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Arnold Böcklin and the Problem of German Modernism

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Had a nationwide poll been taken in 1900, it is highly likely that Arnold Böcklin would have been named the preeminent German painter of the fin de siècle. Today, Böcklin is hardly a name to conjure with. Few museumgoers (especially outside Switzerland and Germany) have seen his work; art historians ignore him; textbooks have trouble characterizing him and explaining both the origins of his style and the effects of his work on other artists. He may occasionally be given credit for anticipating symbolism or for inspiring Giorgi di Chirico and Max Ernst, but few now recognize him, as did his contemporaries, as the German answer to Manet; fewer still rank him with Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche as one of the great German cultural innovators of the century's end. Though two recent exhibitions and their accompanying catalogs have revived interest in Böcklin in the German-speaking world,¹ Fritz Novotny's comments in the 1971 edition of *The Pelican History of Art* still sum up a general judgment on the painter: "Böcklin presented ideals which were simple and crude enough to appeal to the taste of the artistically-minded upper-middle-class society of the so-called 'Gründerzeit' or boom period of the 1870s and 1880s." Novotny concluded that Böcklin's "eclecticism left him little scope for genuine invention."²

Why Böcklin—who, like Wagner and Nietzsche, plumbed the psyche in new and initially unpopular ways—now looks crudely bourgeois or kitschy rather than profound is a complicated question. Part of the answer surely

1. *Arnold Böcklin* (exhibition catalog, Basel, 2001); Guido Magnaguagno and Juri Steiner, eds., *Arnold Böcklin, Giorgio di Chirico, Max Ernst: Eine Reise ins Ungewisse* (Bern, 1998). Also see the Basel Kunstmuseum's slightly older but well-done catalog, edited by Dorothea Christ and Christian Geelhaar, *Arnold Böcklin: Die Gemälde im Kunstmuseum Basel* (Basel, 1990).

2. Fritz Novotny, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe, 1780–1880* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1971), 320, 319.

lies in the success of French modernism in portraying itself as modernism *tout court*; German art, from Heinrich Füssli to Max Beckmann, is little known beyond Central Europe, and even such talented painters as Max Liebermann and Adolph Menzel lack much international appeal. Another reason may be that Böcklin's art actually *was* crude and kitschy; even contemporary admirers like Thomas Mann admitted some of his paintings were bathetic and badly executed.³ But perhaps the most formidable barrier to our appreciation of Böcklin is our inability to take seriously the mythological figures which populate his best-known images. For most members of the German educated middle classes (*Bildungsbürgertum*) at the fin de siècle, by contrast, the classical tradition was still a fundamental point of reference and its major texts were common knowledge. That Böcklin was able to modernize and democratize this tradition without destroying it was central to his relatively brief but intense period of high influence and popularity (from about 1890 to 1905); that his reputation as the 'German Manet' could not be sustained in the face of other, more radical forms of artistic modernism after 1905 is an important barometer of the changing fortunes of German neoclassicism—and an important window on the fast-moving and hotly contested world of Wilhelmine cultural politics.

At the outset, it is critical to note that, *pace* Novotny, Böcklin's popularity was not the result of market-pleasing tactics; the Swiss painter achieved fame only in his old age. Born in the last years of the romantic era, he developed his mature style and his repertoire of oversexed centaurs and otherworldly nymphs (see Figure 1) while a struggling painter in the 1860s. Attacked viciously by critics in the 1870s, his apotheosis came only after he reached his sixtieth birthday and occurred not in his real or adopted homelands (Switzerland and Italy, respectively), but rather in the post-Bismarckian *Kaiserreich*. Changes in Böcklin's style are perceptible over time, with a major break occurring around 1863; but it was not a change of style that made for his post-1885 success. It was a change in Wilhelmine culture, and particularly a change in the cultural salience of classical antiquity, that made

3. Mann described Böcklin's *Madonna Enthroned in the Clouds* as "odd, primitive and so ugly as to almost be comical; I think the old master is simply playing a joke." Mann to Paul Ehrenberg, June 29, 1900, in *Thomas Mann: Briefe, 1948–1955 und Nachlese* (Frankfurt, 1965), 424–5.



Figure 1. Böcklin, *Centaur and Nymph*, 1855.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz Nationalgalerie / bpk. Photo by Joerg P. Anders.

Böcklin the German modernist par excellence for an audience that included Thomas Mann and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the Munich Secession and Sergey Rachmaninoff, Stefan George and Max Ernst, and Paula Modersohn-Becker. And it was a further change in prewar culture, beginning around 1905, that scratched the 'modern' from Böcklin's epitaph and made the Swiss-Italian landscapist the full-blooded German painter whom Adolf Hitler adored.

It is this series of cultural changes that I want to explore, tackling the separate problems of the genesis of Böcklin's vitalistic classicism (in the 1860s and '70s), the enthusiastic reception of his work (in the 1880s and '90s), and, briefly, his post-1905 banalization as a means to understand the diverse and antagonistic nature of cultural modernism in Wilhelmine Germany. As Peter Paret has recently argued, "The war over modernism [in Germany] was not fought along a single front"; nor was it one in which the public, the political elite, or even artists and art critics themselves retained consistent attitudes toward particular works or styles of art.⁴ The story of Böcklin's passage from outré iconoclast to modernist to Germanic painter nicely illustrates the contentious nature of Germany's search for a modern national style at the fin de siècle. Moreover, the painter's eclectic vision reminds us of something this volume as a whole is concerned to underscore, namely, the ambivalence toward the modern exhibited in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German culture. This world exhibited strong streaks of cultural pessimism, to be sure, but it also demonstrated a strong will to modernization; the two combined to form a rich and diverse culture of creative energy and bitter debate. To understand Böcklin, just as to understand the cultural history of the Wilhelmine fin de siècle as a whole, we must recall that it was possible for individuals in this era to be both mourners and modernizers, to live simultaneously on *The Isle of Life* and *The Isle of the Dead* (see Figures 2 and 3).

In a single essay, it is impossible to do justice to the whole of Böcklin's life and labors. I have therefore opted to address one central aspect of his work: the representation of classical antiquity. I chose this direction not only because it is central to Böcklin's reception, but also because I believe that examining transformations in the interpretation of classical antiquity opens a very important window on the changing self-image of those who were most influential in shaping Wilhelmine *Kultur*, the *Bildungsbürgertum*. Böcklin, I hope to show, rose to prominence on the strength of his ability to revitalize the classical tradition; but in the process, he broke all the rules of neoclassicism, abandoning the principle of *ut pictura poesis* (from the poem, or text, the picture is to be drawn), as well as Winckelmannian gravitas and

4. Peter Paret, *German Encounters with Modernism, 1840–1945* (Cambridge, 2001), 128.



Figure 2. Böcklin, *The Isle of Life*, 1888.

Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum. Photo by Martin Bühler.



Figure 3. Böcklin, *The Isle of the Dead*, 1883 version.

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz Nationalgalerie / bpk. Photo by Joerg P. Anders.



Figure 4. Böcklin, *Holy Sanctuary*, 1882.

© Hamburger Kunsthalle / bpk. Photo by Elke Walford.

grandeur. He gave to his half-classicizing dreamscapes a new, less elitist, psychological depth; but he retained enough of what Ludwig Justi called the ‘*Museumskultur*’⁵ of the nineteenth century to convince the embattled *Bildungsbürger* of the 1890s and 1900s that he was the painter who would save art from modernizing debasement on the one hand and academic obsolescence on the other. Conjuring the more psychological gods—Eros and Thanatos—rather than avatars of rationality and achievement such as Athena and Heracles, Böcklin appealed to a German middle class still proud of its classical learning, but no longer satisfied by the sunnier genre scenes and text-based history paintings of the previous era. In passion-infused paintings like *Holy Sanctuary* (see Figure 4) and *Battle of the Centaurs* (see Figure 5), this postliberal middle class, as well as many members of the avant-garde, found emotional (not social) truths with which they could identify without abandoning themselves to the urbane, cultureless world de-

5. Ludwig Justi, *Arnold Böcklin: Ein Führer zur Böcklin Sammlung der National-Galerie* (Berlin, 1927), 25.



Figure 5. Böcklin, *Battle of the Centaurs*, 1873.

Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum. Photo by Martin Bühler.

picted by realists and impressionists. In Böcklin’s world, they could observe raw human passions—lust, terror, grief, anger—while still believing that *Kultur* mattered and would endure.

A study of Böcklin, then, may provide an intriguing way to get at the problem—delineated long ago by Carl Schorske—of discerning what in Central European culture was moving forward and what was moving backward.⁶ For art historians and critics writing in the wake of abstraction’s advent, Böcklin’s story is one of the persistence of classical forms and the defense of traditional *Kultur* against a cosmopolitan form of modernism that flaunted its departures from traditions of all sorts. But seen from the perspective of the 1890s, his story is also one of quite radical discontinuity. Böcklin’s Gymnasium-educated fans of the fin de siècle lauded the painter precisely for breaking away from the stifling culture of the museum and making antiquity relevant by investing it with new emotional appeal. “Böcklin has jumped the tracks of tradition,” wrote one fan; the Swiss genius, wrote another, “was spared the Procrustean bed of plaster-cast classicism, which was so fateful to [Winckelmann’s] successors from [Asmus

6. Schorske posed the problem by quoting Robert Musil. See Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, 1979), 116.

Jakob] Carstens to [Anselm] Feuerbach, for, unphilologically and unfactually, with a sensual energy thirsting for life, he conjured up only smiling or sighing dreams of an ancient paradise.”⁷ That Böcklin, like Richard Wagner, “jumped the tracks” while also revitalizing the world of myth is a notable peculiarity of one moment in the complicated evolution of German modernism; it deserves scrutiny, not simple condemnation. For if Böcklin’s ‘escape’ now appears (to our Picasso-oriented eyes) fusty and arcane, the acceptance of his vitalistic vision of antiquity⁸ marked a real turning point in Wilhelmine culture—the moment in which liberal historicism collapsed under pressures exerted not only by the rapid diversification of the cultural world, but also by the onset of a deeper, darker cast of mind.

Arnold Böcklin, Swiss-Italian Eclectic

Born in 1827 and named after a character in Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell*, Böcklin fits beautifully into the ‘unseasonable’ world of midcentury Basel that Lionel Gossman sketched a few years ago in his marvelous study of the town’s infamous intellectuals.⁹ Though Böcklin escaped from his hometown—and his father’s cloth trade—in 1845, he carried away with him the city’s unique brand of iconoclastic antimodernism and eclectic individualism. Like Jacob Burckhardt, who played an important role in advancing the painter’s early career, Böcklin wove his way through Prussian institutions, but he came out very much his own man. He first studied art in Düsseldorf, where he attended Prussia’s second largest art academy. There, before 1848, classical painting, romantic and Nazarene styles, and Biedermeier realism coexisted,

7. Carl Neumann, “Zu Arnold Böcklin’s siebzigstem Geburtstag,” *Kunst für Alle* 13 (1897–98): 6; Franz Hermann Meissner, *Arnold Böcklin*, 3d ed. (Berlin, 1898), 87.

8. Vitalism is a notoriously slippery term; nonetheless, it describes what seems to have been a real tendency in late nineteenth-century culture, a strain of thought, or better still, a cast of mind that valued experience over erudition, healthy emotions (and action, often for its own sake) over pallid thought, primitive drives over “civilized” manners—the unbourgeois, that is to say, over the bourgeois. For a subtle and engaging discussion of the many forms of this cast of mind, see August K. Wiedmann, *The German Quest for Primal Origins in Art, Culture, and Politics, 1900–1933; Die ‘Flucht in Urzustände’* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1995).

9. Lionel Gossman, *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt* (Chicago, 2000); Rolf Andree, ed., *Arnold Böcklin: Die Gemälde* (Basel, 1977), 16.

apparently unproblematically.¹⁰ Böcklin stayed in Düsseldorf nearly two years, studying with the landscape painter Johann Wilhelm Schirmer and the romantic Carl Friedrich Lessing; he also would have had ample opportunity to study the work of the Nazarene J. G. Schadow, whose son Wilhelm was the director of the Düsseldorf academy. In 1847, he traveled to Belgium, where he saw early Dutch painting and was captivated by Rubens; from there, he went to Geneva, where he found Alexandre Calame’s studio confining (his training there was limited to making sketches of paintings).¹¹ The young Böcklin’s first canvases show clear debts to Schirmer, Lessing, and Calame, a trio of romantic-realist landscape painters who all more or less followed in the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich. He was not yet an original—or even an ‘unseasonable’—painter.

