

Histories of the Spirit

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“No man today embodies the divine more purely and creatively than George – but that is not enough: in George the present time has its hub and centre of renewal.”¹ These were the sentiments the political economist Kurt Singer expressed in a letter to Martin Buber in 1916, after a single brief meeting with the poet. By the 1910s and 20s, Stefan George, the son of a provincial innkeeper who served as the model for Max Weber’s account of ‘charismatic authority’, had become a major cultural and political force in Germany.² And he was a force with a program to revitalize humanity. Along with many others in early 20th-century Germany, he sought to save society from what he saw as the morbid clutches of liberalism, and he pursued a life-long project to reanimate the human soul within an aesthetic empire of his own making. With this ‘State’, led by him as poet-ruler, he and his followers built an alternate model of modernity, a ‘Secret Germany’ that they hoped would ultimately overcome current political and social systems and thereby reconstitute modern life.

By the 1910s, George -- then in his 40s and early 50s -- had collected several generations of disciples, about two dozen gifted and usually handsome men whom he considered worthy to be shaped by him and who offered him their unbounded devotion. These men formed the *George-Kreis* (George Circle); the first generation of his disciples, who were around George’s own age, were mainly aspiring poets, but among those whom George called his ‘sons and grandsons’ many were academics. Around the time these younger followers began to establish a

¹ Quoted in Andreas Höfele, *No Hamlets: German Shakespeare from Nietzsche to Carl Schmitt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

² See Thomas Karlauf, *Stefan George: Die Entdeckung des Charisma*. Munich: Blessing, 2007.

foothold in the German academy, the form of George's program developed from primarily aesthetic to aesthetic-scholarly, from poetry to 'Wissenschaftskunst.'³ He began overseeing the publication of works of scholarship, especially in the field of *Geistesgeschichte*, which can be translated as either 'intellectual history' or 'history of the spirit.' This academic work of the George Circle has been the subject of several recent studies stressing its political nature and the serious challenge to German historiography it presented. What I hope to add to this discussion is the contention that what might be called the religious aspect of George's program should be taken seriously, and specifically that this turn to scholarship should be understood not only in terms of the political and the scholarly, but also in terms of the theological and even magical.⁴

It has already been perceived that these works were an attempt to start a spiritual revolution in a broader section of the German public. Yet the current scholarship on this interprets this spiritual revolution in what I believe is too quotidian a view. The Circle's academic work did indeed speak of the need for a new leader, glorify heroism, and exemplify a kind of Nietzschean monumental history. But for George and his Circle this 'second stage' of his program also had another important function.⁵ For this to become clear, I believe, the second

³ Ernst Osterkamp, "Friedrich Gundolf zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft. Zur Problematik eines Germanisten aus dem George-Kreis", in *Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte 1910-1925*, ed. Christoph König and Eberhard Lämmert. Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993.

⁴ A new book of essays does take George's religion seriously, but since it focuses mostly on himself and his poetry, it is not in conversation with other works on the circle's academic adventures. See *Stefan George und die Religion*, ed. Wolfgang Braungart. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015.

⁵ In 1919, George's journal *Blätter für die Kunst* introduced a series of monographs that were published with the special imprint of the journal by declaring, "die zweite stufe unsrer wirkung ist inzwischen sichtbar geworden – durch bedeutsame weithin bestaunte bücher des wissens und der überschau." These recent works include *A Poet's Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011; Francesco Rossi, *Gesamterkennen: Zur Wissenschaftskritik und Gestalttheorie im George-Kreis*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011; *Wissenschaftler im George-Kreis: Die Welt des*

stage of academic work should be understood in light of the first stage: George's poetry and the early practices of the Circle. This first stage was unabashedly premised on a symbolist understanding of the theurgical power of language to harness cosmic forces, and the leadership of a 'language-creator' as a priest who would bring new possibilities of being into the world, ushering in a new era defined by the unity of aesthetics, theology, and politics. An understanding of this suggests that the adoption of *Wissenschaft* participates in the same program by also using language in more than just a propositional, argumentative way.

