*, described this mechanism in relation to Novalis; that is, to the first Romantics and their relationship to Goethe: “Gewiß konnte man [...] ganz detailliert erzählen, was jedem von ihnen, in jedem Augenblick seines Lebens Goethe bedeutete. Man würde dann jubelnden Siegestaumel sehen und stumme Tragödien, gewaltige Aufschwünge, gewagte Abenteuer und Irrfahrten und die beiden ineinander schmelzenden in ein einziges Feldgeschrei zusammenklingenden Schlachtrufe hören: *zu ihm hin und über ihn hinaus*”.¹³ For Stefan George and his *Kreis* this functioned in the exact same way (and the Kommerell-case demonstrates this *ad abundantiam*):¹⁴ the presence of the master and his charisma were so invasive that they could not be ignored from the moment they appeared destined to inform all of the mental landscape in which the poetic vocation existed.

It is important therefore to recognize the steps that define an “exemplary” history of literature (based on the numinous force of the *exemplum*, conceived, that is, in its ineradicable duality), precisely in the sense with which Walter Benjamin, speaking of that idea of a history of literature advocated by George and his *Kreis*, polemically treated it:

¹³ György Lukács, *Die Seele und die Formen*, cit., p. 97.

¹⁴ Cf. for example Matthia Weichelt, *Gewaltsame Horizontbildungen. Max Kommerells lyriktheoretischer Ansatz und die Krisen der Moderne* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006), which rather convincingly demonstrates how Kommerell, in spite of George’s detachment, substantially maintained the theoretical and poetological horizons intact that informed the *Kreis*. Maurizio Pirro offers an interesting perspective on Kommerell and his *opus magnum* in “Die entzauberte Tradition”. *Max Kommerell e il modello ermeneutico georgiano*, “Studi Germanici” (n.s.), XL (2002), 1, pp. 67-99.



“Und das Ideal dieser Forschungsrichtung wäre die Aufteilung des ganzen deutschen Schrifttums in heilige Haine mit Tempeln zeitloser Dichter im Innern”.¹⁵ It could not be stated any better: not only thanks to the metaphor’s neo-classical bearing, which connects nicely to Georgian intellectual characteristics, but for its implicit “mitogenic” implications as well. Indeed, here the poet appears before his faithful public as a timeless apparition, not only in his sacred and therefore Olympic dimension, but in his demonic and unsettling one as well – a dimension that is already implicit in the figure of the “sacred wood”, the site of apparition *par excellence* for all the myth’s undertones. In that way, the depiction of an “exemplary” *Literaturgeschichte* in which the Myth rediscovers a home within Poetry ends by its turning into its own disturbing double, functional exclusively to itself and its own ambivalent logic. It is therefore no accident that within this apparition the sacred wood becomes the enchanted forest in which the myth lives within the undifferentiated and where Apollo and Baldur end up secretly establishing a bond.¹⁶ In that enchanted forest of myth the poet, supreme administrator of classical and German traditions, both priest and divinity, takes on the role of officiating the sacred cult of eminence. And he does so in a form which one could define as “theocratic” – that is, by abolishing any distance and any form of priestly mediation with the divine, and instituting an absolutely closed self-performativity that rests upon its own exclusive and self-legitimizing *auctoritas*; and in which Apollo and Baldur end up becoming mere liturgical functions of a perfectly self-sufficient poetic-performative system.¹⁷

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft*, in GS III, p. 289 .

¹⁶ This is a reference to one of George’s famous couplets: “Apollo lehnt geheim/An Baldur”, contained in the long composition “Der Krieg”, in Stefan George, *Das neue Reich* (Berlin: Bondi, 1928) p. 34. A useful and stimulating register of the aspects surrounding a German “pathology” of the forest in as much as *facies hyppocratica* of the stiff and “dangerous” tradition is offered by Flavio Cuniberto, *La foresta incantata. Patologia della Germania moderna* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2010).

¹⁷ Maurizio Pirro, in his fundamental study *Come corda troppo tesa. Stile e ideologia in Stefan George* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011), defines George’s magisterial poetics as “an unscrupulous tautological exercise” and continues “The poet’s formative capacity and the incisiveness of the group’s intellectual program find no foundation in any external principle, but justify themselves – intensifying themselves further – through the pure



Solitude and community. Walter Benjamin reads Stefan George

George's myth therefore reappears with the features of a *Gespens-tergeschichte* in which the German *Geistesgeschichte* of the first half of the 20th century and all of its political, historical-literary, religious and symbolic directions is also reflected; furthermore, these directions overlap rather significantly with the other *Gespens-tergeschichte* making its way through those same years: that of German Judaism, and in particular that of the “seven Hebrews” – to once again employ Scholem's ironic and pointed formulation. So, if for Scholem the *Warburg-Kreis*, the *Frankfurter Schule* and the group of “meta-physical magicians” around Oskar Goldberg¹⁸ could organize themselves into the intellectual constructions that confirm the “occult” character marking the sociology of German intellectuals and the German cultural field which developed in the first half of the 20th century, this means – as far as George and his *Kreis* are concerned – that this philosophical, historical and symbolic system reappeared

and simple evidence of a symbolic representation generated by that same formative capacity” (p. 179). In this way Pirro collects and develops Wolfgang Braungart's rich intuition expressed in *Ästhetischer Katholizismus. Stefan Georges Rituale der Literatur* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997), in which he considers aestheticism and symbolism exemplary “European movements” of the *Jahrhundertwende*, founded on precise processes of the ritualization of literature and art: “Kunst ist im Part pour l'art das Unerreichbare, unfasslich Höchste, das als Mysterium Forme der Zelebrierung braucht, weil es nur in diesen Formen da ist und erfahrbar wird” (p. 12). In that sense, therefore, the Georgian “myth” is more explicitly expressed in ritual and liturgy, translating *in literariis* the “splendor” of Catholic form and the “real presence” of the symbol that has a place within it.

¹⁸ The philosopher and religious historian Oskar Goldberg (1885-1953) – in addition to being the author of individual works midway between historical-religious reconstruction, philosophical essay and mystical-occult positioning – had a notable influence on the environment of Berliner Expressionism with the foundation of a *philosophische Gruppe* under the sign of his controversial master, but also awakened interest in many different Weimarian intellectuals, from Thomas Mann to Walter Benjamin, from Alfred Döblin to Robert Musil. On Goldberg cf. Manfred Voigts, *Oskar Goldberg – Der mythische Religionswissenschaftler. Ein verdrängtes Kapitel jüdischer Geschichte* (Berlin: Agora, 1992).



stronger here, on the one hand thanks to charismatic-elective characteristics of the Georgian circle; and on the other, thanks to those specific to the intellectual profile of German Jews. Without entering into the rather vast and problematic conceptual area of the relationship between the Jewish and the German element in the cultural, literary and theoretical field, it is enough to limit attention here to the Jewish element present within the Georgian circle¹⁹ and, more particularly, to the relationship Walter Benjamin wove within it. This relationship is the perfect example of a laboratory in which the individual poetic and political elements that created it tumble rapidly (Judaism, Germanism, culture, politics, the role of the poet and the critic), and give space to new formations to be deciphered. In addition to having been spiritually close to George and his poetic teachings in his youth, Benjamin in fact was one of his most passionate critics, without falling however into an easy distant disdain. Instead, he always retained a certain *pietas* for the by that point rather distant experience and understood it as having been “essential” to his intellectual and cultural development. Gert Mattenklott, who in a brief but complex 2005 article decided to have his two principle areas of

