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**THREE PRINCIPLES
OF “POLITICAL THEOLOGY”
IN THE STEFAN GEORGE
CIRCLE**

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This paper is concerned with one of the most prominent examples of German intellectual history at the beginning of the 20th century, the George circle. The study identifies three principles which are crucial for the “political theology” of the George circle – the principle of covenant, the principle of the charismatic leader and the principle of dominance and service. The main hypothesis is that the George circle was an ideologically integrated group of intellectuals who sought to reform politics by means of aesthetics, and influenced the language and ideology of the “conservative revolution” in Weimar Germany.

JEL Classification: Z.

Key words: political theology, Stefan George, George circle, Friedrich Gundolf, Friedrich Wolters, dominance and service, aestheticization of the political, conservative revolution.

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1. Introduction

In August 1900 the remains of the German Kaisers at the Speyer cathedral were disinterred. The move was initiated by the Austrian Emperor and Luitpold, Prince Regent of Bavaria, and it was carried out by The Bavarian Ministry of Culture. The event had great public resonance. The procedure of examining the remains of Salian emperors was conducted by a scholarly commission and had been approved at the highest level.

However, one person, the German poet Stefan George (1868–1933), was deeply enraged by this act. He poured out his righteous wrath in verses that expressed a claim to spiritual leadership. “The Graves in Speier”³ (Die Gräber in Speier) was the title of one of the “Contemporary Poems” (Zeitgedichte) that opened the first cycle of *The Seventh Ring (Der Siebente Ring, 1907)*.

Uns zuckt die hand im aufgescharrten chore
Der leichenschändung frische trümmer streifend.
Wir müssen mit den tränen unsres zornes
Den raum entsühnen und mit unserm blut
Das alte blut besprechen dass es hafte ·
Dass nicht der Spätre schleicht um tote steine
[...]

One after the other George presented the figures of the crown bearers – Conrad, Henry III, Rudolf and Frederick II (“der Grösste Friedrich”) – to the reader as if appealing to his contemporaries and accusing the blaspheming scholars: “...for you this is a hundred times more disgraceful than Canossa.” By this imperious poetic gesture George demonstrated that the ancient crowns had been put on the heads of present-day monarchs by mistake because he believed they had arrogantly refused to guard the mystic tradition of the Holy Empire (Reich) and were unable to resist the secularization of the modern world. If these monarchs had made common cause with the representatives of scientific Positivism and declared war not only on the dead, but on everything that was associated with the concept of the Reich then somebody had to

³ The poet uses the older spelling of the city.

hoist aloft the desecrated insignia and recover for the words, sacred for every German, “Reich” and “Kaiser” their former grandeur and eschatological meaning. Only a poet could assume this noble mission. Thus was born the idea of a “secret Germany” that united friends and imitators around the towering figure of the master. The “union” (Bund), “state” (Staat), “dominance” (Herrschaft) and of course “Reich” – the latter the key concept of German political thought – were conceptualized and poeticized inside the circle of George’s closest friends.⁴ This happened between 1909 and 1912 when George effected his “spiritual-political” synthesis by uniting Hellas and the Kyffhäuser Mountain, Plato and the myth of the German Kaisers [see: Raulff 2009, 118].

The George Circle (George-Kreis) was one of the most remarkable phenomena of German intellectual history in the early 20th century, a highly influential group of followers and disciples formed around George. Several events that occurred in 1910 were seminal for German intellectual history: the young Germanic scholar Norbert von Hellingrath, who died at the front, published translations of Pindar in the Georgean journal the *Blätter für die Kunst (Pages of Art)*, the first volume of the *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung (Yearbook of the Spiritual Movement)* came out, the historian, poet and translator Friedrich Wolters proclaimed the slogan of “dominance and service”, and the editor of *Blätter für die Kunst*, the author and translator Karl Wolfskehl, whose house, in the Bohemian Munich quarter of Schwabing, was the meeting place for the George Circle members, formulated “The Secret Germany” idea that later became famous.⁵ The George Circle began to evolve from an intimate group of poetic friends into a real intellectual force with a powerful charismatic ideology.