At first, it seems surprising that George would even be willing to allow his disciples to pursue academic careers, and perplexing that he would support them in scholarly activities. For decades he had been against everything *Wissenschaft* stood for. After spending the summer of 1889 in Paris, where he had become a follower of Mallarmé, George had tried to settle down enough to study literature in Berlin and Vienna, but found the academic treatment of literature stifling to artistic work and deadening to the soul. He lasted only two years before giving up studying for a mission to create a German symbolist poetry. After publishing his first collections of verse, he began to form an artistic community around a poetry journal, *Blätter für die Kunst* (Pages for Art), in 1892. Cultivating himself as an aristocratic and esoteric figure on the model of Mallarmé, he published poems in luxuriously printed books with exceedingly limited print runs, poured out scorn for bourgeois family life, and began emotionally intense homoerotic relationships with his disciples.⁶

Dichters und der Beruf der Wissenschaft, ed. Bernhard Böschstein et al. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005

⁶ For details of George's biography and the development of the Circle, see Robert E. Norton, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

All this sounds antithetical to the staid, respectable world of the German academy. And yet, George's activities gradually began to encroach on fields other than mere literature, especially history, religion, and politics. Beginning in the late 1890s, George and his Circle confronted the problem of history and the past that had recently been articulated by Nietzsche. In several works, particularly *The Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* but also in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche discusses the problem of the study of history in contemporary German life. According to him, the 19th-century German obsession with history directly damages the ability to live a meaningful life. In the *Advantages*, Nietzsche maintains that the academic study of history has made real action almost impossible for the German youth, who are mired in the knowledge of everything that came before them. In the *Genealogy*, he argues that the study of history participates in the ascetic ideal, and also in the will to truth. It is the most dangerous subject to study, because it turns the violence of science upon our very souls. And yet, Nietzsche seemed to value the knowledge of past times in which life had been more fully lived, since these exhibited parts of the soul currently eclipsed. These claims about the crushing hollowness of life in the modern age found a sympathetic ear in the George Circle, and following Nietzsche, the early George Circle completely rejected the academic study of history as it was practiced in German universities, but also came to see in the past a source of redemption for the present.

The impetus for the Circle's concern with history was Alfred Schuler, an eccentric visionary of bohemian Munich who came into close contact with George in 1899 when Karl Wolfskehl, one of George's closest followers, rented an apartment in Munich that would serve as the Circle's base for the next several years. Here in the avant-garde Schwabing neighborhood, George formed a small group known as the Cosmic Circle, which was led into a preoccupation with history and religion by Schuler, its other central figure. Self-educated in archeology and the

ancient world but fiercely anti-intellectual, Schuler was a specialist in the liturgies and rites with which he attempted to realize his vision of magically returning the world to the time of pagan antiquity.⁷ Although he believed that the degeneration of the human spirit had begun with the Roman adoption of Christianity, Schuler pinpointed the Reformation as the final blow that led to the disasters of the modern age. George, who with his Rhineland-Catholic upbringing had always been horrified at the unification of Germany under Prussia and at the hegemony of Protestantism during the *Kulturkampf*, was more than happy to locate the cause of current malaise in one of the German nation's most treasured figures.

With Schuler as the Cosmic ideologue, George and several of his followers engaged in magical rituals, poetic incantations, and group performances in an attempt to undo history and return Europe to the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome.⁸ Schuler put great stock in such practices, proclaiming that he planned to visit Nietzsche and cure his illness by performing an ecstatic dance. This might seem easy to dismiss, but Schuler offered a vision of resistance to a lifeless society through an aestheticized magical practice that would manipulate time. And although the Cosmists disbanded after four years of such practice had failed to resurrect the classical world, this experience set the groundwork for George's later program.