Critical to Böcklin’s development was his brief, bitter experience in Paris, where he landed in early 1848. Eking out a bohemian existence as a medical illustrator,¹² he made many visits to the Louvre, admiring especially Camille Corot’s landscapes and Thomas Couture’s 1847 *The Romans of the Decadence*, an enormous archaizing canvas that exemplified neoclassical history painting at its most theatrical. Drawn along with the crowds into the Tuileries in February 1848, he was horrified by the bloodshed of the June Days, during which, it seems, some of his acquaintances were executed. Franz Zelger traces Böcklin’s lifelong loathing of France to the days he spent watching out of his Parisian garret window as transports of prisoners were carted away to execution.¹³ Interestingly, however, Böcklin was never moved to paint the sufferings of the revolutionaries, as did Menzel and many of his Düsseldorf contemporaries. Seeing Böcklin’s early landscapes in the context of such works as Menzel’s *The March Casualties Lying in State* (1848) or Johann Peter Hansclever’s *Workers before the Magistrates* (1848–49) points up the extent to which the Swiss artist’s means of representing pain and sorrow were always psychological or mythological, not social or historical. An

10. Joachim Grossmann, *Künstler, Hof, und Bürgertum: Leben und Arbeit von Maler in Preußen, 1786–1850* (Berlin, 1994), 71.

11. Andree, ed., *Arnold Böcklin: Die Gemälde*, 18.

12. Ferdinand Runkel, ed., *Böcklin Memoiren: Tagebuchblätter von Böcklins Gattin Angela* (Berlin, 1910), 331.

13. Franz Zelger, *Arnold Böcklin: Die Toteninsel. Selbsttheroisierung und Abgesang der abendländischen Kultur* (Frankfurt, 1991), 31.

1890 depiction of *Poverty and Worry*, for example, employs emblematic ancient figures to embody his subject matter; *Plague and War* (1897–98) are Düreresque allegories (see Martin Ruehl's essay, Figure 14). Böcklin might have been eclectic, but the absence of attempts at history painting or social realism throughout his career is also indicative of the kinds of influence to which the artist was always immune.

Quitting Paris, the painter retreated to Basel in September 1848. But he again found the Swiss city's Biedermeier culture oppressive and elected to go, as Jacob Burckhardt advised him, to Italy. This was a wholly conventional thing to do; ever since the Renaissance, artists and architects had gone to Rome to finish their educations—though the great German landscapist Caspar David Friedrich and Böcklin's French contemporary, Gustave Courbet, had been daring enough to break with this convention. As Georg Schmidt points out, had Böcklin followed Courbet's lead and remained in Paris, he would have seen that painter's epoch-making paintings in the salons of 1849 and 1850. He missed another opportunity to experience European art's cutting edge when, after a sojourn in Munich and Weimar (1858–62), he returned to Rome instead of going to Paris, where the first works of Degas, Monet, and Manet (whose *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* dates to 1863) were becoming known.¹⁴ But Böcklin was never one to rush to see the latest exhibitions, and he rarely expressed appreciation for his contemporaries, whether French, German, Swiss or Italian. He probably did see impressionist art early on, but he ignored it in favor of the old masters and the academic art that was more highly valued by most Europeans at the time. In this he resembles his otherwise wholly differently inclined contemporary Anton von Werner, whose patriotic realism became *de rigueur* at the court of Wilhelm II.¹⁵ Werner, at least, wanted to make waves in the cultural history of his day; it is not at all clear that Böcklin shared this aspiration. He was not a man to join a 'school,' launch a movement, or even work out a philosophy of art.¹⁶ In this way, he was anything but a modern artist—and as a result, he frequently felt himself out of step with his times.

14. Georg Schmidt, "Böcklin heute," in *Arnold Böcklin: Die Gemälde*, ed. Andree, 54–6.

15. On Werner's visit to Paris, see Dominik Bartmann, *Anton von Werner: Zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Berlin, 1985), 22–6.

16. His classification as a member of the "Deutsch-Römer" postdates most of his oeuvre and almost certainly would have been disputed by the painter himself.

But Böcklin found love and good light in the south; in any case, he preferred the company of the Italian old masters and the vegetative exuberance of the Italian countryside to the urban culture scenes of the north. After the death of one fiancée, a rejected proposal, and a broken engagement, in 1853 he married the seventeen-year-old daughter of a Papal Guard, Angela Pascucci. If the liaison was rapidly formed, it would prove enduring; Angela became Böcklin's chief cheerleader, his nursemaid, and the stable center around which the moody artist revolved. It may well be that Angela Böcklin also provided the inspiration for her husband to see Italy through nonclassifying eyes; there is a lovely dual portrait of the couple strolling past a vine-covered ruin which dates to 1863–64. She was his muse, as he testified in his *Portrait of Angela Böcklin as a Muse*, and it is almost certainly her grieving form that we see in moving paintings such as *Melancholia* (1871), *Vestal Virgin* (1874), *The Dying Cleopatra* (1872), and perhaps, in smaller form, in the many versions of *Villa by the Sea* and *Isle of the Dead*. The couple had much to grieve about. In the late 1850s, Angela's ultra-Catholic aunt threatened to dissolve her niece's marriage to the Protestant Böcklin, and the couple could not live in Rome until after her death in 1862; nor was his family ever particularly friendly or supportive. Financial conditions were always tight. But much worse, five of their fourteen children would die in childhood, making for a family history shot through with deep lines of sorrow. It may indeed be Angela's influence that makes the most memorable women in Böcklin's paintings the strong, passionate, serious ones; these women are not simply objects of male desire, but rather individuals whose psychological experiences comprise a central part of the image's drama (see Figures 6 and 8).

The painter spent his early years of marriage exclusively cultivating his eye for landscape. Though it lacked the grand prestige of history painting, landscape was the bread and butter of starving young artists—and Böcklin in these years both fit this romantic stereotype and suffered its unromantic realities. But landscape to the young Böcklin was much more than a mercenary form of art. His earliest paintings exhibited the neoromantic tendency to infuse nature with human passions, and in many ways his mature style was simply a blending of emotive landscapes—in the manner of Friedrich or his teachers Schirmer and Calame—with the humor and coloristic panache of the Italian baroque. Though never a *plein air* painter, Böcklin did make careful studies of rocks, seas, and foliage; his trees were particularly expressive, though often they owed much to Corot, another great anti-



Figure 6. Böcklin, *Odysseus and Calypso*, 1882

Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum. Photo by Martin Bühler.

impressionist. The representation of nature was always central for Böcklin, and in images featuring mythological demigods or sacred scenes, the trees, grasses, water, and rocks often seem to absorb more of the painter's (and the viewer's) attention than the figures. That the natural details often seem out of proportion with respect to the scenes depicted (as in the enormous cypresses in *Isle of the Dead* or the towering birches in *Holy Sanctuary*) adds to the uncanny sensibility these images convey and suggests a kind of cultural pessimism that characterizes at least part of Böcklin's corpus.¹⁷ But there are sunnier pictures as well (see Figure 7), pastoral images that celebrate love, youth, and spring. Nature, for Böcklin, served as critique and promise, a sign of endurance in times of suffering as well as an incitement to revelry—but it was never merely a backdrop. It has always been difficult to characterize clearly the genre Böcklin worked in—but he almost certainly would have preferred to be called a landscape painter than a history painter.