My hypothesis is that the George Circle introduced a new model of the “poeticization of the political” based on a range of ideas (or mindset even) which I call “political theology.” From that point of view the concepts of Reich, “State,” “Union”, “dominance” etc. are not quasi-political concepts, but elements of a political theology which raises the vital question of truth as authority, and exacts unqualified subjugation to that authority in order to counter the evil (that is, secularization) of the modern world.

I challenge the view that the intellectual activities of George and his followers belong to the anti-modernism. As I have shown in my studies into the political philosophy of “the conservative revolution”⁶, that the majority of “anti-modernist” statements and ideas were in reality ambivalent and could be seen as projections of the future. The most suitable description

⁴ Ulrich Raulff also speaks about the “sphere of poetic or metaphoric politics” [Raulff 2009, 114].

⁵ On the history and meaning of the concept see: [Kantorowicz 1997, 77 f.]

⁶ See, for example: [Mikhailovsky 2008, 264–283], [Mikhailovsky 2010, 57–82].

of the Georgan political theology, and its successor “the conservative revolution” seen as a whole phenomenon, is “reactionary” or “conservative” modernism.

The George Circle and its influence on right-wing radical thought in the Weimar Republic remains a little-studied theme both in the literature in Germany, where the figures of George and some of his pupils have for a long time been discredited because of their alleged sympathies for the National-Socialist ideology⁷, and in Russia where the perception of George’s creative work from the start bore an imprint of Symbolist interpretation of Viacheslav Ivanov and Valery Bryusov; fruitful studies were cut short during the Soviet period and to this day have been confined to the publication of Russian translations of his books and collections of verses.⁸ The only exception in Russia is the recently published monograph by Maiatsky who focuses on the Platonic cult in the George Circle [Maiatsky 2012].

2. Political theology: authority and truth

The thesis of this paper is that contrary to the widespread perception of George as a (Post) Symbolist poet, a pure poet who has pledged allegiance to “art for art’s sake”, he can and must be seen as a political author⁹ although, with the caveat that he poeticized the political. He sought to turn the poetic-political project of his entire life into a concept that competed with both left-wing and right-wing ideologies which held great attraction for the circle of his pupils and followers. In the expression “political author” the political dimension is derived from the specific interpretation of the concepts of author, authorship and authority. That is, George is not merely an author who produces texts, but an author claiming authority. The concepts of the political and of authority are fused in a single whole in the sphere of political theology.

The term acquired its modern meaning from the works of the German legal scholar Carl Schmitt *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (1923) and *Political Theology* (1922). For Schmitt, the modern political concepts are structurally similar to those of theological systems. In

⁷ Of late, things seem to have started moving gradually. For example the last two decades have seen the publication in Germany of several brilliant studies that examine the George circle in the context of intellectual history [Groppe 1997], [Karlauf 2007], [Raulff 2009]. Special mention should be made of the book about “The Secret Germany” by an American Germanic scholar [Norton 2002].

⁸ See, for example, [George 1997], [George 1999], [George 2009].

⁹ This thesis implies a different interpretation of the political. Klaus Landfried, on the one hand, is right in calling George “a non-political” author [Landfried 1975]. Indeed, he has nothing in common with “real politics”. But on the other hand the avowed liberal democratic scholar overlooks another dimension, ie the authoritative/authoritarian claim to education and guidance. Thus the question of authority and dominance that was key to right-wing radical German thought in the early decades of the 20th century can only be considered if *politics* as parliamentary struggle and legal decision-making procedures is distinguished from the *political* as an existential sphere.

describing political theology, Schmitt writes: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transformed from theology to the theory of state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of the concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.” [Schmitt 1985, 36] The main principle of political theology, formulated by Thomas Hobbes (the key figure for Schmitt) is: *Auctoritas non veritas facit legem* (“authority, not truth, creates law.”)¹⁰ Authority is an instance that guarantees the truth of a representation, confirms it and attests to it. For example, the representation of an idea confirmed by authority lays claim to public (that is, political) recognition and political reality. In general, authority guarantees the authenticity of thought. In that sense truth needs authority.