¹⁹ The most prominent members with Jewish roots within the *Kreis* were Friedrich Gundolf (whose real name was in reality Gundelfinger), Karl Wolfskehl, perhaps the most informed in material on Jewish-German relations, and the historian Ernst Kantorowicz, author in 1927 of a famous monograph dedicated to the emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen, published by the Bondi Verlag (which was, it is important to mention, the official publisher of George’s writings and which in a separate series published – marked by the typographical seal of the swastika – diverse scientific monographs, among which figured all of Gundolf’s books, dedicated among others to Goethe, to Shakespeare, to the same George – as will be seen – or those of Wolters, Ernst Bertram’s *Nietzsche* or Kommerell’s *Dichter als Führer*). On the Jewish presence in the Georgian Kreis cf. above all: Geret Luhr, *Ästhetische Kritik der Moderne. Über das Verhältnis Walter Benjamins und der jüdischen Intelligenz zu Stefan George* (Marburg: TransMit, 2002); Peter Trawny, “Seltsames Wandern zum Rhein von Nil” – *Bemerkungen zum deutsch-jüdischen Gespräch des George-Kreises im Spiegel von Alexander Stauffenbergs ‘Der Tod des Meisters’*, in *Stefan George. Dichtung-Ethos-Staat. Denkbilder für ein geheimes europäisches Deutschland*, edited by Bruno Pieger and Bertram Schefold (Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2010), pp. 189-203; “Verkannte Brüder?” *Stefan George und das deutsch-jüdische Bürgertum zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Emigration*, edited by Gert Mattenklott, Michael Philipp, Julius H. Schoeps (Hildesheim-New York: Olms, 2001).



research and inspiration flow together – Stefan George and Walter Benjamin –, taking on Benjamin’s reading (and Adorno’s) of the Rhenish poet, defined Benjamin and George’s relationship as follows: “Benjamins Verhältnis zu George ist leidenschaftlich ambivalent nach beiden Richtungen, und wie sehr er den Dichter des Symbolismus, vor allem den im Jahr der Seele, den Übersetzer Dantes und Baudelaires verehrt, so entschieden ist seine Ablehnung gegenüber dem meisten danach”.²⁰ The distinction that runs through Mattenklott’s essay between Benjamin the admirer of George’s translating ability²¹ and Benjamin the disparaging of all the rest must also be reexamined in light of the fact – to give an example – that, still in July 1933, and even in a letter to Julia Radt which consciously

²⁰ Gert Mattenklott, *Walter Benjamin und Theodor W. Adorno über George*, in *Wissenschaftler im George-Kreis*, edited by Bernhard Böschstein, Jürgen Egyptien, Bertram Schefold et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), pp. 277-290 (here p. 281). In the relationship between Benjamin and George at the critical and biographical level as well a sort of “mythology” is at work, which leads one to consider that intellectual relationship under a legendary aura – and that is explained in the substantial oblivion of Benjamin’s interest for George. In the end, the legend responds perfectly to the philosophical-historical system of the *Gespensstergeschichte* that shapes German intellectual history, even that of the post-war – as for example Raulff’s book shows. Cf. in part: Geret Luhr, *Ästhetische Kritik der Moderne*, cit.; Marion Picker, 1914. “Wie George in mein Leben hineinwirkte” – Walter Benjamin, in “Text + Kritik”, Heft 168: Stefan George, pp. 60-75; Daniel Weidner, *Geschlagener Prophet und tröstender Spielmann: Stefan George, gelesen von Walter Benjamin*, “Zeitschrift für Germanistik” (N.F.), VIII (1988), 1, pp. 31-65; Emmanuel Levaufre, “Donner leur physionomie aux dates”. *Benjamin et le Cercle de George*, in *Walter Benjamin, le critique européen*, edited by Heinz Wismann and Patricia Lavelle (Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2010), pp. 141-169; Peter-André Alt, “Gegenspieler des Propheten”. *Walter Benjamin und Stefan George*, in *global benjamin*, edited by Klaus Garber (Munich: Fink, 1999), pp. 891-906.

²¹ Which he even amply and unreservedly recognized – if what Scholem recounts about his friend in his memoirs is true. On August 15, 1915, the future expert of mystical Judaism found himself visiting Benjamin, who “las mir vier Gedichte aus den *Fleurs du mal* in seiner und Georges Übersetzung vor. Er las sehr schön, aber nicht etwa nach der Weise der George-Schüler. In allen vier Fällen – Scholem adds – hielt ich seine Übersetzung für die Georges, bei zweien war ich sicher, daß seine Übersetzung besser war”. In Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 23. A beautiful testimony of Benjamin’s mimetic capacity – which was best present in the oral *dimension* – when reading George.



touches, albeit lightly, on *privatissima* details, Benjamin – speaking to his sculptor friend²² of his most recent works, including his article dedicated to George – explicitly states:

Die “Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert” von der Du leider so wenig verstanden hast und an der es so viel zu verstehen gibt, wächst, um wenige aber wichtige, Stücke. Ein Aufsatz über Stefan George [...] sagt, was ich im Namen meiner nächsten Freunde zu diesem Anlaß zu sagen hatte. Ich denke es wird Dir vor Augen gekommen sein. Ich wage aber kaum zu hoffen, daß Gedanken, in denen wir uns einmal begegnet sind, bei uns von einer gleichen Erfahrung gereift wurden.²³

“Stefan George” therefore, in the dense allegorical gallery that courses through Benjamin’s thought, appears as the most hidden and precious emblem and draws on the most intimate sphere of personal and affective relations – in the medium of youth it must be recalled – that for a reserved person like Benjamin becomes even more relevant. The brief essay that Benjamin refers to in his letter was entitled *Rückblick auf Stefan George*, and was published in the prestigious “Frankfurter Zeitung” July 12 of that same year, the year in which Benjamin took a position on a volume of Willi Koch on Stefan George, and which he gave the melancholy – and profoundly significant – *incipit*:

Stefan George schweigt seit Jahren. Indessen haben wir ein neues Ohr für seine Stimme gewonnen. Wir erkennen sie als eine prophe-

²² Julia Cohn, the sister of Benjamin’s childhood friend Alfred, belongs to that most restricted circle of Benjamin’s friends, which in this case goes back to 1912. Julia Cohn, who took the surname of her husband Fritz Radt in 1925, played for example a “secret” role in the draft of Benjamin’s essay dedicated to Goethe’s *Wahlverwandtschaften*. On Julia Cohn see Gershom Scholem’s brief annotations contained in his *Walter Benjamin - die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, cit., p. 119, as well as in *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel. Vierzehn Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983); see also Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin – Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker. Untersuchungen zu seinem Frühwerk* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), in particular pp. 61-64.

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Briefe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1966), vol. 2, p. 587 .



tische. Das heißt nicht, daß George das historische Geschehen, noch weniger, daß er dessen Zusammenhänge vorausgesehen hätte. Das macht den Politiker, nicht den Propheten. Prophetie ist ein Vorgang in der moralischen Welt.²⁴

Some weeks prior Benjamin had written to Scholem about George: “Zwei Rezensionsexemplare versetzen mich in die sehr leidige Zwangslage, jetzt, und vor einem deutschen Publikum, über Stefan George sprechen zu müssen. Soviel glaube ich gemerkt zu haben: wenn jemals Gott einen Propheten durch Erfüllung seiner Prophezie geschlagen hat, so ist es bei George der Fall gewesen”.²⁵ At heart the relationship that Benjamin had with George – for the entire course of his life²⁶ – seems to be contained within the ellipse that his letter to Jula Radt and his previous one to Scholem make clear: a profound and melancholic empathy on the one hand, and on the other an ironic distance. And it is no accident that here the melancholic empathy and the caustic irony correspond to two precise intellectual positions – one private and sentimental, the other public and critical. Benjamin, in other words, seems to understand George’s position – and, with it, his own – in relation to the German cultural field as profoundly split into an intimate dimension and a public one; it is almost as if George’s position in the German letters, including

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Rückblick auf Stefan George. Zu einer neuen Studie über den Dichter* [1933], in GS III, pp. 392-393.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, cit., vol. 2, pp. 577-578 (letter of June 16, 1933). The two books Benjamin refers to in his letter are the aforementioned of Willi Koch, which inspired the article [Willi Koch, *Stefan George, Weltbild, Naturbild, Menschenbild* (Halle-Salle: Max Niemeyer, 1933)], and that of Eduard Lachmann, *Die ersten Bücher Stefan Georges. Eine Annäherung an das Werk* (Berlin: Bondi, 1933). See the *Anmerkungen* to the letter in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), vol. IV: 1931-1934, p. 239.

