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A Companion to the Works of Stefan George (review)

Robert Edward Norton

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Jens Rieckmann, ed. *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George*. Rochester: Camden House, 2005. 257 pp. US\$ 90. ISBN 1-57113-214-7.

“Companions” of this sort – compilations of essays by several hands devoted to various aspects of the life and work of a single figure – have proliferated in recent years. Cynics might suspect that they are a clever marketing strategy in an era when increasingly cash-strapped college and university libraries have been forced to reduce their purchases of scholarly monographs. While relatively easy to pass on an extended investigation of, say, the motif of the travelling minstrel in nineteenth-century German novellas, it seems harder to justify not buying a book that not only provides “well-informed and up-to-date critical commentary,” but also “may be read profitably by the reader with a general interest in the subject,” as the publisher describes the series in which the book under review was published. The promise of specialized expertise coupled with broad appeal combine to make the book seem to be a responsible acquisition.

Unfortunately, this volume does not fulfill the criteria set forth by the publisher. Many of the contributions, although there are exceptions, are both ill-informed and out-of-date, and some are so muddled they can only sow confusion or worse in the mind of anyone not already well acquainted with the subject. This is especially a pity given that the subject, Stefan George, is one with which few readers are familiar, and such an introduction to his poetry and his world could have addressed that ignorance. In addition, George is a notoriously difficult, indeed willfully hermetic, poet, and thus he needs especially knowledgeable and judicious explanation. Clearly that was the intention: following the editor’s introduction, which, although somewhat problematic for reasons I shall discuss below, is one of the best and clearest parts of the entire book, there are two sections, one devoted to “The Poetry” and one to the intellectual, political, and cultural “Contexts” informing the works. In the first, William Waters writes about “Stefan George’s Poetics,” but never really specifies what he means by “poetics.” Indeed, Waters contradicts himself, claiming on the one hand that “George’s works comprise a poetry of opposition, everywhere self-conscious of their imperative to evade, resist, correct and redirect the culture and language surrounding them” (28), yet on the other insisting: “Rather than, as is sometimes said, mounting a monumental critique of his age and its views, George constantly tacks back and forth, trying out now an extravagant pose of defiance, now a reconciliation, now a cry of doubt” (47). Such contradictions occur among the individual essays as well. Jeffrey Todd at one point refers to the vexed question of “George’s own explicit rejection of Nazi honors and self-imposed exile” (140) in Switzerland in 1933. Ritchie Robertson, however, accurately dispenses with this exculpatory fiction by explaining that “George was simply continuing his normal habit of visiting Switzerland in the autumn, and in any case he considered Switzerland to be part of Germany” and that “George passively supported the Third Reich” (201). Of course, differences of opinion or emphasis cannot be avoided in a venture of this sort. But one wonders what an uninitiated reader will make of such irreconcilable statements about a subject so important to an overall assessment of George’s legacy.

Beyond such difficulties, several essays fail even to make their own argument explicit. Karla Schultz’s contribution on *Das Jahr der Seele* and *Der Teppich des Lebens* lacks a discernible focus and even ends with a disjointed excursus on Adorno and Celan. Paul Bishop, who writes on “Stefan George and the Munich Cosmologists,” mentions

Bachofen only in passing and with only superficial reference to *Das Mutterrecht*, the bible of the Cosmic Circle. And in a rambling essay on the potentially illuminating topic of “George’s Concept of Love & the Gay Emancipation Movement,” Marita Keilson-Lauritz allows mere mention of the word homoeroticism to take the place of an analysis of the phenomenon.

But it is on the question of George’s political allegiances and influence that the volume falls particularly short. As mentioned, George has been almost entirely forgotten today. Why? The editor proposes that, in addition to the lack of competent translations of his poetry, “George’s relative obscurity can also be attributed in part to Rilke’s reputation in the Anglo-Saxon world as the pre-eminent modern German poet” (2), as if there were only one seat assigned to modern German poets in the Anglo-Saxon literary table and Rilke inconveniently occupied it. The real reason, though, for the sepulchral silence surrounding George’s name since the Second World War lies in the many connections – some overt, some subtle and complex – between George and National Socialism. This is an uncomfortable topic, but for too long George’s apologists have tried to will it out of existence through silence or denials. And while it is not the only context in which to understand George, it is a critical one and cannot be ignored. Yet on this score the editor, in his perhaps forgivable desire to rescue George from one-sided interpretations that concentrate on the affiliations with National Socialism to the exclusion of all other aspects of his achievement, rehearses a grotesque conclusion. To emphasize, or even to mention, the relationship between George and the Hitler regime “is to follow in the footsteps of the Nazis who considered themselves the fulfillment of all prophecies” (18). Do not, in other words, draw a line, however tenuous, between George and the Nazis, for in so doing you would be employing and affirming the Nazis’ own categories of self-understanding. That sounds like an alarmingly familiar form of intellectual intimidation.

In the introduction, the editor hopes that the book will help spark “a rekindling of interest in this crucial, albeit controversial writer” (3). That seems an unlikely result, but if it does occur it will not be for the reasons he must have hoped for.

ROBERT E. NORTON *University of Notre Dame*

Paul Michael Lützeler. *Freundschaft im Exil. Thomas Mann und Hermann Broch*.

Thomas-Mann-Studien, Band 31. Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann, 2004. 246 S.

Euro 39. ISBN 3-465-03312-7

Nur wenige wissenschaftliche Aufsätze vergleichen die Romane Thomas Manns und Hermann Brochs. Die Beziehung zwischen dem weltberühmten hanseatischen Schriftsteller und dem erst spät zur Literatur gekommenen und heute fast nur in Insiderkreisen bekannten Wiener Autor sind bisher von den jeweiligen Forscherzirkeln kaum wahrgenommen worden. Dabei war eine Rezension zum *Tod in Venedig* Brochs erste Veröffentlichung überhaupt, und diese Novelle hatte, nicht anders als später die *Joseph-Romane*, einen nicht zu unterschätzenden Einfluss auf das literarische Schaffen Brochs. Auf der anderen Seite las Thomas Mann Brochs *Schlafwandler*-Trilogie und kannte dessen *Vergil*-Roman durch verschiedene Privatlesungen Brochs im Hause Mann bereits in seinen frühen Stadien. Doch die Verbindung der beiden Autoren ging weit