The author is himself an example of what he writes about. An example cannot be presented in an exclusively intellectual way because bald thought does not command trust in principle. Therefore the author witnesses his text by his way of life. Hence authority is manifested as a measure of responsibility for what that authority represents [see: Trawny 2010, 20]. Friedrich Gundolf in his book *Stefan George in our Times (Stefan George in unserer Zeit)* makes this observation about George’s authority: “An important part of his image is that he awakens *faith*” [Gundolf 1918, 12–13].

Hence the esoteric character of the circle. George is undoubtedly one of the founders of the “esoteric initiative” which implies “esoteric politics.”¹¹ The politico-theological concept of authority implies a different interpretation of truth, or rather, a sharp contradistinction of the universal truth (truth as correctness) and truth as a personal message. Universal truth is inherently such that its significance does not depend on any definite place, *topos*. Truth is at the disposal of anyone who controls a certain socialized discourse, in any place and at any time.¹²

An attentive listening to George’s messages in verse and a close look at the imagery of the high-sounding manifestoes of his adepts reveals the resolute tone with which George and his

¹⁰ For more detail on the difference between “political philosophy” and “political theology” in the context of the debate between Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss see [Meier 2012, 167–191].

¹¹ The concept of “esoteric initiative” is brilliantly expounded by Trawny in his book devoted to Heidegger’s “esoteric philosophy” [Trawny 2010, especially: 35ff.].

¹² This position contrasts, for example with the phenomenology of place in Carl Schmitt’s 1950 book *Nomos of the Earth*. It demonstrates that the indifference of the universal significance of cognition and its verbal expression is an abstract ideal that is challenged by a multitude of discourses linked to specific places and isolated from one another. For example, Schmitt points to the phenomenon of “localization” (Ortung), the establishment of a specific place, or *topos*, in connection with the order (Ordnung) peculiar only to that place.

adherents exclude the indifference to universal truths. Their addressee must take the message seriously as a way of thought and life. The listeners are seen not merely as recipients of some personally indifferent truths, but as those who hear the call and are ready to forego the neutrality of science, technology and political neutrality. The esoteric initiative always presupposes a close circle of dedicated listeners concentrically located around a single centre, who is the main focus of attention.

Authority in the sense of political theology is intimately connected with the National-Pedagogical idea in the George circle¹³, as well as mythologization of history and “a vision of the future.” George’s National-Pedagogical program as set forth in his books of verses *The Star of the Covenant* (*Der Stern des Bundes*, 1914) and *The New Reich* (*Das neue Reich*, 1928), the classical imagery in Max Kommerell’s study *The Poet as Leader in German Classics* (*Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik*, 1928), the figure of a highly significant European monarch of the Middle Ages, Frederick II, head of the House of Hohenstaufen, idealized by Ernst Kantorowicz (1927), the books by Gundolf *Caesar* (1924) and *Shakespeare* (1928) all fit neatly into the political theology model and cannot be reduced to banal manifestations of German nationalism in the intellectual sphere. The strong influence of George and his pupils on the spiritual and historical atmosphere of war-time and post-war Germany can be attributed to the consummate command of the main instrument of influence, that is language, the spread of a peculiar vocabulary, certain images and figures associated with social and political values. The latter are encountered not only in the verses of George himself, but in the works of his disciples who taught at universities and therefore could draw on academic resources.

Below I will formulate three principles, the *sine qua non* of George’s political theology, elaborated by the circle of his friends and followers. 1) The idea of the order of the select (in the form of a “union”, Platonic “state”, Reich or “Secret Germany”); 2) the figure of the poet as leader and educator; 3) the claim to total dominance as expressed in the proud, imperious gesture and the dream of a Reich, as well as the readiness to serve and obey the superior power.