17. This treatment was not, of course, invented by Böcklin; he could have learned it from C. D. Friedrich, Claude Lorraine, or Poussin, whom we know Böcklin greatly admired.



Figure 7. Böcklin, *Look, the Meadow Smiles*, 1887.

Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt.

More pantheist than humanist, he spent his early years in Italy not in deepening his appreciation for European civilization's past achievements, but in perfecting his portrayal of nature's moods.

In fact, Böcklin long evinced little interest in antiquities. Unlike his younger contemporary Paul Cézanne, Böcklin created no sketchbooks of ruins, sculptures, and frescoes during his sojourns in the Italian countryside.¹⁸ As Klaus Vierneisel has observed, there are no archaeological details in Böcklin's paintings of the '50s and early '60s—*Pan Frightens a Shepherd* (1860), *Pan amongst the Reeds* (1859), *Nymph at the Spring* (1855)¹⁹—and, we could add, few thereafter. Rather, his first images of nymphs and fauns seem shaped by rococo genre paintings; indeed, the semiclassical figures might have been added to landscapes to make the pictures sell.²⁰ They did sell, but not very well, and it is unlikely that Böcklin moved further into

18. Klaus Vierneisel, "Archäologisches bei Arnold Böcklin," in *Arnold Böcklin, Giorgio di Chirico, Max Ernst: Eine Reise ins Ungewisse*, ed. Guido Magnaguagno and Juri Steiner (Bern, 1998), 87.

19. *Ibid.*, 89.

20. Schmidt, "Böcklin heute," 54.

the realm of myth simply to satisfy market demand. There is no evidence, moreover, that he self-consciously adopted classical themes in order to make a political point, or even to *épater l'académie*. What he and his contemporaries fought over in his first classicizing pictures was not his vision of antiquity, but his already flashy use of color, his hypernaturalist rendering of vegetation, and the potentially salacious disposition of his nymphs.²¹ If, in his early work, Böcklin was developing a repertoire of favorite mythological figures, he had not yet arrived at a notably new approach—in either technical or intellectual terms—to the ancient past.

At this stage of his career—as for the next quarter-century—Böcklin remained an authentically garret-dwelling bohemian. Though he sold *Pan amongst the Reeds* to the Bavarian king in 1859 for the Neue Pinakothek, he was still virtually penniless. He had, in fact, nearly died of typhus and grief in 1858–59 (his son Robert had died during the painter's illness), and the first catalog entry for the Pinakothek described him as deceased.²² In 1860, he landed a job as professor for landscape painting at the new art academy in Weimar—but he despised the bleakness of the weather and the stuffiness of the court. Already by the late 1850s, he had developed what would be a lifelong obsession with building a flying machine that would take him soaring through the skies like a bird—leaving behind, presumably, all his earthly cares. Characteristically, however, he would never agree to degrade his vision by incorporating into it a modern utilitarian device, and without an engine, his planes could not but fail to satisfy his avian aspirations.²³

Still seeking a style, a home, and a steady income, Böcklin returned with his family to Rome in 1862. Here, at last, he found real inspiration—first from Raphael's Vatican murals and then, more powerfully, from the Pompeian wall paintings, which he saw for the first time in 1863. "The impres-

21. The original version of Böcklin's *Nymph and Centaur* could not be exhibited in Rome on "moral grounds" until Böcklin supplied the nymph with a veil. Andree, ed., *Arnold Böcklin: Die Gemälde*, 20. A later image (1866) was apparently rejected by the Basel Museum as "too naked." Rudolf Schick, *Tagebuch-Aufzeichnungen aus den Jahren 1866, 1868, 1869 über Arnold Böcklin*, 2nd ed., ed. Hugo von Tschudi (Berlin, 1902), 80–1.

22. Runkel, ed., *Böcklin Memorien*, 83.

23. On Böcklin's flying aspirations, see Ferdinand Runkel and Carl Böcklin, *Neben meiner Kunst: Flugstudien, Briefen, und Persönliches von and über Arnold Böcklin* (Berlin, 1909), 37.

sion was so powerful," his student Rudolf Schick recounted, "that he was driven completely out of his previous path," requiring a full year to reorient himself.²⁴ When he completed his transition, he emerged with a much deeper devotion to decoration, to color, and to imaginative (rather than naturalistic) painting. Impressed with Roman encaustic paintings, his colors became more vibrant, his contrasts sharper, and his will to experiment greater. Schick's diaries, which cover the years 1866 and 1868–69, show Böcklin obsessed with tints and fixatives, ceaselessly experimenting and usually failing in his attempts to recreate the beauties of ancient and Renaissance fresco painting. When we see him reading a book, it is a treatise on colors, not a volume of Greek poetry or philosophy. His friend Franz von Lenbach, who would later excel in reproducing Titian's tones, apparently learned a great deal from Böcklin's technical experiments.²⁵ Quite simply, the point was to delight the viewer's eye and to make his delight in brilliant coloration last. A painting, Böcklin would later tell an eager listener, "must be painted for the eye, and not for the reason [*Verstand*]."²⁶

Simultaneously with this immersion in frescoes (and flying machines), Böcklin's personality began to assert itself more dramatically. His characteristic combination of saturnine melancholy and passionate zeal for life can be felt in paintings like *Faun Playing for a Blackbird* (1864–65) or *Villa by the Sea*, which went through six versions between 1864 and 1878 (see Figure 8). Perhaps frequent resettlement and adversity, in addition to his Pompeian experience, helped forge the eccentric vision which developed over the course of this decade; his infant son Maurizio died in 1866, and his beloved six-year-old daughter Lucia died after being hit by a cart in 1868. Basel, to which the family had fled in 1866, hardly had proved welcoming. Finances remained limited, but Böcklin did obtain some commissions; by 1869, his newfound confidence in his own vision had become so strong that it produced a lifelong break with Burckhardt, whose insistence that Böcklin modify the murals he had begun in the Basel Museum angered the painter.²⁷ Looking at these muddled and messy paintings now, many of us would

24. Schick, *Tagebuch-Aufzeichnungen*, 171.

25. Sonja von Baranow, *Franz von Lenbach: Leben und Werk* (Cologne, 1986), 59–60.

26. Böcklin quoted in Adolf Grabowsky, *Der Kampf um Böcklin* (Berlin, 1906), 148.

27. Schick, *Tagebuch-Aufzeichnungen*, 265, 281; Runkel, ed., *Böcklin Memorien*, 127–32.



Figure 8. Böcklin, *Villa by the Sea*, 1878 version.