With the end of the Cosmic period in 1903, a shift occurred in George's relations to his followers. No longer sharing influence with others, he became the unquestioned Master over his disciples, whom he led into a poetic-religious cult of which he was the high priest. George broke

⁷ Roderich Huch, *Alfred Schuler, Ludwig Klages und Stefan George. Erinnerungen an Kreise und Krisen der Jahrhundertwende in München-Schwabing*. Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini, 1973.

⁸ For a description of one such performance, see Ludiwg Curtius, *Detusche und antike Welt. Lebenserinnerungen*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1950. p. 252. For Schuler's own outline of his vision, see Alfred Schuler, *Fragmente und Vorträge aus dem Nachlass*. Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1940. pp. 168-201.

with several associates, including Schuler, when they were insufficiently enthusiastic about this cult, failed to demonstrate the self-sacrificing devotion he demanded, or evinced a too-strident anti-Semitism that overrode George's own concerns. The new cult was centered around the deification, through the power of George's poetry, of a recently deceased 16-year old boy, Maximilian Kronberger, who as George's deity was known as 'Maximin'.⁹ In addition to instituting the worship of this new god, and by extension the worship of himself as the god-maker, he began to take a more intensive pedagogical role towards his new, ever younger disciples. These he bound to himself through an intensively homoerotic education inspired by Plato.¹⁰

Having abandoned Schuler's quest to resurrect the past, George decided the anticipated aesthetic-theological order would come with a new future, under the auspices of his new god. However, the past still retained a certain appeal. The Circle believed that the most important thing about the past was not the fact that it had already happened; they weren't very interested in knowing how the past had led to the present. They were interested in the past because they wanted to use it in the present, as an example of a better way of living. The Circle continued to look to ancient Greece but also increasingly the Holy Roman Empire as its examples of a better human existence. But how to access this vitality without first being crushed by the deadening power of academic study? Once Schuler's plan to return to past was given up, they needed a different way to recreate the vitality of the past in the present, to bring the current world to an

⁹ For the Circle's official understanding of the Maximin cult, see Wolters, *Stefan George und Die Blätter für die Kunst. Deutsche Geistesgeschichte seit 1890*. Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1930. p. 314. For critical appraisals, see Lothar van Laak, "Maximin als religiöses Medium" and Georg Dörr, "Stefan Georges neopagane Maximin-Religion" in *Stefan George und die Religion*.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the Circle's preoccupation with Plato, see Melissa S. Lane, "The Platonic Politics of the George Circle: A Reconsideration." In *A Poet's Reich*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011.

end and create anew. This would be the first stage of George's program, in which Circle attempted to recreate lost patterns of life through what they considered the special powers of poetry.

The symbolist idea of poetry already imbued itself with religious power.¹¹ The Circle believed strongly in the ability of language to do things beyond simply convey information – they read their poetry aloud in cultic rituals intended to harness cosmic forces and create change in the visible world. A true poet, the Circle believed, controlled the hidden powers of language, and could use these powers to create a vitality of being that had been lost to history. They believed that language could create new Ideas, Ideas that would then unfold within the world of human relations through their own power. One might think of it in a Platonic sense – if the poet could bring new Forms into being by speaking them, he could change the structure of reality. The Circle seemed to believe that George had this power.

George, then, could create a new world through the power inherent in poetry by naming Ideas and calling those Ideas into being. This is clearly a divine act, as we saw in George's creation of the god Maximin. As an adolescent George had invented his own language, based on ancient Greek and called 'Imri', and he wrote about his linguistic innovation in his poetry

¹¹ In *Secret Germany*, Robert Norton gives a lovely explication of what he calls "the fantasy of seemingly unlimited power over the phenomenal world", inherent in symbolist poetry. "The words of a poem act as a kind of conduit, leading not to an appreciation of the things they describe, or even to a specific emotion they might evoke, but through an ultimately inexplicable alignment the poem makes possible to a sort of spiritual attunement to the poet's vision, and, ultimately, an encounter with what was variously called the 'Idea', the 'Infinite', or the 'Absolute'. And it is the poet, and the poet alone who can supply the medium enabling this encounter to occur. [Symbolists] saw the artist, and specifically the poet, as occupying a privileged position before the rest of humanity, privy to esoteric knowledge, engaged in rituals performed in a language that only the initiated could – and should – comprehend, and acting as an intermediary to a force that is invisible, mysterious, and, for that reason, vaguely frightening to ordinary mortals. [...] It is important to emphasize that, for George, this achievement of dominion over the world, indeed over life, was not a matter of metaphor, a mere figure of speech: it was a conviction that quite literally shaped the rest of his life." pp. 77-78.