3.1. The principle of covenant

The early decades of the 20th century, especially the years of the Weimar Republic, were the decades of alliances and circles (one thinks of the Serakreis, the circle of the right-wing intellectual and publisher Eugen Diederichs, “The Gentlemen’s Club” (Herrenklub) of Heinrich

¹³ For more on pedagogy in the George circle see [Groppe 1997].

von Gleichen, and the numerous unions of war veterans such as “Stahlhelm”, “Bund Oberland”, “Der Jungdeutsche Orden”). In the juxtaposition of “society” (Gesellschaft) vs. “community” (Gemeinschaft) the latter was given preference. It had a clear-cut structure and a distinct world view. Covenant or union (Bund), circle (Kreis), unit-pack (Schar) are not political associations in the narrow sense and differ from parliamentary parties.¹⁴ They are not so much instruments in the struggle for power as a certain existential benchmark, that is, they are based on the fundamental opposition of friend and foe (Carl Schmitt). If we proceed from broad concept of the political, assuming that it is any form of community that sets life goals and has a political character, then covenant is the direct opposite of the public politics of the state. The more attractive the Bündish community, the more it will seek to assume the role of the state, which under normal conditions claims the authority to politically educate its citizens. The idea of an order of the select is the politico-theological point of intersection between authority and its representations, a symbolic commonplace of many thinkers and writers of the period between the two world wars who dreamed of elitist-cult community in the form of a covenant. This prompts the hypothesis that the George circle may be a prototype of the basic existential form of the conservative revolution.

The poem “The Oath” (Der Eid), which is included in *The Seventh Ring* can be seen as a paradigmatic poem which anticipates and establishes a spiritual union. [George 1909, 60–61]. It is structured not so much as a dialogue between the teacher and pupil, as the swearing in of those whom the master and ruler sees as “the new elite” or “the noble seed of the earth.” At the same time it highlights the friend-foe opposition while the master is cast in the role of saviour.

„Schreitet her und steht um mich im rund

Die ich auserkor zum bund [...].“

[...]

Lenker auf den wegen UNSRER not ·

Nenn dein dunkelstes gebot!

Pfluge über unsre leiber her:

¹⁴ See the study by the sociologist and philosopher Hermann Schmalenbach [Schmalenbach 1922] who introduced the category of *Bund* (covenant, union) alongside the established social category of “community” (Gemeinschaft) as an organic entity opposed to a mechanical pluralism of “society” (Gesellschaft). It was adopted from George’ *Star of the Covenant* and interpreted as a new kind of modern religious community based on member’s emotional attachment to group. On the sociological foundation of the concept of *Kreis* (circle) in Schmalenbach’s teacher Georg Simmel see: [Groppe 1997, 162 f.]. The theological dimension of *Bund* as the Knightly Order is stressed by G. Nebel in his essay (1970) on Stefan George and the secularized world [Nebel 2000, 238–239].

Niemals mahnt und fragt dich wer!

„Durch verhüllte himmel seh ich schon

Die vollendung und den lohn.

Unsre feinde sind zum kampf gereiht.

Meine söhne rufen streit.

Boden hilft den händen die ihm traut ·

Himmel schadet wo ihm graut.

Keine schar zu dicht · kein wall zu steil!

Meine söhne rufen heil.“

Around 1909/1910 George rallied a group of young poets and intellectuals. Issue 9 of the journal *Blätter für die Kunst* published by George carried the poet's appeal for a new "spiritual Reich" ("dies ist reich des Geistes: abglanz / Meines reiches..."). Naturally, Plato was chosen as the most suitable philosophical ally. The identification of the philosopher-king from Plato's *Republic* with the image of the poet ruler represents a projection of George's political theology of ancient philosophy. And the "spiritual Reich" could only be sustained by erotic force and sexual attraction to beautiful young men. "The amalgam between Plato and George" [Maiatsky 2012, 76], between the Academy and the Circle was first articulated in the translation of Plato's *The Symposium* (1912), by Kurt Hildebrandt and with a 40-page commentary. Stressing the erotic behest of Socrates (a youth must not be an object of love, but must be attracted to him who is above him) Hildebrandt asserts that in this dialogue Plato moves on to new tasks, political tasks, proclaiming himself to be "king of the spiritual empire." Totally oblivious of the ironic ending of this dialogue, Hildebrandt reads into Plato his teacher George and maintains that *The Symposium* can only be understood through the idea of "a living spiritual empire" that is diametrically opposite to real politics.