²⁶ Consider that, still in May 1940, in a letter to Adorno that deals with the correspondence between George and Hofmannsthal in the light of his friend’s essay that would appear immediately after Benjamin’s suicide, cf. Theodor Adorno, *George und Hofmannsthal. Zum Briefwechsel 1891-1906*, in *Prismen. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (München: DTV 1963), pp. 190-230. Benjamin argues: “Und diese, unzeitgemäße und undankbare Aufgabe: eine “Rettung” Georges, Sie haben sie schlüssig wie es nur sein kann, so unaufdringlich, wie es sein muß, bewältigt”, in Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, cit., vol. 2, p. 853.



those post-1933, is understood only within a complex and tense space situated between sub-movements of the heart and public uprisings in the squares. This is not only for the obvious reason – already between the lines in his letter to Adorno – of George’s necessary *Rettung* from the National Socialist attempt to make him a poet of the regime²⁷ – but also to signal a rather particular review which for Benjamin is realized exclusively in the *medium* of poetical interiority, “in the name of my most intimate friends”. And just who these intimate friends mentioned in an elliptical form in the letter are, and in which sense George for Benjamin was a prophet, unlucky on the plane of actual politics but evidently efficacious on the ethical-moral one, is understood even more thanks to an episode cited by Benjamin himself just a few years before, in 1928, when the “Literarische Welt” had asked different writers and intellectuals – including Brecht and Buber, Rosenzweig and Stefan Zweig – the meaning the poet’s figure held for them on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday.²⁸ The magazine had received a brief but rather dense response from Benjamin in which, among other things, he stated:

Im Bewußtsein [...] bemühe mich ich, desto genauer mir zu vergegenwärtigen, wie George in mein Leben hineinwirkte. Voranzuschicken ist dies: Er tat es niemals in seiner Person. Wohl habe ich ihn gesehen, sogar gehört. Stunden waren mir nicht zu viel, im Schloßpark zu Heidelberg, lesend, auf einer Bank, den Augenblick zu erwarten, da er vorbeikommen sollte. Eines Tages kam er langsam daher und

²⁷ This is how the National Socialist minister Bernhard Rust remembered the poet the day after his death: “Mit Stefan George ist nicht nur einer der größten Dichter unseres Volkes dahingegangen, sondern auch einer der geistigen Wegbereiter und Kün­der des neuen Deutschland”. Cit. in Michal Petrow, *Der Dichter als Führer? Zur Wirkung Stefan Georges im “Dritten Reich”* (Marburg: Tectum, 1995), p. 38.

²⁸ This is in fact what the magazine’s editorial staff wrote: “Wir bitten Sie, sich an dieser Plebiszit [toward the poet’s presumed role in German *Geistesgeschichte*] zu betei­ligen durch eine kurze autobiographische Notiz, in welcher Sie darstellen, welche Rolle Stefan George in Ihrer inneren Entwicklung spielt. Wir werden Äußerungen jeder Art, positive wie ablehnende, veröffentlichen”. Cit. in the *Anmerkungen* of the editors, in Walter Benjamin, GS II/3, p. 1429.



sprach zu einem jüngeren Begleiter. Auch habe ich ihn dann und wann im Hof des Schlosses auf einer Bank sitzen gefunden.²⁹

Beyond its biographical consistency (Benjamin was in Heidelberg in 1921,³⁰ the year before George decided to move to Marburg),³¹ this entirely literary image demonstrates a scenographic harmony with four of George's lines taken from one of Benjamin's most beloved collections, *Das Jahr der Seele*: "Wir suchen nach dem schattenfreien bänken / Dort wo uns niemals fremde Stimmen scheuchten / In träumen unsre arme sich verschränken / Wir laben uns am langen milden leuchten".³² The impression is strengthened if one keeps in mind that in that brief piece of writing for the "Literarische Welt" there are also Benjamin's hand-written notes regarding evocative *Figuren* and *Gedichte* of the poet's; and even more so regarding Benjamin's circle of friends. The text in fact begins with a rather significant list: "Fritz Heinle, Wolf Heinle, Rika Seligson, W. S[imon] Guttman, [Ferdinand] Cohrs, [Friedrich] Podszus, Jula Cohn",³³ followed by a list of George's poems taken from *Das Jahr der Seele* to which Benjamin had added a number of names in parenthesis in a transparent reference to the list of "figures" that precede this second list: "Ihr tratet zu dem herde (Dora) Gemahnt dich noch (Fritz) Es lacht in dem steigenden Jahr dir (Rika) Der Täter (Guttman) Uns die durch viele Jahre (Walter) Wir warden noch einmal zum lande fliegen (Walter)".³⁴

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Über Stefan George* [1928], in GS II/2, p. 622.

³⁰ Cf. Peter-André Alt, *Gegenspieler des Propheten*, cit., p. 891.

³¹ Cf. Thomas Karlauf, *Stefan George. Die Entdeckung des Charisma*, cit., p. 532.

³² Stefan George, *Das Jahr der Seele* (Berlin: Bondi, 1939), p. 15.

³³ Walter Benjamin, *Figuren für Notiz über George*, in GS II/3, p.1430.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Here the following components of George are intended: *Ihr tratet zu dem herde Gemahnt dich noch* and *Es lacht in dem steigenden Jahr dir*, all taken from Stefan George, *Das Jahr der Seele*, cit., p. 118, p. 40 and p. 93 respectively; from *Der Täter* and *Uns die durch viele Jahre zum triumphe*, in Stefan George, *Der Teppich des Lebens und die Lieder vom Traum und Tod* (Berlin: Bondi, 1932) p. 49 and p. 35; and from *Wir werden noch einmal zum lande fliegen*, in Stefan George, *Die Bücher der Hirten- und Preisgedichte der Sagen und Sänge und der hängenden Gärten* (Berlin: Bondi, 1930), p. 87. The attributions of the individual poems to persons known to Benjamin are easily recognizable: Dora Kellner, who in 1917 became his wife, Fritz Heinle, his poet friend of whom we will later speak, Rika Seigson, his companion, and Wilhelm Simon Guttman, the avantgarde Expressionist painter and future director of an important photographic agency.



