

BERICHTE UND BESPRECHUNGEN

RÜDIGER GÖRNER, Georg Trakl. Dichter im Jahrzehnt der Extreme, Wien (Zsolnay) 2014, 352 S.

Und Kinder wachsen auf mit tiefen Augen,
Die von nichts wissen, wachsen auf und sterben,
Und alle Menschen gehen ihre Wege.

Und süße Früchte werden aus den herben
Und fallen nachts wie tote Vögel nieder
Und liegen wenig Tage und verderben.¹⁾

As far as one can tell in the absence of an index, Hugo von Hofmannsthal's ›Ballade des äußeren Lebens‹ is not one of the very many intertexts cited by Rüdiger Görner in his book on Trakl.²⁾ And it is perfectly true that its composition does not fall in what Görner calls “das Jahrzehnt der Extreme”, though its publication certainly does.³⁾ It is true too that Hofmannsthal's is not a name cited in the index either to the ›Historisch-kritische Ausgabe‹ or to Weichselbaum's biography.⁴⁾ Yet if Walter Ritzer's ›Neue Trakl-Bibliographie‹ is to be believed, Eva Reuter had brought the two poets together under the sign of “Schwermut” as early as 1949.⁵⁾ And these lines seem in some ways to express the essence of Trakl, especially of the Trakl presented in Görner's study.

What comes across with extraordinary intensity is the profundity of Trakl's vision. So much so, indeed, that as a reader one is apt to get lost in it. That vision, as Görner presents it, did not much concern itself with the mundane details of everyday living, was often absent and self-absorbed. To that extent it is possible to apply to it the precise pun of Hofmannsthal's ‘von’: Trakl, like Hofmannsthal's

¹⁾ HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL, ›Ballade des äußeren Lebens‹, in: H. v. H., Sämtliche Werke I. Gedichte I, ed. by EUGENE WEBER, Frankfurt/M. 1984, p. 44.

²⁾ RÜDIGER GÖRNER, Georg Trakl. Dichter im Jahrzehnt der Extreme, Vienna 2014. Hereafter cited just with a page number.

³⁾ Ibid., p. 221.

⁴⁾ GEORG TRAKL, Dichtungen und Briefe. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, ed. by WALTHER KILLY and HANS SZKLENAR, 2 vols, Salzburg 1969. Hereafter cited as HKA. HANS WEICHSELBAUM, Georg Trakl. Eine Biographie, Salzburg 2014.

⁵⁾ WALTER RITZER, Neue Trakl-Bibliographie, Salzburg 1983, p. 177.

children, can come across as naïve, ignorant, even other-worldly precisely because he is so achingly aware of the void at the heart of being. Equally, Trakl's poetic universe is full of people going on their way, often without a concrete social or geographical goal, so that the act of going, and the frequently irredeemable loneliness that accompanies it, necessarily become metaphorical and metaphysical. Like Hofmannsthal, Trakl, the poet par excellence of autumn and decay, never tires of following fruits, especially the crimson-black berry of the elder, through its cycle of ripening and decay.⁶⁾ For Trakl as for Hofmannsthal, birds are also implicated in the process, notably in the elegiac dactyls of "Lange lauscht der Mönch dem sterbenden Vogel am Waldsaum" (HKA I, 421). And when that poem continues "O die Nähe des Todes", those of us who have read Görner – who devotes some of his finest pages to an account of Trakl's invocative 'O' – realize with a shock of recognition that we are here at the heart of Trakl's universe of poetic practice. In Trakl, even more than in Hofmannsthal, it is death itself whose seeds were there from the beginning, which grew slowly, naturally and single-mindedly to fruition, and then, when the moment was ripe, turned this stocky, slightly stooping man (Görner's book is sparsely, but evocatively illustrated) into an uncanny resemblance of a bird's carcass.

That moment occurred in 1914. It is the first thing that is mentioned on the blurb to Görner's book, and for good reason. For that book is a characteristically oblique contribution to the slew of publications which appeared in the second decade of the 21st century to commemorate the centenary of the First World War. With the help of Alfred Ehrenstein, who punningly says of Trakl that he was "mehr Suicid als Cid", Görner (p. 289) underlines the point that this death, though it occurred in the context and in the wake of mechanized mass slaughter, is at once anachronistic and prophetic. It refuses the rhetoric and practice of heroism, and with it the (ironically broken) way in which a whole generation made sense of their likely demise. And it substitutes instead a death by creative toxicity (the phrase, of course, is Görner's – see p. 64 and the whole chapter that starts there) of a kind that makes Trakl a forerunner of what with the death of Kurt Cobain and Amy Winehouse would become the 'club 27'. Although there is some equivocation over whether Trakl's death was actually deliberate, and although his allegiance to Alvarez's 'savage God' is not universally accepted, it is hard not to read his cocaine overdose as a gesture of absolute refusal: Trakl was no more prepared to participate in the folly of the First World War than he had been to work for the 'Ministerium für öffentliche Arbeiten' (see Weichselbaum, 128f.). It is also though an expression of separateness and solitude: nothing about Trakl's life demonstrates his difference from his contemporaries as persuasively as his leaving it. And those friends who arrived after the event could plausibly surmise that, had they got to Trakl earlier, things would have turned out differently (HKA II, 742; Weichselbaum 174; Görner 272). At another level again, though, that death seems necessary and inevitable.

⁶⁾ See for example HKA I, 54, quoted in GÖRNER, p. 297.