Kunstmuseum Winterthur. Presented by the heirs of Olga Reinhart-Schwarzenbach, 1970.

probably agree with Burckhardt: the murals were both poorly conceived and awkwardly executed. Neither these nor the portraits that sustained his family in Basel advanced Böcklin's vision; the time had come for the painter to free himself entirely from the world of his 'fathers.'

Abandoning Basel, Böcklin moved on to Munich, where he worked, in part, with his friend Franz Lenbach in the employ of the lawyer-poet (and translator of Persian, Arabic, and Spanish literature) Graf Adolf Friedrich von Schack. Schack, one of the aristocrats whose patronage sustained Böcklin throughout his hungry years, had begun an art collection that consisted, oddly, of copies of old masters and original works by living German artists, which he hung side by side in his personal gallery.²⁸ Lenbach was employed as a copyist, and Böcklin seems to have assisted him in this endeavor. But Böcklin was never a very good copyist; indeed, he disapproved

28. See Andrea Pophanken, "Graf Adolf Friedrich von Schack und seine Galerie: Anmerkungen zur Münchener Sammlungsgeschichte," in *Sammler, Stifter, und Museen: Kunstförderung in Deutschland im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Ekkehard Mai and Peter Paret (Cologne, 1993), 114–34.

of those who, like his erstwhile friend Anselm Feuerbach, were too concerned with painting "like the old masters" as well as of realists like Adolph Menzel, who, Böcklin claimed, simply painted nature's surfaces.²⁹ Nonetheless, the years in Munich would inspire Böcklin to produce two important works which would make his reputation as an iconoclastic painter of mythological scenes: *The Battle of the Centaurs* (1872–73), and *Triton and Nereid* (two versions, 1874–75).

In these two striking paintings, the imaginary animals and demigods have escaped from forest tapestries into the sunlit center of the canvas. By focusing on the figures and reducing the landscape (which took up the greatest part of images like *Pan Frightens a Shepherd*), Böcklin gave his characters new psychological power—and new audience appeal. *The Battle of the Centaurs* was widely exhibited and popularly acclaimed; it sold for 6,750 francs in 1876.³⁰ Schack bought the first version of *Triton*, and it seemed as if the National Gallery in Berlin would buy the second one. Impressed by the success of these two images, Böcklin quickly produced a series of more Pan pictures, which included *Nymph on Pan's Shoulders* (1874); *Two Pans Fishing* (1874); *Idyll* (1875); *Sleeping Diana, Watched by Fauns* (1877, see Figure 9); and *Centaur by the Water* (1878). Combining lessons learned from Rubens with his own love of the sea, he also began to produce a highly amusing set of Dionysian seascapes. It has been estimated that allegories and motives taken from classical antiquity make up one-half of Böcklin's paintings as a whole; a total of thirty-two works treat his favorite figures—Pan, fauns, and nymphs.³¹ While there is much in his corpus that is not classical from the 1870s on, the representation of this arcadian world defined his style.

These paintings exhibit a self-confident departure from the formal serenity and high moral tone of both neoclassicism and naturalism. Böcklin formally created a sense of intense irreality by combining naturalistic exactitude and implausible characters, poses, or colors, by dwarfing figures in vast, spiritualized landscapes, and by erasing all modern elements, such as roads, houses, or figures in contemporary dress. Applying the language of romantic painters like Caspar David Friedrich to semiclassical scenes (see, for exam-

29. See his comments quoted in Grabowsky, *Der Kampf*, 187, 185.

30. Runkel, ed., *Böcklin Memorien*, 252.

31. Vierneisel, "Archäologisches bei Arnold Böcklin," 88.



Figure 9. Böcklin, *Sleeping Diana, Watched by Two Fauns*, 1877.

stiftung museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf.

ple, *Holy Sanctuary*), Böcklin created the feel of primeval isolation and religious intensity.³² In the absence of historicizing details, his romantic staging of moods—not actions—turned the symbolism inward. Accordingly, the content of images became quite clearly psychological; viewers were not referred to any particular stories, but rather were invited to think about male/female relations in general (*Triton and Nereid*) or to partake of someone else's classicizing dream (*The Isle of Life*). The ancient world itself was either a source of pleasurable titillation or distressing dreams, but it was not in any way directly accessible or morally instructive.

There has been much discussion of the sources of Böcklin's psychological, bacchanalian antiquity; in search of textual sources, many scholars have followed Andrea Linnebach's closely argued speculations. In her excellent study *Böcklin und die Antike*, Linnebach notes the painter's knowledge of

32. Cf. Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York, 1975). Many thanks to Lionel Gossman for directing me to this wonderful book.

Homer, Aristophanes, Ovid, and Heinrich Heine; she also adduces the possibility that the painter might have read J. J. Bachofen's *Mother Right* and/or Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. She rightly suggests that Böcklin likely heard about Burckhardt's lectures on Greek history, as he remained a close friend of the historian until the end of the 1860s, during which time Burckhardt was preparing the lectures later published as the *Cultural History of the Greeks*.³³ Böcklin's Dionysian creations surely owed something to the antiliberal preoccupations of his fellow Baselters, Bachofen, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche, and Linnebach's work does a lovely job of sketching the neoromantic undercurrents that were available to Böcklin and his iconoclastic contemporaries.