In the autumn of 1914 the publishing house of the George circle, "Bondi", brought out the first in the series of "spiritual books" ("Geistbücher"), which, as George admitted, were his politics [Raulff 2009, 133]. It was a monograph about Plato's Gestalt by the young philosopher Heinrich Friedemann, who was killed during the First World War. It takes George's Platonic hermeneutics to arguably its highest level.¹⁵ Plato's state, which Friedemann pointedly refers to

¹⁵ Maiatsky aptly calls this first Gestalt book "The Old Testament of Georgan Platonolatria" [Maiatsky 2012, 89].

as a kingdom (“königtum”), as if harking back to the medieval myth about the Reich, is structured as a hierarchy, is based on the link between “dominance and service” and is directed towards a single centre: “Thus, the close circle of the guardians of the state is determined by the dominance of One. The One and Only is mythically elevated above human limits, his head touching the crown of the First and Only” [Friedemann 1914, 54]. It may be that the source of these Platonic or rather Neoplatonic allusions of Friedemann’s was an earlier text by Friedrich Wolters titled *Dominance and Service*. Friedemann obviously confers poetic features on the philosopher’s great image stylizing Plato as a king and “leader of his Reich”. Edith Landmann, a follower of George, noted in her review of the book that such an interpretation of Plato would have been impossible before George because his hand can be discerned behind this book.

3.2. The poet as leader and educator

Plato’s project for the state is based on the fundamental idea of *paideia*, or the education of a wise king. Political theology is also unthinkable without education, although civic education (or the dialectical training of philosopher kings) is replaced by the elitist education of the poet called upon to be the mentor and leader of the people. George’s attitude is perfectly in line with late Romanticism: the poet must act both as a ruler and as an educator: the means of education being language and the goal being the people (Volk).¹⁶ Gundolf notes: “...what matters for George and his followers is not the aesthetic play, not narcissistic and esoteric enjoyment of language; with them we are talking about a serious mission: the moulding of a man and a people.” [Gundolf 1918, 12–13].

And several lines further down he says: “We want to see model people whose very existence is sufficient to strengthen our responsibility, awaken our conscience and temper our

¹⁶ It may be argued that this late Romantic model of reformatting politics through art was created before George by Wagner in his *Gesamtkunstwerk* project. Plato is known to have been critical of mimesis within a state and proposed to expel poets from his ideal polis. The reason for Plato’s decision is *uncertainty*. For, according to Plato, the state must avoid any uncertainty inasmuch as the principle of the state structure – justice – demands that everyone occupy his proper place. At the same time poetic work is full of uncertainty, which makes the poet irrelevant to the state, *atopos*. Bogatov pinpoints the reinterpretation of the Platonic problem in late Romantic aesthetics: “Wagner, as if taking part in the argument, declares that it is the state itself that is irrelevant in the modern state because the state as he describes it spreads uncertainty (because the state policy is not addressing the real needs of the people), the state is committed to what is superfluous. In that sense Plato’s *uncertainty* is akin to Wagner’s *superfluousness*. Today only art, proceeding from the people’s real need is capable of bringing forth –through *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the meaning of German relevance, not surfeit, and accordingly of statehood as such. The critique of the bourgeoisie on account of its excessiveness and uncertainty in light of the needs of the people engenders the epoch that we call the modern epoch” [Bogatov 2011, 59–60]. In this context, I should also point to the Burkhardtian concept of the state as a work of art which was re-actualised in the George circle, above all by Kantorowicz and Kommerell [Raulff 2006].

character – people whom it is impossible not to love because they carry the measure of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, dignity, duty and shame investing our whole being with new content. That power springs not from simple talent, but solely from character. For the poet it is language and Gestalt it embodies” [Gundolf 1918, 13].

In his book of verses called *The Star of the Covenant (Stern des Bundes)* George addresses “the spirit of the sacred youth of our people” [George 1934, 15] seeing his task in “heralding a new word” and evoking “a new people” [George 1934, 91]. The key role in this belongs to Hölderlin. There emerged a cult in the George circle of that enigmatic, and one of the most profound, German poets.