collection *The Year of the Soul*: “The seer’s word is common to few/Even when the first bold wishes came/Grave and lonely in rare and strange dominion/He invented new names for things.”¹² George allocated to his mature poetic language the power that belonged to Adam in the garden of Eden when he named the animals, a power of language derived from God’s creation of the world. This adamic language gave his poetry a precise esoteric power, a power that was furthered through the Circle’s insistence on the importance of reciting the poetry aloud. The kernels of the new Ideas were then planted within the Circle, creating a ‘secret’ world within the ‘real’ one. In this way George, the Circle believed, could bring into being forms of life with the same essential trueness as those of ancient Greece. Indeed, through this poetic power he had infinitely more access to the truths of that ancient world than contemporary Greece could have, merely by being descended from it: the poet never travelled to Greece, purportedly saying, “wherever I am, is where Greece is.”

In 1909, the George Circle inaugurated the second, exoteric stage of its work by publishing two programmatic essays on the political-theological agenda the circle itself. These were Friedrich Gundolf’s “Gefolgschaft und Jüngertum” (Allegiance and Discipleship), released in the *Blätter*, and Friedrich Wolter’s “Herrschaft und Dienst” (Sovereignty and Service), printed as a short book. These pieces mapped out the proper hierarchical relationship between George and the Circle, in Wolters’ case extending the model to wider society as well. Both viewed George as a life-giving force emanating to and animating those around him, and they disagreed on what was essentially a theological point – whether George should be worshiped as the representation and mediator of saving life-energy or as that life-energy itself. It was with these

¹² Quoted in Norton, *Secret Germany*, p. 22.

essays that the Circle began to become a ‘State’. In 1910 the Circle published the first issue of a new journal, the *Jahrbuch für die Geistige Bewegung* (Yearbook for the Spiritual Movement), edited by Gundolf and Wolters.¹³ The first academic monograph published by the circle, Gundolf’s groundbreaking *Shakespeare und die Deutsche Geist*, followed in 1911. It was a huge success both commercially and as an intervention in scholarship. But Gundolf’s book also established the pattern for how George would co-opt the scholarly form to further his own program. The publication of these three works, along with the founding of the *Jahrbuch*, demonstrate that George and his followers had started to develop theories of history and political theology alongside their theory of art.

Friedrich Gundolf, twelve years younger than the Master, had quickly risen to be the foremost of the disciples, and it was Gundolf, along with another new disciple of the highest rank, Friedrich Wolters, who would shape George’s future political-theological activities. Both Gundolf and Wolters were academics, and Gundolf in particular paved the way for George’s followers to choose this path. At first George was completely against this career choice, and wanted Gundolf to focus on writing poetry. “No road leads from me to scholarship,” he warned.¹⁴ But Gundolf insisted, in what would be the first of only two occasions in which he would defy George’s will. By 1910, he had completed his habilitation thesis at the University of Heidelberg, where he then became a professor of *Germanistik*. The center of George’s Circle moved to Heidelberg, where Gundolf was teaching. As he began to use his post to lead his students to the Master’s Circle, George began to realize the usefulness of taking over the universities.¹⁵

¹³ In the same year, Karl Wolfskehl introduced the idea of the circle as a “Secret Germany.”

¹⁴ Edgar Salin, *Um Stefan George*. Düsseldorf: Küpper, 1954. p. 49.

¹⁵ See Norton, *Secret Germany*, pp 457-471.