But given the paucity of first-hand testimony (as the painter's son explained, Böcklin "had something of an aversion to the written word"),³⁴ Linnebach's reconstructions of Böcklin's reading list remain undocumented—and somewhat beside the point. As she herself points out, throughout his life Böcklin rarely painted major classical figures or conventional scenes (such as Achilles battling Hector or the lovemaking of Venus and Adonis); he preferred half-heathen figures, like nymphs, centaurs, and mermaids, whose antics were not described in any ancient sources. Historical figures and referents are entirely missing from his oeuvre; he did not attempt a *Death of Socrates* or a *Battle of Salamis*, which would have required archaeologically accurate props—or a full-on, Klimtian, modernism that Böcklin could hint at but could not quite envision. We know from numerous of his pronouncements that he was in no way a literary or cerebral painter; unlike the Pre-Raphaelites, he did not peruse arcane works of medieval flower symbolism or devote careful study to poetry, philosophy, or music. He wanted his viewers to feel the grief of the woman in *Villa by the Sea*, the frigid dampness of the sea in *Triton and Nereid*, and the lust and terror of the pursuing centaur and the frightened nymphs in *Playing in the Waves* (see Figure 10). Identifying the woman as Iphigenia, Triton and Nereid as characters spawned by Heine's poetry, and a libidinous centaur as Böcklin's own friend Anton Dohrn, simply does not unlock the meaning of his images, as might

33. Andrea Linnebach, *Arnold Böcklin und die Antike: Mythos, Geschichte, Gegenwart* (Munich, 1991), 21–35, 68–72.

34. Runkel and Böcklin, *Neben meiner Kunst*, 13.



Figure 10. Böcklin, *Playing in the Waves*, 1883.

Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Neue Pinakothek, Munich.

be the case for seventeenth-century allegories. Rather naively, Böcklin had thrown a monkey wrench into the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*—and in the 1860s and '70s, that made his work seem distinctly bizarre.

This departure from conventional practice was, as suggested above, less a conscious choice than the rather accidental result of the interweaving of romantic landscape painting, Pompeian decoration, and Italian baroque grandeur in Böcklin's maturing style. Above all, the painter conceived of himself as a craftsman. As such, he was heir to an ongoing (if increasingly threatened) 'classical' tradition, one that was not narrowly (if at all) defined by literature but rather sprang from the pattern books of the old masters. Böcklin was one of the first German painters to have a full range of Italian canvases at his fingertips, and in museums and in photographic reproductions, he carefully scrutinized the old masters. His pronouncements on art show that he studied closely at least the following: Raphael, Titian, Poussin, Rubens, Corregio, Michelangelo, the Carracci, Caravaggio, Giorgione, Tintoretto, Rogier van der Weyden, Guercino, Parmigiano, Rembrandt, and

Giotto.³⁵ He 'seceded' from the salons of his day not by becoming a painter of the future but by reverting to an artisanal tradition that had been left behind. In this, of course, he had precursors and companions abroad, from the Pre-Raphaelites to the German Nazarenes, from the proto-symbolist French painter Puvis de Chavannes to the arts and crafts movement in America. But there is neither need nor warrant to interpret these similarities as the result of 'influence.' Böcklin was simply responding to the same anxieties that many of his contemporaries had about the demise of the artisanal tradition, reacting to new kinds of inspiration that were offered by expanded access to the pre- and postclassical art of the past. While the Nazarenes, Pre-Raphaelites, and Puvis gravitated toward medieval Christian art, Böcklin was most powerfully influenced by Pompeian wall paintings and the Italian baroque. This gave his works their unique—and, according to men and women of the fin de siècle, their uniquely German—flavor.

The other source for Böcklin's peculiar vision of the ancient world was, unquestionably, the contradictions within his own psyche, which lent his pictures their unique and highly variable "moods." The vicissitudes of his own fortune alone might well have made him doubt the liberal philhellenist insistence on Greek balance and happiness. Böcklin was a moody man, torn between his northern patrons and his southern tastes; his life was characterized by the contrast between the repressive Basel business world of his father and the bohemian delights of Italy. He could express grief and longing or revel in nudity, humor, and sensuousness. Quite open in his acknowledgment of the erotic element in human relations, this apparently monogamous father of fourteen celebrated sensual pleasures as part of the natural landscape (as in *Spring* or *Look, the Meadow Smiles*), but he also could portray repression as a kind of tragic sublimity (as in *Odysseus and Calypso*). Böcklin's paintings, Ludwig Justi maintained, "guide one through all the peaks and valleys of life: jubilation and pain, childish romps and pensive old age, sweet love and raw force, incense and wine, music and murder, joyful dance and terrifying loneliness, spring passions and pestilences."³⁶ A painter of passions, Böcklin defied the liberal-bourgeois code of respectable expres-

35. See *ibid.*, 178–88. Böcklin mentions (184–8) a number of German moderns—Menzel, Piloty, Makart, von Marées, Feuerbach, Dreber, and von Werner—all negatively.

36. Justi, *Arnold Böcklin: Ein Führer*, 22.

sion. Like Nietzsche and Burckhardt, he returned to the ancients the right to experience the full range of human emotions.

As was clear both to his critics of the 1870s and to his fans of the 1890s, Böcklin was no academic neoclassicist. In one (undated) revealing rant, the painter exclaimed: "To be Greeks! Us? Why were the Greeks Greeks? Because they created what they saw, as seemed right to them. (The ancients did not want to make antiquity, as far as I know—only we want to do that.) . . . The fresh water of life is what we want, and that is ever flowing for us, as it was for the Greeks. We will only be Greek when we grasp it in our own way."³⁷ In many ways, this is what the neohumanists had been saying since Humboldt. For Böcklin, however, 'grasping in our own way' meant abandoning the Winckelmannian, *wissenschaftlich* classicism of the Gymnasium and the plaster cast for a pantheistic arcadia whose existence was (and had always been) primarily psychological, not historical. And quite suddenly, around 1880, for one important sector of the population, this became the antiquity of choice.