In a preparatory private note Benjamin thus underlines what stimulates his public intervention as well, and that is the extremely strict interconnection established, within the same existence of the philosopher and critic, between George's poetry and the friendly figures of his circle. In fact, in his response to the "Literarische Welt" he adds how, in the end, the impression that George's figure had made upon him did not need to wait for his physical appearance in the courtyard of the Heidelberg castle: "Doch das war alles zu einer Zeit, da die *die entscheidende Erschütterung* seines Werkes mich längst erreicht hatte;³⁵ and it was not a "shock" that had come exclusively from the poetry, "but always from those poems only which in certain decisive moments I sensed on my companions' tongues, and a few times on my own. Connected to those companions – none of whom are any longer alive today – not by his poetry, but rather by a force of which one day I shall speak".³⁶ Just what that force was becomes clear in the continuation of the text: youth. "If the privilege and the unutterable fortune of youth – Benjamin continues – consists in legitimizing oneself in verse, in being able to struggle and to love in verse, we owe that experience to three of George's books [i.e. *Das Jahr der Seele*, *Der Teppich des Lebens* and *Die Bücher der Hirten*], of which *Jahr der Seele* is the heart".³⁷ That is the way the nature and form of that *entscheidende Erschütterung* take shape: a shock that has an effect all the way to his very foundations, not in the sense of an epiphanic illumination, however, so much as that of a painful renunciation. And it is the renunciation that is also at the base of a famous letter that Benjamin mailed on August 4, 1913, to Carla Seligson, the sister of that Rika, Fritz Heinle's companion (the real secret heart of Benjamin's reflections in those years), quoted in the notes to the response to the "Literarische Welt". In this letter Benjamin argues:

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, [*Über Stefan George*], cit., p. 622.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* The fact that, in the original version of this text in Scholem's possession, one finds added, after the "Wir", an interesting parenthesis which Benjamin then suppressed in the published version is not meaningless: "(die wenigen namenlosen für die ich hier spreche)", in GS II/3, p. 1431.



Nun muß ich Ihnen, so schwer es ist, noch antworten auf das, was Sie über die Form neuer Jugendlichkeit schreiben. [...]. Aber vor allem: wird eine neue Jugendlichkeit, wie wir sie wollen, den Einzelnen weniger einsam machen? [...] Ich glaube, wir dürfen fragen: wo sind die, die heute einsam sind? Auch dazu, zur Einsamkeit, kann erst eine Idee und eine Gemeinschaft in der Idee sie führen. Ich glaube, es ist wahr, daß sogar nur ein Mensch, der die Idee (gleichviel “welche”) aufgenommen hat, einem sein kann; dieser muß glaube ich einsam sein. Ich glaube, daß nur in der Gemeinschaft, und zwar in der innigsten Gemeinschaft der Gläubigen ein Mensch wirklich einsam sein kann: in einer Einsamkeit, in der sein Ich gegen die Idee sich erhebt, um zu sich zu kommen.³⁸

In this extremely clear manner the young Benjamin – influenced in this, among others, by Stefan George – depicts a *Gemeinschaft* which is not simply an “organic” structure based on the mystic electricity of individuals and on their subsumption into a unitary principle, in other words a structure to be contrasted in every detail to a “synthetic” *Gesellschaft*,³⁹ so much as it is, rather, a spiritual concentration of believers bound together by solitude; of young, rejecting spirits both at the entrance to the *Gesellschaft* of adults and to the construction of a separate *Gemeinschaft*.⁴⁰

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, cit., vol. 1, p. 86.

³⁹ The reference here is obviously to Ferdinand Tönnies’ famous sociological antithesis in his principal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, first published in 1887, which was widely and successfully received. It is worth considering the following explicative passage: “Jedes Verhältnis der Gemeinschaft ist in der Anlage, oder dem Kerne seines Wesens nach, ein höheres und allgemeineres Selbst, gleich der Art oder Idee, woraus die einzelnen Selbste (oder “Häupter”, wie wir mit leichterem Ausdruck sagen möchten) sich und ihre Freiheit ableiten. Hingegen stellt jedes gesellschaftliche Verhältnis den Anfang und die Möglichkeit einer ihm vorgesetzten künstlichen Person dar, welche über einen bestimmten Betrag von Kräften oder Mitteln verfüge; demnach auch Gesellschaft selber als ein wirkungsfähiges Ganzes gedacht” ; Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundbegriffe der reinen Soziologie* [1887] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), p. 153.

⁴⁰ The youthful essay *Das Leben der Studenten* from 1914-1915 in this sense plays a central role; in it Benjamin resumes his thoughts in relation to the *Jugendbewegung* in which he had played a part in its more liberal sections (especially towards Jews and women). In his opinion the revolutionary task of the new generation consisted in “eine



Entering the woods: Walter Benjamin, Fritz Heinle and the *Jugendbewegung*

Let us therefore summarize: for the whole of his life Walter Benjamin at first practiced, and then remembered, those youthful years forever with a melancholic fondness and interest, a cultural and poetic approach forever tied to a profound communal request (so profound that it became virtually undetectable) in which that co-presence of “Intimität und Versinnlichung” that, according to the young Lukács, characterized George’s poetry⁴¹ continuously and imperceptibly reemerges. For Lukács that co-presence of the interior sphere with the sensorial tangibility of George’s poetic world involves the presence of

So ist etwas tief Aristokratisches in der Lyrik Stefan Georges, etwas das mit einem kaum merklichen Blick, mit einer nur geplanten aber

Gemeinschaft von Erkennenden, an Stelle der Korporation von Beamten und Studierten”, in Walter Benjamin, *Das Leben der Studenten*, in GS II/1, p. 76; a *Gemeinschaft* constituted by “schöpferischer Menschen” and who “erhebt jedes Studium zur Universalität: unter der Form der Philosophie” (*ibid.*, p. 82), but who are not organized into an organic communal structure: “Es gilt eine keusche und verzichtende Jugend, die von Ehrfurcht vor den Nachfolgenden erfüllt ist” (*ibid.*, p. 86). That *keusche* and *verzichtende* youth – two heavily Georgian adjectives, reinforced by the quotation immediately following the poem “H.H.” (that is, Hugo von Hofmannsthal) contained in *Das Jahr der Seele* – constitutes the nucleus of a community which in this sense does not represent in any way an aspiration to the formation of a group different from the dominant one already connected to the selfsame aspiration; but rather an “anti-community” marked by solitude, renunciation and, in the end, death – never understood as the end of all things, but as the seal of an existence characterized by a “religious” sense, exemplified in the figure of the *Nachfolgenden*. It is a good idea to restate Peter-André Alt: “Benjamins Plädoyer für die Ausbildung wissenschaftlicher Eliten im Zeichen erneueter wissenschaftlicher Disziplin deckt sich durchaus mit der exklusiven Programmatik des George-Kreises und deren asketischen Ansprüchen”, in Peter-André Alt, *Gegenspieler des Propheten*, cit., p. 894. On the young Benjamin within the *Jugendbewegung*, on his relationships and his concept of *Gemeinschaft* more in general cf. among others Marino Pulliero, *Walter Benjamin. Le désir d'authenticité* (Paris: Bayard, 2005).

⁴¹ “Intimität und Versinnlichung: dieser Gegensatz ist die technische Wendung des seelischen Problems der Nähe und der Ferne”, in György Lukács, *Die Seele und die Formen*, cit., p. 189, a phrase which presents a remarkable conceptual and terminological density.



nicht getanen Handbewegung jede lärmende Banalität, alle leichten Seufzer und billigen Gemütsbewegungen von sich fern hält. Die Lyrik Georges hat fast keine Klagen : ruhig, vielleicht resigniert, doch immer tapfer, immer erhobenen Hauptes blickt sie dem Leben ins Auge.⁴²

So, the poet's aristocratic *habitus*, which is fed by a disdain that clearly is not only stylistic but above all else existential, without any doubt serves to reiterate the abyssal distance between his world and that of bourgeois daily life; however, it also underlines the so-to-say nihilistically heroic bearing of his poetry. It is precisely this aristocratic-spiritual dimension – but also heroic-nihilistic – that most attracted Benjamin, who, moreover, shared with George neither the communal and initiatory dimension, which was accentuated and radicalized with the passing of time,⁴³ nor the “heroic” attitude of the *Selbststilisierung* as poet and prophet. Benjamin favored instead that ascetic *intentio* that dwells within George's collections when read with greater empathy, in particular *Das Jahr der Seele*; the ascetic *intentio* both in its gestural and visual rarefaction, and in its linguistic and symbolic care, that we rediscover in Benjamin's sonnets.⁴⁴ For Benjamin it is not about promoting the pedagogical-teleological *Führer-Gefolgschaft* through the sacred *medium* of the poetic announcement, nor pushing the initiatory knowledge that is transmitted in some way to a confused and directionless society; rather, it concerns developing “die Idee der dialogischen Gemeinschaft sub specie aeternitatis als Kern des wissenschaftlichen Lebens”.⁴⁵ An idea that corresponds

⁴² *Ivi*, pp. 193-194.