Instead of understanding the public academic work as a repudiation of the previous stage, it should be interpreted as a sign that the Circle believed its previous efforts were working and they were now ready to build upon them. The time was ripe for spreading what had been secret into the broader public. Only a few years after Gundolf's book, during the beginning of the Circle's experiment with academia, it seemed as if its efforts to destroy the existing world order had borne fruit: Europe erupted into war.

To many in the Circle who had been attempting to destroy and replace the existing German order, the First World War seemed to be the event they had been awaiting. George himself took no part in the rampant German nationalism that accompanied the outbreak of war, and he was hesitant to believe that the war would cleanly lead to the new world he wanted.¹⁶ His followers, however, tended to show no such restraint: Gundolf immediately greeted the war as the promised event the Circle had been awaiting, the "holy war" George had so often described. Gundolf and Wolters both exulted in the idea that the war would transform the Prussians into an ideal German *Volk*, bringing into being the new world they had been preparing.¹⁷ Most of George's disciples, if they weren't conscripted, signed up right away as volunteers. Wolters rushed to join, along with the disciples Edgar Salin, Ludwig Thormaehlen, Ernst Morwitz, Kurt Hildebrant, Wolfgang Heyer, Norbert von Hellingrath, and Robert and Erich Boehringer.¹⁸ Karl Wolfskehl was rejected due to his terrible eyesight, a fate he bemoaned.¹⁹ In open letters printed

¹⁶ Berthold Vallentin, *Gespräche mit Stefan George*. Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini, 1967.

¹⁷ Friedrich Gundolf and Karl and Hannah Wolfskehl, *Briefwechsel*. Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini, 1976-77. 2:103. Stefan George and Friedrich Wolters, *Briefwechsel. 1904-1930*. Ed. Michael Philipp. Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini, 1998. p. 104.

¹⁸ Stefan George and Friedrich Gundolf. *Briefwechsel*. Ed. Robert Boehringer and Georg Peter Landmann. Düsseldorf: Helmut Küpper, 1962.

¹⁹ Gundolf and Wolfskehl, *Briefwechsel*. 2:106.

in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the fall of 1914, both Wolfskehl and Gundolf publically hailed the war, and even justified its atrocities. They argued openly that the war was a cosmic force of spiritual renewal, having been prophesized by George.²⁰ These articles received an outpouring of positive responses from both the German public and the educated elite, and firmly established the George Circle in the German mind as an institution concerned with matters beyond poetry.²¹

Poetry, however, was still very important – George’s *Star of the Covenant*, which had come out in January of 1914, was his first book of poetry that was printed at a price and in numbers that made it accessible to the general public, and it became a cult-book among the German youth during the war, carried into the trenches along with Nietzsche. It was, however, an esoteric work even less accessible than George’s previously released collections – George even referred to it as a “secret book” – *Geheimbuch*.²² It was described by Edgar Salin as “the law book of the circle” and it showed George combining the roles of poet with those of priest and politician, disclosing visions of his future empire. Said empire would be established after tens of thousands died in a holy war that was blessed by the god George had created, sweeping away the present order and providing the Circle with a fresh canvas on which to realize their ‘State’.²³

This was now recognized even by those outside of the Circle: on New Year’s Eve, 1914, the

²⁰ Karl Wolfskehl, letter in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Sept. 12th, 1914. Friedrich Gundolf, “Tat und Wort im Krieg,” *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Oct. 11th, 1914. From Wolfskehl’s letter: “*There is another Germany*, behind the exterior where the literary champions of Europe meet with the great worlds of politics and finance. This Germany says to you in Europe’s difficult hour: this unwanted war, which was forced upon us, is essential nonetheless, it had to strike for the sake of Germany and of the world of European humanity, for the sake of this world. We did not want it, but it comes from *our God*. Our poet knew of it. He saw and presaged this war and its necessity and its virtues long before premonitions mounted this year – before any papers began to rustle. The *Star of the Covenant* is that book of prophecy, that book of necessity and conquest.” Translated in Norton, *Secret Germany*, pp. 552-553.

