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“The Balm of Language”
Approx. 1,790 Words

The Balm of Language

Georg Trakl: A Profile
Edited, with an Introduction, by Frank Graziano
Published by Logbridge-Rhodes, Inc.

I discovered the work of Georg Trakl in 1970 thanks to Robert Bly, who'd dropped Trakl's name during a poetry reading. (Among connoisseurs of such things, Bly is considered one of the finest name-droppers. The criteria for excellence in that field are these: the name must be mentioned with easy familiarity; the mentioner must hint that not knowing the name implies some sort of spiritual failure in the listener; and when the listener finally follows up on the name, it must prove worth the bother.) At the time, I could find only one book of Trakl's poetry, the *Selected Poems* (edited by Christopher Middleton and published by Jonathan Cape). It whetted my appetite for the poet's work, and because Trakl's influence on other American poets was so strong, I kept expecting a *Complete Trakl* to appear from somebody somewhere. It hasn't. And what what's worse, the Cape edition of Trakl's poems itself soon went out of print. In recent

years, anyone wanting to spend time with Trakl has had to be content with James Wright’s handful of translations, published in his *Collected Poems*.

Luckily, a fine literary publisher in Durango, Colorado (Logbridge-Rhodes, Inc.) recognized the importance of the Trakl’s work and has brought a significant part of it back into print. *Georg Trakl: A Profile* not only makes the poems from Cape’s *Selected Poems* available once more, it expands the Trakl canon in English with previously unpublished prose poems and, within a revealing essay by Siegfried Mandel, provides selections from Trakl’s letters. It also offers a bio-critical introduction by the volume’s editor, Frank Graziano, and an appendix consisting of the James Wright translations mentioned above.

I’ll return to the book itself later. But first, I want to essay a few impressions about Trakl and his work.

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When I first read Trakl, his poems struck me like careful blows delivered against close eyes: brief, painful illuminations. For Trakl’s life, inner and outer, was nothing if not painful. Born on February 3, 1887 in Salzburg, Austria, then raised by an indifferent father and a depression-ridden mother addicted to opium, Trakl suffered from schizophrenic episodes, drug addiction, visual and auditory hallucinations, and an obsessive incestuous relationship with his younger sister, Grete. It was his anxiety over Grete’s illness, following a miscarriage in March of 1914, that finally broke Trakl’s tenuous mental health and led to his enlistment in the Army just after Austria declared war on Serbia. As a pharmacist, Trakl was assigned to a field hospital and placed in charge of casualties he could not adequately treat. Following the bloody battle of

Grodek, Trakl attempted to shoot himself, but was disarmed and hospitalized for psychiatric observation in Cracow. There he took an overdose of cocaine and died on November 3, 1914.

Grete, who had recovered from her miscarriage, never recovered from her brother’s suicide, and a little over three years later shot herself to death at a party in Berlin.

It’s proper to include Grete’s fate in considering Trakl’s work, because his relationship with her is the hub around which all else revolves. Whether or not we consider it pathological, it was the one fact of their lives that kept death at pay, and the only peace in Trakl’s work appears in the context of his fearsome love for Grete. Of course, there is a “forbidden” love, so the peace it brings is always associated with death:

O the evening deep in the sombre hamlets of childhood.
The pond beneath the willows
Fills with the tainted sighs of sadness.

O the wood which softly lowers its brown eyes,
When from the solitary’s bony hands
The purple of his enraptured days ebbs down.

O the nearness of death. Let us pray.
This night the delicate limbs of lovers
Yellowed with incense on warm pillows untwine.

(“Nearness of Death,”
tr. Michael Hamburger)

As always when Trakl writes about Grete, death is near — but *only* near. The lovers are holding it off, keeping it outside in the world. There are even occasions when the outside world — always full of death, always in decline — is transformed and sanctified, as in the poem “Summer,” which even in translation is brilliant:

At evening, the sound of the cuckoo
Stops in the wood.
The grain bends lower,
The red poppy.

Black thunderclouds bloom
Above the hill.
The ancient song of the cricket
Fades off into the fields.

The leaves of the chestnut
Trees stir no more.
Upon the spiral staircase
Your dress rustles.

One silent candle shines
In the dark room;
A silvery hand
Extinguishes it;

No wind, no stars. Night.

(tr. Robert Grenier)

Here we get no halfheartedly Expressionist phrases, as we did in the early poem, such as “The pond . . . / Fills with tainted sighs.” Such language, projecting an internal state into the external world, is a kind of retreat, a refusal to confront the source of anguish. When Trakl’s guilt is not operative, as in “Summer,” the language is straightforward, painterly, exact — like great Chinese poetry.