⁴³ “The structuration of the *Kreis* according to severe hierarchical orders and in light of a complex strategy of cultural conditioning of the present reverberates, in the early 1900s, in George's poetry as well. If the semantics of *Teppich des Lebens* (1899) is still concentrated on the solitary and exclusive conversation between the poet and transcendence, *Der siebente Ring* (1907) develops according to a knowledge-based and esoteric principle comprehensible only with reference to the circle's ideology”, in Maurizio Pirro, *Come corda troppo tesa*, cit., p. 19.

⁴⁴ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Sonette*, in GS VII/1, pp. 27-67.

⁴⁵ Gert Mattenklott, *Walter Benjamin und Theodor W. Adorno über George*, cit., p. 284.



to the two poles around which Benjamin organizes the articulation of a complex cultural discourse starting from George: a dialogic community – because paradoxically based on the frank recognition of the heuristic and “sociable” value of solitude – and an idea of life subsumed within the sign of death and transience (without however declining into a realized and completed *meditatio mortis*). That dialogic community must realize itself through prolific philosophical production, which is realized primarily in the quasi-religious awareness of its intrinsic necessity.

It is precisely because Benjamin “rescues” these aspects from George – both the solitude of the knower and the presence of death through the *medium* of *Wissenschaft* – that he is destined thereby to create a radically new perspective as far as communal terms are concerned, and that his later distancing from that world does not translate into a simple renunciation of his prior closeness. In fact this is how his piece for the “Literarische Welt” concludes: “Immerhin habe ich im Bezirk dieser Dichtungen zu lange verweilt, um nicht auch eines Tages seine Schrecken kennezulernen”.⁴⁶ For Benjamin it is not only about underlining how important the poet was to his youth and to his network of intellectual friendships – but it is also about, as a warning, the distancing, almost the following maturity, as the text’s last words introduce an additional element of reflection that seems to contradict this assumption: “Aber wie Geister ungeborner Stunden, *versäumter Möglichkeiten*, stehen zuletzt noch einige Gedichte seitab, die ich immer allein geliebt habe, die sich nur immer allein mir erschlossen: Merzeichen dessen, was möglich gewesen wäre, wären Einsamkeit und Versäumnis nicht das Notwendige”.⁴⁷ In this sense the role that George’s figure played in Benjamin’s eyes cannot simply be resolved as having been a mere influence – even if that role was renounced over time – but rather as a real “disturbing presence”, an *entscheidende Erschütterung*, to use the words of Benjamin himself. It is not therefore, in other terms and more generally speaking, about philologically investigating a *Wirkungs-* or *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Stefan George as much as it is test-

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, [Über Stefan George], cit., p. 624.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*



ing the presence of a *Nachleben* of his works that, also beyond the intentions of those who at one time read and appreciated them, continue to work their powers upon the most intimate spheres of those who experience them or come under their spell. In that way, this modality of an author's "return to life" becomes the conceptual model of "another" history of literature, one based on disconnections and isolations rather than connections and influences.⁴⁸

Traces of such indications are found in two extremely different testimonies. The first case is a line in a letter Julia Radt Cohn had written to Benjamin on August 17, 1933, in response to that letter of his in which he had reproached her for an insufficiently empathetic reading of his most recent works, primarily the *Berliner Kindheit* and *Rückblick auf Stefan George*. In this letter Julia underlined her friend's position in relation to George: "Du weißt ja, dass ich ganz anders denke, als Du und nur aus dem Pathos und der Hassliebe, die ich aus Deinem 'Rückblick auf Stefan George' fühle, weiss ich, dass Du auf ganz andere Art, aber eben doch von ihm bewegt wurdest".⁴⁹ The second is the retrospective judgment that Theodor Adorno dedicated to his friend who had tragically committed suicide on the French-Spanish border, describing the pathos of a Romantic origin that had informed his youthful activism: "Groß war seine Sehnsucht, in Gemeinschaften sich einzufügen, neuen Ordnungen, auch praktisch, zu dienen. Sein Drang dahin bereitete, formal, in seiner Jugend eine Richtung, die später sich politisierte".⁵⁰ Through the references of two friends the conceptual and existential directions are defined with which it is possible to reconstruct the so-to-say political poetology – or poetic ethics – of the young Benjamin: on the one hand an ambivalent relationship to George's poetry that his friend Julia Cohn reconstructs around the two poles of *Pathos* and *Hassliebe*; and on the other Adorno's thesis

⁴⁸ Marion Picker is undoubtedly correct when she asserts: "Vom heutigen Standpunkt ist es eine Herausforderung, Georges nachhaltige Wirkung auf Literatur und Kritik im deutschsprachigen Raum zu ermessen, erweist sie sich als verschüttet", in Marion Picker, 1914. "Wie George in mein Leben hineinwirkte", cit., p. 60; but she is correct exclusively in the sense of a traditional historical-literary *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, cit., vol. IV: 1931-1934, pp. 265-266.

⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 97.



which posited the young Benjamin's neo-Romantic *Sehnsucht* to be at the base of his successive political-cultural commitment. Criticism has amply underlined how Walter Benjamin's intellectual beginnings – under the sign of the *Jugendbewegung* and the teachings of Gustav Wyneken,⁵¹ which from then on distanced themselves with the position the master took on the explosion of the First World War – are marked by a strongly spiritualized Hegelianism,⁵² by a utopia of *Gesellschaft* that, even in its strongly anomalous directions, is inscribed in the coeval *lebensreformerisch* and *jugendbewegt* sensibility of the late-Wilhelmine *Intelligentia*,⁵³ as well as by a radical *Kulturkritik* of Expressionist and Nietzschean origin that Benjamin shared with large sections of the *Jugendbewegung* and with Wyneken himself.⁵⁴ Those coordinates, however, are not simply abandoned by the mature Ben-

⁵¹ On Gustav Wyneken, an exemplary figure of the pedagogical reformer between post-Nietzschean *Kulturkritik*, the cult of the Führer and radical pedagogical motions cf: Heinrich Kupffer, *Gustav Wyneken* (Stuttgart: Erlebnispädagogik, 1970); Hinrich Jantzen, *Jugendkultur und Jugendbewegung. Studie zur Stellung und Bedeutung Gustav Wynekens innerhalb der Jugendbewegung* (Frankfurt: dipa Verlag, 1964); Winfried Mogge, *Wandervogel, Freideutsche Jugend und Bünde. Zum Jugendbild der bürgerlichen Jugendbewegung* and Gert Matenkloft, "Nicht durch Kampfesmacht und nicht durch Körperkraft..." *Alternativen jüdischer Jugendbewegung in Deutschland von Anfang bis 1933*, these last two contained in *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit. Der Mythos Jugend*, edited by Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz and Frank Trommler (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985). On the relationship with Benjamin, in addition to the other previously mentioned monographs on Benjamin, cf. also Ansgar Hil-lach, "Ein neu entdecktes Lebensgesetz der Jugend". *Wynekens Führergeist im Denken des jungen Benjamin*, in *global Benjamin*, cit., pp. 872-890.