²¹ Thomas Mann and Ernst Bertram. *Briefe aus den Jahren 1910-1955*. Ed. Inge Jens. Pfullingen: Neske, 1960. p. 21.

²² Stefan George, *Gesamt-Ausgabe der Werke*. Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1927-34. Vol.8, p. 5.

²³ Salin, *Um Stefan George*, p. 239.

book was hailed in an unaffiliated review in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* as “the foundation of the new German order.”²⁴

In the course of the next two years, however, it became apparent that the war would not be the quick and glorious act of destruction and rebirth that the Circle had hoped for. George was vindicated in his belief that the most important work was yet to come, and he created a new public outreach that would lead to the spread his empire. This was the culmination of the ‘second stage,’ a new series of books to be written by the academic members of the Circle: *Werke der Wissenschaft aus dem Kreis der Blätter für die Kunst*. Between 1916 and 1934, Georg Bondi, George’s personal publisher, released 18 books in this series, all of them personally approved by George and embossed with a special design to signify them as part of a unified project.²⁵ George called these works his *Geistbücher* – spirit books – and he used them to cultivate and direct the spiritual energy of the German public.²⁶ Several of them were great successes, both in the

²⁴ Johannes Nohl, “Deutschland und der Stern des Bundes,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. Dec. 31st, 1914.

²⁵ This design was also that which marked George’s journal, *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung* and had appeared on Circle publications since 1910: a curved swastika inside a circular ring. The George Circle was the first European group to use the swastika, and they considered it an ancient Indian vitalist symbol. In 1928, when the Circle could no longer ignore its appropriation by the Nazis, Georg Bondi released a statement denouncing this perverted use. However, the Circle firmly refused to relinquish it as their symbol, since they had used it first. See *Stefan George und der Symbolismus*, ed. Werner Paul Sohnle. Stuttgart: Württembergische Landesbibliothek, 1983.

²⁶ Friedrich Gundolf, *Goethe*, 1916; Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche. Versuch einer Mythologie*, 1918; Gundolf, *George*, 1920; Friedrich Wolters, *Herrschaft und Dienst* (2nd ed.), 1920; Gundolf, *Shakespeare und die Deutsche Geist* (5th ed.), 1920; Gundolf, *Heinrich von Kleist*, 1922; Wilhelm Stein, *Raffael*, 1923; Berthold Vallentin, *Napoleon*, 1923; Gundolf, *Caesar. Geschichte seines Ruhms*. 1924; Vallentin, *Napoleon und die Deutschen*, 1926; Ernst Kantorowicz, *Friedrich II*, 1927; Max Kommerell, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik. Klopstock, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Jean Paul, Hölderlin*, 1928; Gundolf, *Shakespeare. Sein Wesen und sein Werk* (2 vols.), 1928; Wolters, *Stefan George und die Blätter für die Kunst. Deutsche Geistesgeschichte seit 1890*, 1930; Vallentin, *Winckelmann*, 1931; Kurt Hildebrandt,

number of copies sold and their academic influence, especially Gundolf's *Goethe* (1916), Ernst Bertram's *Nietzsche* (1918), and Ernst Kantorowicz's *Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite* (1927).²⁷

The *Geistbücher* were almost entirely works of *Geistesgeschichte*, and constituted a wholesale revolt against traditional German historiography: although meticulously researched, they were meant to appeal to a wide audience and give a specific interpretation of important figures meant to lead the public to George's political theology. They also instituted a controversy about the role of myth in history – although they almost all are histories of great men, most of them focus more on the myths these men created than on the actual events of their lives. This was the opposite of “telling things as they actually happened.”²⁸ Written in almost poetic language, usually given a compelling narrative, and uniformly lacking in the usual scholarly apparatus of notes, they were, Thomas Mann commented, as if history had taken up the form of an intellectual novel.

Platon: der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht, 1933; Ernst Morwitz, *Die Dichtung Stefan Georges*, 1934.