In the three “Hyperion” verses from George’s last book of verses *The New Reich* (1928) the poet himself speaks to proclaim the “advent of a new God.” Hölderlin is not a model poet or bard of “the beautiful life,” but as a prophet, *poeta vates*, and at the same time a critic of contemporary Germany and the forerunner of the future “sons of the Sun” in whose “timid” eyes lives the “dream” so much prized by George [George 1928, 16–19]. George’s political theology is linked with the doctrine of the need for a mediator. He discovers and presents God who rescues people from need and demands from them a sacred intoxication only in which God can be recognized. Why Hölderlin? For a whole century the cult figure in German literature was Goethe. Young Germans, according to George, should draw inspiration from Hölderlin’s prophecy of a new God thus equipping themselves for the struggle against the destructive forces of the modern world, more precisely, industrial society. That purpose cannot be achieved by Goethe’s optimistic humanism of the classical period, nor the skeptical wisdom of the old Goethe. Anticipating the advent of the “time of heroes” the literary scholar, poet and translator Max Kommerell boldly attributed to Hölderlin the traits of a leader reminiscent of Empedocles, a sage, a loner and an inspired charismatic leader [Kommerell 1928, 458]. Imputed to that poet were the prophetic powers of mediating between gods and humans, knowledge of the supreme mission of a people which made him an aristocrat of the spirit. “The poet,” writes Kommerell, “who relates to the people in the highest sense, occupies a special rank among great poets. He does not merely contain in himself the brilliant history of that people in the future, but shapes that history because history is but a projection of the Image of such a people on the temporal plane. But above all he embodies the nobility of that people. For a whole number of influential and glorious peoples of the past could never attain the level of the Image in their life. All our poetic past has only one poet, Hölderlin, whose work infuses us with confidence that fate has marked us out like it marked out the Greeks” [Kommerell 1928, 470]. In short, Hölderlin is the poet who managed to express “German destiny” most succinctly [Kommerell 1928, 481].

The discovery of Hölderlin's poetic legacy is known to have had a great impact on the George circle members and on the representatives of the "conservative revolution" Heidegger, F.G. Jünger and Nebel. One can cite later testimony of Schmitt who wrote in his diary "Glossarium" (17 May 1948): "The decisive step at the turn of the century was the transition from the genius of the Goethe type to the genius of the Hölderlin type. Since 1910 we have perceived the slogan 'youth without Goethe' (Max Kommerell) in concreto as 'Youth with Hölderlin.' It was a transition from an optimistic, ironic, neutral type of genius to a pessimistic, active, tragic type ..." [Schmitt 1991, 152].

With Schmitt, the reference to Hölderlin is not accidental because, as has been said before, the distinction between friend and foe is the prerogative of political theology. In turn, as Meier demonstrated, that distinction is based on the total opposition of good and evil; God and Satan; obedience and disobedience; total dedication to higher values and renunciation of any order or hierarchy [Meier 2004, 22 f.]. In other words, the main enemy is secularization. The choice of Hölderlin and the "tragic" literary history meant a declaration of war on the secularized order of the modern bourgeois state.

The poet sees before him only light and darkness, "the heroic humanity" embodied by the youth he has fostered and the "stinking mire" and "universal chaos" of contemporary society. Or, to quote the editor of the *Jahrbuch für die geistige Bewegung*: "We believe that at stake is not the question of which class or people prevails over another class or people, but we believe it is necessary to declare a different struggle, the struggle of Ormuzd against Ariman, of God against Satan, of the world against the world" [Jahrbuch 1912, VIII].