⁵² "Mit diesem [from Wyneken] zu einer Metaphysik der Jugend verwaschenen Hegelianismus hat Benjamin sich zunächst bedingungslos identifiziert", in Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin – Der Intellektuelle als Kritiker*, cit., p. 16.

⁵³ "Gemeinschaft est peut-être la catégorie fondamentale du type wilhelmien, et dans cet horizon prend forme la pensée du jeune Benjamin", in Marino Pulliero, *Walter Benjamin. Le désir d'authenticité*, cit., p. 845. It is no accident, obviously, that Stefan George himself – together with maybe only Hölderlin – is one of the most beloved poets not only of the *Jugendbewegung* as a whole, but above all in the most exclusive Wynekenian circle: on this aspect in particular cf. Alfred Ehrentreich, *Stefan George in der freien Schulgemeinde Wickersdorf*, "Castrum Peregrini", CI (1972-1973), pp. 62-79, that however is primarily a biographical reconstruction.

⁵⁴ On these aspects cf. Fabrizio Desideri's classic study *Walter Benjamin – il tempo e le forme* (Rome: Ed. Riuniti, 1980), p. 42ss., which takes up again the intellectual char-



jamin, as we have seen, but rather seem to be precipitates in a new chemical compound in which they in some way keep themselves operative. We could define this chemical compound here as the *Nachleben* of past forms that rearticulate themselves in new constellations of sense in which *Einsamkeit* and *Versäumnis* assume central profiles, destined to mark Benjamin's intellectual and existential *habitus*.⁵⁵ Of such *Einsamkeit* and *Versäumnis* we must also consider his brief but intense friendship with the poet Christian Friedrich Heinle, who together with Benjamin shared years of commitment in the *Jugendbewegung* and a passion for George's poetry as well as the "communal" cult of solitude, but who would commit suicide together with his companion Rika Seligson⁵⁶ after Germany's entrance into the war. In the aforementioned letter to the latter's sister Carla dated August 4, 1913, Benjamin recounts in fact how he had passed the last days of his semester at Freiburg together with Heinle:

acteristics of the young Benjamin included in these coordinates: "A long process of thought and 'historian' together make up the layers of the *Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte*" (p. 48).

⁵⁵ In that sense this single piece of Benjamin's intellectual biography demonstrates surprising affinity with that of the young Lukács: he too, almost in the same amount of years, coming out of the shock related to the suicide of a close friend (the young painter Irma Seidler with whom he had had a passionate relationship that had been destined to end after only a few months and which successively saw him marry and she commit suicide). In his diary from that time Lukács writes (before Irma's suicide): "A slight shadow of hope. The 'Ice Age' begins. I am dead – but maybe there will be the works. That's how it seems anyway. I am dead: but this is not the bad thing. – The strangest thing of all is that I am dead, but that she lives in me; to the extent that something could live in me. Silently. Without desire. Without pain. Without anger. But she. Only she", in György Lukács, *Diario (1910-1911)* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983), p. 14. Another unsettling testimony to an ascent of form realized at the expense of real life.

⁵⁶ On Christoph Friedrich Heinle (1894-1914), called Fritz, cf. Geret Luhr, *Ästhetische Kritik der Moderne*, cit., p. 236ss.; Erdmut Wizisla, "Fritz Heinle war Dichter". *Walter Benjamin und sein Jugendfreund*, in "Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen". Frankfurter Benjamin-Vorträge, edited by Lorenz Jäger and Thomas Regehly (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1992), pp. 115-131; Giorgio Agamben, *Introduzione a Friedrich Heinle*, and Gianni Carchia, *Heinle e la "lingua della gioventù"*, both within "aut aut", 189-190 (1982), pp. 26-29 and pp. 42-46 (this monograph fascicle dedicated to Benjamin also contains the translation of some of Heinle's poems that were thought to have been lost and instead had been recovered in an edited version from his time by Carla Seligson: Frierich Heinle, *Poesie*, *ibid.*, pp. 32-41).



Da war mein Fenster, das Sie kennen, mit der Pappel und den spielenden Kindern, ein Fenster vor dem man sich reif und erfahren fühlt, wenn man noch nichts geleistet hat, also gefährlich, aber doch so lieb, daß ich dort wieder wohne, wenn ich noch einmal nach Freiburg komme. Da war Herr Heinle, von dem ich weiß, daß wir über Nacht Freunde geworden sind. Ich la shier gestern abend seine Gedichte aus diesem Semester und finde sie, entfernt von ihm, fast doppelt schön. [...] die vier letzten Abende waren wir (Heinle und ich) stets über Mitternacht hinaus zusammen, meist in der Walde.⁵⁷

The so-to-say allegorical meaning of this personal description on *Gemeinschaft* and solitude, destined to illuminate the Benjaminian considerations that follow in the letter as well, are inescapable. It is from the nucleus of the Benjaminian *Freundeskreis*, in the end made up of only Benjamin himself and Heinle, in any case that his particular communitarian theory of those years emerges. A community fed on distance, on pathos for the works more than for the people, as in the Romantic myths – central to the *Jugendbewegung* – of *Wanderung* and the forest.⁵⁸ To keep to the imaginative and allegorical system that this letter strongly evokes one could also say: the typical enchanted forest of German Romanticism (so typical that it loses its historical character *strictu sensu* in order to acquire the “mythological” dimension of a timeless *Pathosformel*) thus becomes the “space” in which demons, or gods, appear – it is the constitutionally uncertain space of the *Nachleben*, which is also the space of death *par excellence*. An example is Sonnet 7 from the first section of Benjamin’s poetic col-

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, cit., vol. 1, p. 85.

⁵⁸ In the end one could say that the letter to Carla Seligson is structured like a poetical work of George’s there where its evocative dimension emerges according to a representation of nature absolutely functional in its service to its expressed subject, but not therefore without its own literally autonomous power. As Maurizio Pirro says, speaking about *Das Jahr der Seele*, and principally the poem that opens the collection, “Komm in den totgesagten Park und schau”, in which “the objectification of the living, the reduction of his metaphorical potential to a linearity guaranteed not by the negation of nature, but by its transformation into an imaginal symbol”, in Maurizio Pirro, *Come corda troppo tesa*, cit., p. 118.



lection (the inner organization of the works was thought up by Benjamin himself):

Wie soll mich dieses Tages Glänzen freuen
Wenn du nicht mit mir in die Wälder trittst
Wo Sonne in den schwarzen Ästen blitzt
Die konnte einst dein tiefer Blick erneuen

Indes der Lehre Wort dein Finger ritzt
In meines Denkens Tafel die in Treuen
Die Zeichen wahrte – und den Blick den scheuen
Erhebe ich doch wach am Wegrand sitzt

Der Tod statt deiner und ich bin im Walde
Verlassener als Busch und Baum zur Nacht
Ein Wind fährt über die entblößte Halde

Des Mittags Helle die mich jäh umfacht
Scheint vom gewölbten Himmel tiefer blauer
Wie eines rätselvollen Auges Trauer.⁵⁹

A sonnet that, beyond the manifesto of these biographical circumstances described in the letter, perfectly circumscribes and describes the risky “place” of the Benjaminian poetic community in which death, more than a border to be meditated upon, represents the inevitable penalty of its transience, which precisely for this reason is destined to continuously renew itself within the *Nachleben*.