In the light of it, Trakl's poems make perfect sense – and conversely, the poems seem to lead by an inexorable logic if not to that death, then to an equivalent one. And as we have seen with Hofmannsthal, a strong sense of an ending – what in Freud would become the death drive and what Mann, in Görner (p. 140) calls a “Sympathie mit dem Tode” is characteristic of the period as a whole.

In other words, Görner's book, written and published to commemorate Trakl's death, is also structured by and permeated with it. Thus on page 62 Görner writes “Trakls Dichtungen werden fortan das Sterben als ein Werden zum Tode zeigen.” On page 136 he notes specifically, “Trakls *Gedichte* zeugen vom Wirken der Toten und des Todes.” And on pages 294–295 he quotes Adorno to the effect that “Die Einheit des Expressionismus besteht im Ausdruck dessen, daß die [...] Menschen [...] zu Toten wurden.” The sequence matters, and helps to explain the ways in which Görner approaches Trakl. For Görner has important things to say both about the “Dichtungen” – that is the holistic poetology of Trakl's writing, and about individual collections and poems, and also about his place in the literature of his time. For example: the context in which he quotes Thomas Mann on the “Sympathie mit dem Tode” is not that of Trakl's possible decadence, nor even that of a discussion of his possible incestuous “Blutschuld” – but at the start of a discussion of his use of colour. It is a take on a much vexed issue that is instantly persuasive – and would have been even more so if his publisher had offered a colour reproduction of the extraordinary self-portrait from December 1913, to which Görner devotes some particularly illuminating pages (178–180), and in which all the Trakl colours, separately and together, can only contrive to give his skull a thin veneer of anguish. Reading this portrait also in the light of what Görner has to say about synaesthesia and music is actually a terrifying experience.

Görner's reading of the poem ‘In Venedig’ is similarly shattering. The poetic logic whereby the ‘Einsame’ and the ‘Heimatlose’ become a child with a “kränkliches Lächeln” is rendered even more compelling by the reference to the fate of Gerhart Fischer and the description by his sister of the mortally ill 19-year-old's final gondola journey. In this regard too Görner does valuable work in reminding us that there is nothing fantastic about Trakl's poems. On the contrary, they are unrelentingly realistic – but the reality they represent has been transformed almost beyond recognition by the apprehension of death that underlies them. The point is underlined as it were from the other end in Görner's reading of ‘Vorstadt im Föhn’. The poem begins for all the world like an expressionist ‘Großstadtgedicht’, with the slaughter-house offering a synaesthetic reminder of death in the form of blood which seeps into the canal like a whisper. But it ends with a vision of reflections and clouds that is informed by memories of childhood and childhood reading.

Late in the study, on page 296, Görner quotes a small poem that is not by Trakl at all. The author is Friedrich C. Heinle, who, Görner tells us, committed suicide in 1914 at the age of 19, in protest against the war. The poem begins with a syntactical ambiguity of a kind which Trakl pursued much further, whereby it is not immediately obvious that the word “Licht”, capitalized as befits its position at the

start of a line, is in fact an adverb. It introduces a play of light and shadow, past and present, in which familiar symbolist trochaics have suddenly to accommodate “Schüsse”. The second stanza starts with the word “Leise”, which contrasts with the martial sound words of the previous stanza (“dröhnen”, “klirrend”), and, because it is associated with light, takes on a hint of synaesthesia. It also of course expresses the tone of Trakl’s poetry generally, and it occurs in a similarly prominent position in a poem by Werfel, which Görner had quoted on page 275. The stanza also features the Trakl-word “mild”, a contracted participle (“verschwommen”) and some pluralized “Schatten” that are both literal, metaphorical and metaphysical. And it ends with the ambiguous phrase “wie verweint”. With it the poem becomes an act of mourning directly comparable to Wilfred Owen’s ›Anthem for Doomed Youth‹. In this context the “Abends” of Heinle’s title turns out to be the precise equivalent of Owen’s “slow dusk”. Thus by introducing Heinle’s poem into his discussion of Trakl, Görner makes us aware of the extent to which the great poet of evenings is part of a pan-European phenomenon. Or, as Hofmannsthal puts it, in a line which could again serve as a summary of Görner’s Trakl: “Und dennoch sagt der viel, der ‘Abend’ sagt.” Without Görner’s erudition and wide reading, without his sensitive analyses and his extraordinary skill at capturing echoes, and above all without his minor-key musings on death and the author, we would have understood a great deal less both about the ‘Dennoch’ – and about the ‘viel’.

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Wie Rüdiger Görners ausgezeichnetes Buch über Oskar Kokoschka einzuordnen ist in das nahezu nicht mehr überschaubare Werk des deutsch-englischen Literaturwissenschaftlers, gibt er in seiner Danksagung vor: nämlich als Schlussteil eines monografischen Triptychons, in dem sich Thematisches mit Biografischem verbindet. Das will sagen, Görner setzt anhand von Kokoschka fort, was er mit ›Rainer Maria Rilke. Im Herzwerk der Sprache‹ (1987) und ›Georg Trakl. Dichter im Jahrzehnt der Extreme‹ (2014) begonnen hat, nämlich „eine Trilogie des Künstlerischen“ zu versuchen, „in der das Wort neu sichtbar werden und das Sichtbare anders als sonst üblich zu Wort kommen sollte“ (350).

Dass ein ganz konkreter Link zum Trakl-Buch besteht, legt Görner im Nachwort offen: es ist Georg Trakls eindrucksvolles Gedicht ›Die Nacht‹, das spontan entstand, als der Lyriker den Maler bei der Verfertigung seines Gemäldes ›Windsbraut‹ beobachtete, mit dem Kokoschka auf seine so stürmische wie tragisch-