3.3. Dominance and service

Submission to a higher and superior power and the theory of sacrifice are among the fundamentals of German conservatism. George embodied the charisma of a poet who commanded the technique of legitimizing his claims to dominance. He consistently identified himself with his "message" (Sendung) and as an instrument in the service of "higher forces." Max Weber's concept of "charismatic dominance" was modeled after the figure of George.¹⁷

The fact that George saw his cult (built around his figure by numerous "apostles", most notably Wolters and Gundolf) as a "policy" is explained in the framework of political theology. But it would be a mistake to consider that policy to be a subjective strategy for implementing a

¹⁷ See: [Groppe 1997, 590 f.]

lofty poetic mission through cult and authority.¹⁸ The political is not simply an area of culture, and a field and an instrument (democratic or undemocratic) of organizing social relations, but a perpetual struggle and confrontation described in the categories of the effect of higher, divine forces and the poetic identification with them. On the one hand, the poet himself submits to the supreme law of the mission, but on the other hand he derives form there – in the consciousness of the members of his circle – the legitimacy of his authority. In the framework of a political theology based on the friend-foe opposition and an existentially concrete choice between God and Satan, dominance cannot be validated because it does not require validation in principle. The poetic-existential dimension of the political turns any alliance with authority into an instance establishing an order into an absolute value (and potentially a powerful political entity) as a result the total in the form of an “empire” or a strong “total state” is the only point of support.

The essay of the poet, literary scholar and translator Friedrich Gundolf [Gundolf 1909] is based on the idea of the Gestalt of the leader who assumed the historical task of “re-educating souls.” He is like a sovereign because he is above any normative principles as he carries the law within himself and represents the new order. He acts in the light of divine truth because he heralds the advent of the “future god”. He addresses his messages to “lay brothers” “replete with faith and love” that are parallels of the exploits of Christ’s apostles. These adherents are mobilized to fight bourgeois vulgarity and “diversity” (Plato’s *poikilia*), the quest for pleasure and originality which embodies the evil of the modern world. The disciples, who are always the few, learn to sacrifice themselves to necessity, to what destiny ordains. But their self-denial and service are fueled by love for “the only one” who satisfies their thirst for the eternal. In the spirit of the dialectic of *The Symposium* they docilely set aside their “self” to become “personalities” reflecting the “exalted image of humanity.” Dominance “born of and borne by” the king forms the nucleus of the book by Wolters with the title emblematic of the circle, *Dominance and Service* [Wolters 1909]. It is significant that the professional medievalist and ardent supporter of Georgehe linked the emergence of the circle with the appearance of God and the Saviour before the “spiritual king.”¹⁹ Wolters gives an ontological interpretation of the image of the circle: he projects onto the relationship between the master and his disciples, a neo-Platonic model of the emanating whole, building a system of concentric circles that spread and eventually return to

¹⁸ This is the opinion, for example, of Landfried: [Landfried 1975, 172].

¹⁹ Da kamst du spross aus unsrem eignen stamm
 Schön wie kein bild und greifbar wie kein traum
 Im nackten glanz des gottes uns entgegen:
 Da troff erfüllung aus geweihten händen
 Da ward es licht und alles sehnen schwieg
 [George 1934, 8].

their source. His work is also valuable in that one can see in it not only charismatically given personal relationships of trust between the master and his disciples, but that it is applied to a broader sphere, “the spiritual empire” or “Spiritual Reich.”²⁰

4. The poeticization of the political

As Raulff pointed out, George reformatted the historical-political vocabulary by removing the concepts of “state,” “covenant”, “Reich” (first in Germany under Wilhelm II and later in the Weimar Republic) from the real-political context to lend them a real-spiritual connotation. He maximized his impact on modernity by first distancing himself from it as much as possible. This plan was to be promoted by the programmatic concept of Reich and the Platonic doctrine of two worlds taken on board by George’s adherents. Both point to successful spiritualization of the political [Raulff 2009, 186].

Just as George derived concepts from the real-political discourse and retrospectively turned them into images, Gestalts and myths he simultaneously stripped them of their links with the present and placed them in an indefinite future which could only be prophesied. The Empire or Reich which George speaks about is by no means the contemporary Wilhelmian Reich, but a future Reich (similar to Hölderlin’s figure of the “future God”). This could be described as “messianization of politics.” “This is the place,” writes Raulff, “where along with Platonization of politics the Reich myth comes into play. He skips over the abhorred reality in the temporal sense and causes a short circuit between the dimensions of the past and present: remembrance of the myth of the Reich becomes a code of promise. In the framework of this eschatology ‘the state’ is projected into an indefinite future” [ibid.].