Of course, Trakl’s finest poems *are* Expressionistic, but purely so, not halfheartedly. They do not retreat from anguish by projecting it outward; they embrace it, shape it, exalt it. As Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton note in the introduction to their groundbreaking anthology, *Modern German Poetry*, “Trakl’s work is affirmative. But what it affirms is a

spiritual order of being which may not be at once perceptible in his poems, because he inflects the imagery of this spiritual order so often with an imagery of disintegration.” A prime example of this is “South Wind,” an eerily uplifting poem:

Blind lamentation in the wind, moon-days of winter,
 Childhood, softly footsteps fade by the dark hedge,
 The long peal of bells in the evening.
 Softly the pallid night approaches,

Transforms into purple dreams the pain and affliction
 Of stony life,
 That without abatement the thorn may goad the decaying body.

From the depths of its sleep the fear-stricken soul moans suddenly,
 And the wind in the depths of broken trees,
 And swaying, a shape of lamentation,
 The mother moves through the lonely wood

Of this speechless grief; nights
 Full of tears, nights full of fiery angels.
 Silver, against a bare wall, a child’s skeleton smashes.

(tr. David Luke)

As with all of Trakl’s greatest poems, we may try to interpret “South Wind,” but the results will not be satisfactory. For its images refer neither to literary traditions nor to shared human experience; they arise out of the tension between a particular individual’s inner and outer life. Those images we may recognize — “moon-days of winter,” “broken trees,” “nights / full of tears” — do not explain or justify the images peculiar to Trakl’s inner world: the thorn goading the decaying body, the mother as a shape of lamentation, the child’s skeleton smashed against a wall. We might say that Trakl succeeds at both communicating with and alienating us; or that he communicates his own alienation; or, to the extent that any one of us recognizes Trakl’s internal

imagery as cognate with his own, we might say he reveals our own alienation. At any rate, we will have succeeded in nothing but description. As with DNA, we can name the elements constituting Trakl’s poems and say how they work, but the purpose behind the poems will remain elusive.

The chief risk in writing poems as Trakl did is that they will fail to communicate at all; the chief virtue — and it is invaluable — is that it may give access to otherwise unreachable areas of the spirit. As James Wright wrote, Trakl’s poems “are not objects to be used and then cast aside, but entrances into places where deep, silent labors go on.”

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I quickly came up against a tough personal question when I decided to write about *Georg Trakl: A Profile*, namely: Why had Trakl exerted such an influence over me back in 1970, when the translations reprinted here first came into my hands? For months my poems were full of black autumn trees, silver boats on cold lakes, disembodied hands, rain and wavering candle flames. Experience seemed to be irrelevant. After all, my father had never been indifferent, my mother never addicted to anything stronger than chocolate; I didn’t have a sister; and drugs (*pace* Robert Lowell) were never my white wine. I looked to other poets who, in those days, had seemed to be swayed by Trakl — Wright, of course, and Greg Orr, Paul Zweig, Mark Strand, Louis Glück, early Bly — and the only commonality I could find was the sense that all of us, regardless of background, felt wounded and in need of healing. We were all trying to heal ourselves with poetry. I think this is the labor to which James Wright refers.

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To be grateful to Logbridge-Rhodes for bringing Trakl back into print so handsomely is not to say that this book has no weak points, though the weaknesses are minor. It not only reprints the English translations of the Cape *Selected Poems*, for example, it reproduces typographical errors from that edition (note the elided periods in the fourth lines of “Amen” and “Childhood”), while regrettably dropping the enface German language texts.

More unfortunate is the introduction by editor Frank Graziano, which should be read only *after* reading Trakl’s poems and letters. (An exception may be made for section two of the essay, which concerns Trakl’s biography.) The introduction is chock full of those attenuated niceties of thought we find in French criticism à la Barthes, such as: “‘Complaint’ . . . misses the mark when dealing with a poem by Georg Trakl; it suits only poets whose work gives priority to what a word *says* over what a word *is*, to the chatter of signification over the fullness of diction not dependent primarily on meaning.” This is sophisticated gobbledygook and should not be allowed to scare the reader away from Trakl’s poetry. Neither should one be warned away by Graziano’s name-dropping. On the first page of his essay, he mentions Harold Bloom, Anne Sexton, Kojève (surely you know his first name), Hegel, Osip Mandelstam, “Anthony Wilder . . . summarizing Lacan,” and Rilke. A first-class name-dropper like Robert Bly would never stoop to one name summarizing another!

I’m nitpicking, of course. *Georg Trakl: A Profile* is finally an important new book, indispensable for its poems, its prose poems and letters, as well as for something I haven’t mentioned yet: the haunting photographs of Trakl, his sister Grete, his friend Erhard Buschbeck, his father and his mother, which appear here and there throughout the book. They bring home

quite vividly the image of Trakl in profile: a doomed genius bent over his writing-table, face dimly lamplit, feverishly covering his secret wound with the balm of language. . . .