The Discrete Charm of Mythological Modernism

If this story so far is one of the artistic genesis of an 'unseasonable' painter, the remainder is a tale of grand success—success that came to Böcklin not as a result of changes in his style but rather as a result of rapid cultural changes occurring rather to the north of his usual haunts. We pick up the story at about 1871, just as Böcklin began to emerge from poverty and obscurity. The years following the foundation of the Wilhelmine empire were happy ones for Germany's middle classes, although, as Peter Gay has recently underlined, the bourgeoisie did not speak with one voice, then or ever.³⁸ The moneyed elite (*Besitzbürgertum*), for example, had begun to assert its more urbane and utilitarian tastes against those of the educated elite, which nonetheless remained dominant in the bureaucracy, churches, and schools. In the 1870s, painting academies still followed neoclassicist rules: students copied plaster casts of ancient statues and aspired to work in the genre that topped

37. Quoted in Gustav Floerke, *Zehn Jahre mit Böcklin: Aufzeichnungen und Entwürfe* (Munich, 1901), 127.

38. Peter Gay, *Schnitzler's Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture, 1815–1914* (New York, 2002).

the French Academy's hierarchy, history painting. But even for history painters, ancient and mythological scenes had become rather rare, giving way to more modern—and often specifically Germanic—canvases, like those of Carl Friedrich Lessing and Adolph Menzel. By midcentury, social realism and genre scenes had become very popular, in Germany as in France and Britain. Landscape, reviled by the seventeenth-century French Academy, had attained a new prestige, as was clear in the favorable reception given the pioneering work of Constable, Corot, and Friedrich in Europe, and Alfred Bierstadt and Thomas Cole in America. But as we have seen, in the 1850s and '60s Böcklin's combination of romantic landscape and rococo mythology did not seem to suit almost anyone's taste, not to mention any nation's self-conception. As a result, throughout the 1870s Böcklin remained an eccentric outsider rather than a Germanic genius.³⁹

Interestingly, the first Germans to take an interest in Böcklin were bankers, particularly Jewish collectors who were based in Berlin.⁴⁰ Evidently, these modern-minded cosmopolitans saw something new in the maverick artist's pantheistic paganism; perhaps their outsider status with respect to the heavily Protestant cultural elite allowed them to appreciate, as others as yet could not, Böcklin's explorations of antiquity's saturnalian psyche. Yet as their admiration grew, an anti-Böcklin clique increasingly emerged as well. In the 1870s, cultural conservatives ridiculed what one called Böcklin's "truly shameless use of color" and his juxtaposition of "imaginary conception" and "hyper-realistic representation." The classically-schooled criticized the painter for departing from literary sources. The liberal-era elite were, after all, learning from scholars like Theodor Mommsen to appreciate a Roman Empire "where the wind blows and bad weather dominates, and which reminds one of today's prosaic national economy."⁴¹ Where, they asked, did the ancients record a battle of centaurs? As Lutz Tittel has shown, these devotees of neoclassicism thought Böcklin's work 'bizarre' and overly concerned

39. In the Basel catalog, Thomas Gaetgens has shown that the French did not think of Böcklin as 'German' in this period—or in the prewar era either. Thomas W. Gaetgens, "Böcklin and Frankreich," in *Arnold Böcklin*, 89, 101–3.

40. Angelika Wesenberg, "Böcklin und die Reichshauptstadt," in *Arnold Böcklin*, 76.

41. In the hands of midcentury scholars like Ernst Curtius, ancient Greece remained much more highly aestheticized, but equally distant from Böcklin's vision. See Hermann Grimm, "E. Curtius über Kunstmuseen," *Preussische Jahrbücher* 25 (1869): 616.

with being different.⁴² Nor were the painter's imaginary animals acceptable to a culture steeped in positivistic natural science. Vexed by Böcklin's rendering of mythological beasts, Berlin professor of natural history Emil Dubois-Reymond proved that the artist's sea creatures were anatomically impossible.⁴³ Though by the mid-1870s Böcklin had developed his mature style and had found a small following, the *Bildungsbürgertum* was not yet ready for his brand of neoromantic classicism.

Few if any of his admirers described Böcklin as a 'German' painter in the years just after unification (the painter in fact resettled in Florence in 1875); nonetheless, he had achieved enough notoriety to attract the attention of Max Jordan, director of the soon-to-open National Gallery in Berlin. Partial to Italian Renaissance and German romantic art, Jordan evidently hoped that Böcklin would marry the two styles successfully, and commissioned a work from him for the new institution. But when the Swiss painter delivered the second version of his *Triton and Nereid* in 1875, Jordan rejected it, telling the cultural minister, "His image has an unmistakable parodistic quality, and has resulted in the emancipation of ugliness, a tendency which frequently disfigures Böcklin's—always in their way interesting—images."⁴⁴ In 1876, Empress Augusta rejected Böcklin's bathetic *Lamentation beneath the Cross* (the nude, plastic Christ's eyes are open, while the two Marys evince unconvincing gestures of grief), and Böcklin himself remained unsatisfied with his new *Pieta* sketches. He offered to try a new *Triton* with more mythical mystique and less parody, but the regional art commission asked for a different subject, a landscape with many figures—perhaps hoping to keep Eros and Thanatos at bay.⁴⁵ Böcklin finally produced an image that was dubbed by Jordan *The Elysian Fields*, a dreamscape in which a faun carries a woman across a stream to a Poussinian garden party. The image was attacked as

42. Comments from reviews for the *Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst* (1873 and 1872 respectively) quoted in Lutz Tittel, "Die Beurteilung Arnold Böcklins in der Zeitschrift für bildende Kunst von 1866 bis 1901," in *Arnold Böcklin, 1827–1901: Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Plastiken* (exhibition catalog, Basel, 1977), 125, 124.

43. Kenworth Moffett, *Meier-Graefe as Art Critic* (Munich, 1973), 53; Linnebach, *Böcklin und die Antike*, 56.

44. Quoted in Wesenberg, "Böcklin und die Reichshauptstadt," 78.

45. Justi, *Arnold Böcklin: Ein Führer*, 17; Wesenberg, "Böcklin und die Reichshauptstadt," 78–81.

unintelligible, base, and sensational, and Wilhelm I was forced to promise not to buy any more of Böcklin's pictures.⁴⁶

In 1880, the Catholic nationalist August Reichensperger blasted Böcklin in the Reichstag, insisting that the painter's pagan scenes, unlike real Greek and Roman nudes, exerted a deleterious effect on modern morals—and especially on women—to the detriment of German *Geist* and German identity.⁴⁷ But Reichensperger would be one of the last cultural conservatives to denounce Böcklin in this way. Soon after 1880, conservatives, as well as members of the avant-garde, began lauding the Swiss painter for precisely the sort of non-Winckelmannian penchants the previous generation had abhorred. One critic summed up this new rhetoric nicely: "Born in a world which groans under the weight of suffocating [*zudrängender*] tradition, in a world of excavations and museums, where almost every creative drive is smothered by imitation and insensitivity, [Böcklin] remains untouched. The dreary medium of knowledge seems not to obscure his eye. It is as if this man has arisen directly from the original splendor of the elements, from a paradise in which men and animals live together in brotherhood and harmony, where they understand one another and men are free of arrogance."⁴⁸