The project of “spiritual books” (“Geistbücher”) also plays a part. The transfer of the Georgan message to the realm of rhetoric was greatly aided by the works of the Circle’s pontifices Gundolf and Wolters. They built bridges between George’s poetic politics and the

²⁰ Groppe and Maiatsky rightly note the rivalry between George’s two main “apostles” and substantial differences in their interpretations of dominance. “For Wolters the key is power and voluntary and ecstatic submission to it; for Gundolf what matters most is love for the Master, not because of his power, but because he leads to new cognition. While for Gundolf the Master is a mediator between the disciple and the Idea, for Wolters the Master is the Idea. Wolters brings his formidable rhetorical power to assert action, deeds, the active character of both the ruler and the disciples [...], whereas with Gundolf the Master remains the custodian of values and educator of his disciples. Finally, while for Gundolf education is crowned with the flowering of the personality, for Wolters the crowning of service is self-sacrifice. Undoubtedly, then, Wolters more definitely and unequivocally painted the image of the Master in the cult of the ‘leader’ that is indispensable for the ‘conservative revolution’.” [Maiatsky 2012, 24], cf. [Groppe 1997, 244].

perceptions of the contemporaries and secured the influence of George's political theology on German intellectual history in the early decades of the 20th century.

Conclusions

In this study I argue that the George Circle was not only or largely a poetic group of imitators around the figure of George, but an ideologically integrated intellectual group comprising university teachers and non-academic liberal writers and, claiming, from about 1910, to reformat politics by means of aesthetics. At least two facts bespeak the profound and many-sided influence of the George Circle (above all the administrators and ideologists of the circle, Wolters, Wolfskehl, Gundolf and of course George himself) on the shaping of the intellectual life in the Weimar Republic: 1) such concepts as Reich, "covenant (union)" (Bund), "The Secret Germany", "dominance and service" (Herrschaft und Dienst), generated within the Circle became embedded in the lexicon of right-wing conservative thought of the conservative revolution²¹; 2) there was a poeticization and messianization of the concept of the political which was manifested, among other things, in the widespread aspirations in the wake of the First World War about the future Reich, the advent of a charismatic leader and about new methods of social organization of non-parliamentary anti-liberal opposition in Germany in the 1920s-30s.

We have seen that political theology in the George Circle with its three essential traits (the idea of the order, the poet-leader, the claim to total dominance) was concentrated around the authoritative/authoritarian figure of the author who entirely represents the idea and awakens faith in this idea among others.²² The poet as prophet (*poeta vates*) is guided by a supreme mission and testifies to it with his unique poetic idiom. The author, as if following the political theology guidelines, inevitably aestheticizes and poeticizes the political. It has to be stressed that this is not about the transformation of political ideas and forms of consciousness into purely aesthetic qualities, but about a diametrically opposite process: the starting point for an aesthetic

²¹ The real authorship of the above concepts is not open to question. However, it is hardly possible to establish the facts of borrowing or references to the corresponding works of the George circle by representatives of the conservative revolution partly because the works of conservative revolutionaries represent journalistic articles or essays and partly because concepts could have been attributed to the whole group.

²² S. George (like the later conservative-revolutionary authors such as E. Jünger or M. Heidegger) can rightly be called a representative of the poetic life project in which the two traditional features of German spirituality, "Dichten und Denken", are not "scientific" or "private" activities, but are understood as an existential project with a certain inherent truth.

interpretation of politics²³ in the framework of political theology is the authority of the poet and the spiritual movement he initiates. One consequence of this process is the notable theological shift in the semantics of ideas.

The political ideas worked out within the George Circle, for all their heterogeneity and inherent contradictions, exerted a substantial spiritual-historical (intellectual) influence on the conservative revolution. New ideas of the tasks of the state, elitist or hierarchic models of society, the charismatic integrated George Circle became a laboratory of intellectual history at the turn of the century.

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²³ Cf. Stefan Breuer’s definition “aesthetic fundamentalism” [Breuer 1995].

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