²⁷ As a series, the books met with mixed success. The first one to be printed as a *Geistbüch*, *Goethe*, was a huge commercial success, going through 13 editions. Bertram's *Nietzsche* also sold well, going through 8 editions, was praised for its loveliness and beauty, and became the foremost book in Nietzsche interpretation until Walter Kauffmann argued against it in 1950. Gundolf's *George* received a more mixed response, as it was exceedingly hagiographic, and contained almost nothing about the poet's life. It went through only 3 editions. Wolter's *Herrschaft und Dienst* was printed in 3 editions (although only beginning with the second were they given the imprint). Gundolf's *Kleist* also ran through 3 editions. Stein's *Raffael*, and Vallentin's *Napoleon* were both printed in 1923, an inopportune time for new books, and both were ignored by the public. Gundolf's *Caesar* went through 2 editions and was translated into English. Vallentin's second book on Napoleon in '26 also appears to have fallen flat. Kantorowicz's book on Friedrich II, however, made him famous overnight. It went through three editions, was translated into English and Italian, and began a controversy over the role of myth in understanding history.

²⁸ For a detailed treatment of the *Mythenschau* controversy, see “Ernst Kantorowicz: History as New Mythology” in Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: the Making of a Modern Historiography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003

Their purpose, however, was far from a mere intellectual exercise. George said many times that the *Geistbücher* are politics.²⁹ They would be the bulwark of the political work of his State, reaching far more people than his poetry had, and lending the legitimacy of scholarship to George's program while dismantling what he found objectionable about that scholarship. The *Geistbücher* were an attempt to harness *Geistesgeschichte* to provide spiritual-political answers to contemporary problems, both through the books' content and through the effects of awakening the spirits of masses of people, providing a spiritual field on which George could work his magic.

The *Geistbücher* make an exoteric return to the problem of history that had been explored esoterically in the first stage of George's project. The public would of course never be able to comprehend the poetic power that had called the essence of the past into being within the Circle. The books thus had a dual function shared between their content and their form. The stories about great figures educated readers by exemplifying a more vital form of life, as called for in Nietzschean monumental history. However, the form of the books, the language itself, also played a role. The Ideas that George had called into being, that had been kept and nurtured within the Circle, could now venture out to influence the wider world.

In *Shakespeare und die Deutsche Geist* Gundolf explains his vision of how this works. Great literary figures can be divided into 'language creators' and 'language masters.' Language creators, are 'true poets': "In order to create language, to shape it for the future, it takes someone capable of new experience arising directly from what is yet unformed; one who does not merely relive what is already formed. This distinguishes the language creator from the language

²⁹ Salin, p. 253.

master.”³⁰ The language master is necessary to spread the Ideas brought into being by the language creator into the public. In his *Shakespeare*, Gundolf tells how Schlegel’s translations of Shakespeare into German both brought about the ‘coming-into-itself’ of the German spirit, and were made possible only because the ‘ur-experience’ of Goethe’s poetry had previously created the world in which that might occur.

The language creators Gundolf cites are Dante and Goethe, but clearly George is in this class as well. In a letter to George dated the same year that he wrote *Shakespeare*, Gundolf presented himself as just this kind of language master who could be useful to George’s cause. “Give me ten years of health,” he pleaded, “and I will be the man to make all your ur-thoughts and ur-experiences the common property of German culture.”³¹ Gundolf’s *Shakespeare* explains what it is doing while it actually does it. The salient difference between George and Goethe, however, is that George was trying to amass real political power that would lead to eschatological destruction and rebirth. These academic books, then, seem to attempt to awaken new possibilities in the souls of their readers, not simply by spreading retellings of history, but by speaking, as it were, a true name, a call that would bind the readers as new initiates to George’s State, and open them to the service of the poet-leader of a new era.

³⁰ Gundolf, *Shakespeare und die Deutsche Geist*, p. 353. Translation by Andreas Höfele in *No Hamlets*.

³¹ Stefan George and Friedrich Gundolf, *Briefwechsel*. pp. 206-7. Cited in Höfele, *No Hamlets*.