Criticism of the *Priesterwissenschaft*. Walter Benjamin and the *George-Kreis*

This Benjaminian place is an isolated place (and nevertheless remains a communal space in which it continues to give itself some kind of communal, delicate and hidden but forever profound

⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Sonette*, cit., pp. 30-31.



epiphany); it is a place in which – to take up once again the aforementioned image in relation to the *George-Kreis* – there is no sacred wood, nor temple, and therefore no officiating priest nor mass of adoring faithful. This is the origin of Benjamin's great skepticism toward the circle surrounding the poet that can be found in multiple places in his critical production.⁶⁰ His skepticism arose from both the great perplexities around the opportunity of celebrating a poetic cult *sans phrase* and those regarding the comprehensive profile of the group, accused of practicing a "*Priestwissenschaft der Dichtung*" (as Benjamin wrote in his essay of 1933); or, rather, the "priest-like science of poetry guarded in the 'Blätter für Kunst'". The young who lived in the name of George's poetry, Benjamin continues, have no connection to that "welche in seiner Lehre Befestigungen ihrer Position im Machtkampf der Parteien gefunden hat. Nein, vielmehr in der, welche an ihrem besten Teil schon darum ihr Zeugenamt vorm Richtstuhl der Geschichte versehen kann, weil sie tot ist".⁶¹ Undoubtedly, however, for the Benjamin taken with the exclusive Georgian *Kreis*, it is not only about stigmatizing immediate scientific and political issues, but also about emphasizing how its members spinelessly accept the most serious *sacrificium intellectus*: that of relinquishing their creative liberty in favor, one could say, of a teleological creation of "liberty" at the service of the supreme teachings of the popular-poet.⁶² As Benjamin says while severely judging Gundlof's

⁶⁰ Paradigmatic, for example, of the radical contestation that Benjamin carried out of the Gundolfian "sanctification" of Goethe in his essay on the *Elective Affinities*, or the refined but nevertheless crushing commentary on Kommerell's book. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Wider ein Meisterwerk. Zu Max Kommerell, "Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik"*, in GS III, pp. 252-259.

⁶¹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Rückblick auf Stefan George*, cit., p. 399.

⁶² "Uns leitet die absicht, die seelischen kräfte zu deuten, welche zeugend und empfangend die einheit eines ganzen geistigen wesens bilden, und wer mit uns nach dem spruch des grossen meisters alles vergängliche nur ein gleichnis des ewigen geschehens weiss und in dem maasse, als dieses gefühl sein herz mit der wucht der unendlichen bilder belastet, seinen geist vom drucke der alltäglichen hemmungen des einzel-lebens und den alljährlichen verschaltungen des gemeinlebens, die zeit und raum bedingen, erleichtert fühlt, wird unserer absicht um so williger folgen, je weniger wir am vielfachen und tausendfach wiederholten der menschlichen dinge haften bleiben, und



Goethe, “So vollendet sich ein Dogma das das Werk, welches es zum Leben verzauberte durch nicht weniger verführerisches Irren als Leben wieder zum Werk erstarren läßt und das die vielberufene »Gestalt« des Dichters als einen Zwitter von Heros und Schöpfer zu fassen vermeint, an dem sich mit dem Schein des Tiefsinns alles behaupten läßt”.⁶³ What Benjamin condemns in the attitude of the *Kreis*’s disciples, deliberately failing to distinguish between rather diverse voices present within it,⁶⁴ is the political teleology underlying the poetics; a teleology that sought to transform the work into life without any waste, thereby conferring upon it an Olympic and sacred rigidity and placing it at the service of a strict and obligatory cult. It is precisely in these descriptions, it is important to add, that one rediscovers the anti-modern fashion that was simultaneously present within the logic of mass society – and thus completely modern –

wird uns um so inniger verstehen, je mehr wir vermögen, sie am höchsten beispiel, das stets das klarste und zugleich mehr als beispiel, nämlich das urspiel jeder seelischen bewegung ist, am Göttlichen und Ewigen deutlich zu machen”; this is, for example, Friedrich Wolters in his “Bible” that scandalized the *Kreis*, in the opening lines of the section dedicated to *Dienst*: Friedrich Wolters, *Herrschaft und Dienst* (Berlin: Bondi, 1923), p. 53 [upper- and lowercase letters as in the original].

⁶³ Walter Benjamin, *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften* [1921-1922], in GS I/1, p. 160.

⁶⁴ This is perhaps the only real limit – or prejudice – of Benjamin’s socio-cultural analysis of the Georgian *Kreis*: he did not want to distinguish, to mention two names, between the intellectual characteristics of a Wolters – author, in addition to the brief aforementioned essay, of the weighty and in the end vacuous work *Stefan George und die Blätter für Kunst. Deutsche Geistesgeschichte seit 1890* (Berlin: Bondi, 1930) – and that of a Komerell, who instead in those same years had written a book with similar intentions, but of an entirely different conceptual tone: *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* (Berlin: Bondi, 1928). For the rest, however, it was precisely the *Kreis* that validated its own theoretical and existential homogeneity. By now we have accurate and rather acute reconstructions of the George-Kreis, whether on the sociological, cultural or *textanalytisch* sides. Cf. Carola Groppe, *Die Macht der Bildung. Das deutsche Bürgertum und der George-Kreis 1890-1933* (Cologne-Weimar: Böhlau, 1997); Rainer Kolk, *Literarische Gruppenbildung. Am Beispiel des George-Kreises 1890-1945* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998); Günter Baumann, *Der George-Kreis*, in *Kreise Gruppen Bünde. Zur Soziologie moderner Intellektuellenassoziation*, edited by Richard Faber and Christine Holste (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2000), pp. 65-84 (but the entire volume represents an extremely useful chronological list of the forms of intellectual associations in the first half of the 20th century in Germany); as does the previously cited anthology *Wissenschaftler im George-Kreis*.



that the group enjoyed.⁶⁵ For the most part unimportantly, but with very *blasé* and at the same time interested understatement, in 1920 Friedrich Gundolf got worked up enough to negate almost any sacred, esoteric or initiatory approach of the *Kreis* whatsoever:

Der Kreis ist weder ein Geheimbund mit Statuten und Zusammenkünften, noch eine Sekte mit phantastischen Riten und Glaubensartikeln, noch ein Literatenklüngel (die Mitarbeiterschaft an den “Blättern für Kunst”) ist an sich noch kein Zeichen der Zugehörigkeit), sondern es ist eine kleine Anzahl Einzelner und bestimmter Haltung und Gesinnung, vereinigt durch die unwillkürliche Verehrung eines großen Menschen, und bestrebt der Idee die er ihnen verkörpert (nicht diktiert) schlicht, sachlich und ernsthaft durch ihr Alltagsleben oder durch ihre öffentliche Leistung zu dienen;⁶⁶

while just a few pages before he had maintained a positive dialectic between the public and secret sphere, between mass and *Gestaltung*, between atomization and *Bund* – between modern society and the separate *Kreis*.⁶⁷ Criticism has often emphasized the im-

⁶⁵ “Für die Gefolgschaft Georges war Anpassungsfähigkeit die Voraussetzung, das Vermögen, auf die wechselnden Inkarnationen des Neuen wie auf Modartikel sich rasch einzustellen, um up-to-date zu bleiben”, in Gert Mattenklott, *Bilderdienst. Ästhetische Opposition bei Beardsley und George* (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1985), p. 266. The history of Mattenklott’s work originally published in 1970 and for which he was not uncontroversially awarded a chair at the University of Marburg, demonstrates just how much the *Nachleben* is also the history of different cultural solitudes, which precisely for this reason erect bridges over abysses that until that moment had been unimagined. The reason for such controversy is that it is a study that forever hangs in the balance between Georgian “cult” and its debate in a critical-ideological sense; furthermore, even its cover – which reinterprets the *Jugendstil* of the Anglo-German *Jahrhundertwende* through a Pop-Art lens, brazenly exhibiting the reproduction of a design by Beardsley of three satyrs gifted with extremely large phalli – is provocative. On Mattenklott and his position in the extreme offshoots of the Georgian *Nachleben* in Benjamin’s footsteps cf. Ulrich Raulff’s shrewd reconstruction, *Kreis ohne Meister*, cit., pp. 515-518.

