

Stefan George and the Construction of a Poetic Idiom

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Stefan George's "Komm in den totgesagten park," the opening poem in his cycle *Das Jahr der Seele*, is a gateway poem in several obvious senses, and in one sense that is perhaps not obvious. I contend that it is a gateway into George's own personal poetic idiom, by which I mean not just his idiosyncratic way of using the German language, but rather a completely new language, a language that is not even the same *kind* of activity or system as other modern European languages. In particular, George devises a language in which meaning—in any reasonable sense of the term—is no longer the principal function of words, but has become merely one function among many that are carried out by word-like entities whose existence is as thoroughly and radically *material* as that of the objects they may happen to name. In this sense George's words are opaque, but their opacity assumes positive value when we recognize that we can now deal with them by obeying the poem's initial imperative, "schau." The idea of a poetic idiom, a poetic language fundamentally different from the standard language it resembles, is not unprecedented. One thinks of Dante, Klopstock, Blake, the poets of the Middle High German period. But George's project is unique in a number of significant ways that will be opened for discussion.