⁶⁶ Friedrich Gundolf, *George* (Berlin: Bondi, 1920), p. 31.

⁶⁷ “Diese Idee [die Einheit einer Seele mit einem ewigen Raum und einer einmaligen Zeit] setzt entgegen der Verheutigung (Aktualisierung) der Werte das Ewige, der Veröffentlichung der Werte das Geheimnis, der Benutzung und dem Genuß den Zauber, der Masse die Gestaltung, der Einzelung (Atomisierung) den Bund” (*ibid.*, p. 27).



PLICIT anti-modernism of the Georgian Kreis; but, in reality, the Georgian circle proved itself, precisely by virtue of its exclusive and esoteric attitude expressed on the poetological, existential and religious dimension of the secret,⁶⁸ inside the logic of the steadily growing mass society – already evident in the objective failure that in that way it came to create between an aristocratic and exclusive style and the unscrupulous use of a very modern logic of goods.⁶⁹

Walter Benjamin proved himself equally critical and analytical toward all of that, in any case, to the same degree he would later be with metropolises: in both cases he reconstructs an archeology of the myth by delving into its darkest origins, and simultaneously bringing to light its most recent and unsettling derivations. Thus the image that dominates Benjamin's retrospective glance from the edge of the abyss into his own past, and of the poetic figure projecting its own image, is fine-tuned – a poetic figure, he will by now have understood, that is a “figure” of a work, even before that of an author; and that condenses itself in an image, that of the poet-prophet, destined to contrast in every way that of the popular-poet (the image that Benjamin evoked in the opening of his 1933 work). If the popular-poet appears like one who announces the coming kingdom of poetry to his disciples, the poet-prophet appears like one who exclusively apprehends a *Vorwissen um die Katastrophe* as Benjamin underlines: “George, dem die eigene strenge Zucht, und angeborener Spürsinn für das Nüchternen, Vorwissen um die Katastrophe gegeben hat, vermochte doch als Führer oder Lehrer nur schwächliche und lebensfremde Regeln oder Verhaltensweisen vorzuschreiben”.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ “The secret is the privileged dimension and at the same time logical poetic heart of German symbolism. For the canonical authors of the movement – George, Hofmannsthal, Rilke – art operates in contact with the occult side of things, with reality's return to shadow; and at the same time the secret is an instrument of the symbolic intensification of reality itself. The possession of a common intuition, in fact, connects the spirits ready to fulfill the aesthetic experience, and together separates them from contact with the arid prose of civilization”, in Maurizio Pirro, *Come corda troppo tesa*, cit., p. 192.

⁶⁹ “Das Warenzeichen der Blätter für die Kunst hat George verliehen wie die Wintergenossenschaft das Weinsiegel. Es bedeutet nicht allein die Anerkennung der Zugehörigkeit, sondern auch die Verbürgung der Echtheit und Reinheit des ausgezeichneten Produkts”, in Gert Mattenklott, *Bilderdienst*, cit., p. 219.

⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Rückblick auf Stefan George*, cit., p. 393.



“Weak and life-distant” are how the behavioral paradigms prescribed by George’s poetry appear to that Benjaminian youth: precisely because they detracted from the work that the vicious circle of *Herrschaft* and *Dienst*, *Führer* and *Gefolgschaft* brought within themselves in order to dedicate themselves instead to the “perfect” superimposing of poet and poetry – perfect to the degree that they took away from Olympic cultural process of superimposition between life and work that was instead at work within the Georgian *Kreis* –, in order to dedicate themselves to the actual acquisition of life – in the *medium* of death. In this sense the symphonic closure of this *Rückblick* is to be understood:

Das Geschlecht, welchem die reinsten und vollkommensten Gedichte von George ein Asyl gegeben haben, war zum Tode vorbestimmt. [...] George war ihm keineswegs der “Künder” von “Weisungen”, sondern ein Spielmann,⁷¹ da es bewegte wie der Wind, die “blumen der frühen heimat” [...].⁷² [...] Der große Dichter ist George diesem Geschlecht gewesen, und er war es als Vollender der Decadence, deren spielerische Gebarung sein Impuls verdrängte, um in ihr dem Tod den Platz zu schaffen, den er in dieser Zeitwende zu fordern hatte. Er steht am Ende einer geistigen Bewegung, die mit Baudelaire begonnen hatte. Mag sein, daß diese Feststellung einmal nur eine literarhistorische gewesen ist. Inzwischen ist sie eine geschlechtliche geworden und will ihr Recht.⁷³

Benjamin in his conclusion thus confirms, and not without detachment, the importance that Stefan George had had upon a very hidden and very particular part of his youth, and whose teachings he

⁷¹ Beyond indicating, literally, the ambulatory organ grinders of the Middle Ages and of the beginnings of the modern age, the word “Spielmann” also possesses a secret echo, perceptible to those who with Benjamin had a shared past in the *Jugendbewegung*: *Der Spielmann* is in fact a collection of songs that was very common among the *Wandervögel*, or rather, those in the youth movement in the widest sense.

⁷² This is a quote from the composition “Uns die durch viele jahre” that Benjamin loved (in Stefan George, *Der teppich des Lebens*, cit., p. 35).

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, *Rückblick auf Stefan George*, cit., p. 399.



had to a large degree followed as if spellbound.⁷⁴ In that way he recounts a precise historical-literary chapter no longer based on the usual mechanisms of influences, currents, protagonists and imitators, but on the *evocative* (in a literal sense) power of an oeuvre's *Nachleben*, which thus ceases to be historical-literary, and instead becomes primarily *historical*. The death of the poet, therefore, does not consign him to the marble and celebratory pantheon of poetry's eternal "heroes". On the contrary, he is destined to continuously reappear, and in so doing continuously re-propose the "Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit".⁷⁵

⁷⁴ The same Klaus Mann, to give an example outside of the Kreis, in 1928 had held a conference with the suggestive title "Stefan George – Führer der Jugend", which concluded with the words: "Stefan George bedeutete der Generation um die Jahrhundertwende den großen Beweis dafür, daß *der Dichter* auch in unserer Zeit möglich sei, daß er in ihr, mahndend, fordernd und prophezeiend, wirksam sein könnte. Er wurde der Generation, die sich um 1914 opferte, der reinste und höchstgeliebte Repräsentant eines hölderlinschen Deutschland, für das sie sterben zu müssen glaubte, während sie in Wahrheit für eine pathetisch hergerichtete Lüge fiel. Er ist uns, die wir während eines Zusammenbruches aufgewachsen sind, Bindung an die Werte und Traditionen großer Bildungswelten und Vergangenheiten; während er uns also vor Entwurzelung bewahrt, ist er uns auch, durch sein Werk und durch sein Schicksal, das er uns vorgelebt hat, Führer und Wegweiser in eine Zukunft des reinsten Lichtes, des strengen Glücks", in Klaus Mann, *Stefan George – Führer der Jugend*, in *Auf der Suche nach einem Weg. Aufsätze* (Berlin: Transmare, 1931), pp. 121-130, here p. 130.

⁷⁵ "Das Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit" is a typically Benjaminian definition: "Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind: jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit", in Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in GS V/1, p. 578 .