What gave Böcklin's antiquity this primeval new vitality is a question that requires much more research, but some reflections are in order. It is surely the case that by the fin de siècle, the proponents of 'modern' education had convinced a broad section of the population—one which included the emperor himself—that neohumanist, elitist *Bildung* was no longer the appropriate sort of education for German students. Even within the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the younger generation (those whose formative experiences occurred after the founding of the Reich in 1871) now began to call for new life to be breathed into German culture, attacking the 'dry as dust' philological positivism of their fathers. Once the need for reform was recognized, plans for remaking German culture proliferated. Of course, as 'Germany' was a brand-new creation, the question of what 'German culture' actually was remained terrifically fraught. Each of the individual states had its own cultural

46. Moffett, *Meier-Graefe as Art Critic*, 52.

47. Andrea Linnebach, "Antike und Gegenwart: Zu Böcklins mythologischer Bilderwelt," in *Arnold Böcklin, Giorgio di Chirico, Max Ernst*, ed. Magnaguagno and Steiner, 196; Wesenberg, "Böcklin und die Reichshauptstadt," 82.

48. Neumann, "Zu Arnold Böcklin's siebzigstem Geburtstag," 5.

institutions and traditions; trying to fuse them all into one 'culture' without destroying some of them was an impossibility from the outset. Moreover, this quest was going on at the same time as all of Europe was experiencing what should be seen as a democratizing revolution in the cultural sphere. Not only were newspapers and magazines proliferating at a fantastic rate; booksellers and publishers also were multiplying and rapidly diversifying their wares. Travel, popular theater, sports, and museum-going all became more commonplace experiences, thanks to increased leisure time and swifter means of transport. The circulation of photographs and the advent of film further fragmented the cultural scene. Avant-gardes evolved and subdivided, and conservative cultural critics strove to force myriad genies back into antiquated bottles. In this atmosphere, longing for 'cultural unification' was deep and regularly expressed, but rarely (if ever) achieved; certainly there was no consensus in the world of artistic practice. The proliferation of galleries, patrons, associations, secessions, exhibitions, and publications made it possible for numerous artistic 'flowers' to bloom—and for numerous half-appreciated artists to cultivate grudges and/or bohemian sensibilities. This rich world of possibilities might have been experienced as exhilarating and, for some people, perhaps it was. But by and large, contemporary literary accounts testify to anxiety in the face of too much diversity. A 'styleless' age, it was agreed, could not be a great one; it could not unite national talent. In such a state of disunity, Germans could hardly hope to rival French and Italian painting—something, many felt, the nation already famous for its poetry, philosophy, science, and music should now attempt to do.

This anxiety about style was particularly rife among the *Bildungsbürger*, who were accustomed to being Central Europe's cultural providers; they were loath to give up the privileged task they had wrested from the aristocracy in the eighteenth century. This is the sociocultural context in which to understand Germans' adoption of Böcklin as a national hero: not as a simple reaction against modernization, but as the attempt of one sector of the classically-educated elite to substitute *their* form of modernism for what was being offered by the antihistorical impressionists or, worse, the socially critical naturalists. Böcklin was not the most conservative choice that could have been made, institutionally or intellectually; that was Anton von Werner, longtime director of the Berlin Academy, member of the Prussian state art commission, president of the Association of Berlin Artists, and favorite

painter of Wilhelm II. Böcklin's fans were not of this type. Rather, they were men like the poet Stefan George or the painter Gustav Floerke (who came to study with Böcklin in 1881), men who did attend the classical Gymnasien, only to emerge as critics of the desiccation of the neohumanist tradition. "The aesthetic dogmas and presuppositions of our fathers," Floerke recalled, "were transmitted to us in flesh and blood, and after generations, they still shape our popular books and our Gymnasium teachers. Those who have used them to enjoy [life] or shape themselves are few." In contrast, he wrote, Böcklin's art was "sensuous, immediate, not abstract, intellectual, [the kind that] is devious in its effects."⁴⁹ Böcklin, claimed Julius Langbehn in his hugely popular *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (*Rembrandt as Educator*), was one of the few living artists to have escaped the "anal historicism" of archaeological fetishism and accepted Winckelmann's obsolescence.⁵⁰ For these cultivated young men, reared in a world in which industrial, commercial, and practical knowledge threatened to destroy the prestige of humanistic *Bildung*, it was imperative to preserve the status of their own group and the grand cultural traditions that had been entrusted to it, the most important of which was the classical one. But they were unable and unwilling to return to the comfortable conventions of academic neoclassicism, especially since professionalization and historicization seemed to be destroying the creative power of Greek culture. Feeling repressed and confined by the banal pleasantries and narrowly focused scholarship of the midcentury, they concluded that antiquity had either to take on a new vitality or be consigned to the dustbin.⁵¹

Without the intervention of Böcklin, the dustbin perhaps would have triumphed—but the simultaneous growing appeal of Bachofen's *Mother Right* and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, the appearance of George's *Algabal* and Richard Strauss's *Elektra*, and the launching of new attempts to universalize classical experience (J. G. Frazer's *Golden Bough*, Freud's *Oedipus*

49. Floerke, *Zehn Jahre mit Böcklin*, 194, 106.

50. [Julius Langbehn], *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, 39th ed. (Leipzig, 1891), 30–5.

51. There are strong parallels here with a revolt going on within the realm of classical scholarship itself. See Suzanne Marchand, "From Liberalism to Neoromanticism: Albrecht Dieterich, Richard Reitzenstein, and the Religious Turn in Fin-de-Siècle German Classical Studies," in *Out of Arcadia: Classics and Politics in Germany in the Age of Burckhardt, Nietzsche, and Wilamowitz*, ed. Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Ruehl (London, 2003), 129–60.

complex, C. G. Jung's studies of Mithraism) all suggest that the new generation was eager to rekindle the classical tradition's fires, supplying it a torch to carry into battle with a materialist and insufficiently heroic present. What Böcklin provided was the equivalent in oils to what others were producing in scholarship, music, and poetry: a subjective and psychological understanding of antiquity. His popularity was also bolstered by the fact that many of his canvases belonged to what one commentator called the "*antike Niedergangsstimmungssphäre* (the realm of ancient feelings of decline),"⁵² for by the 1890s the lament for the passing of paganism had become a familiar topos. The sense of loss and longing—conveyed so poignantly across the English Channel by Walter Pater—was echoed by Böcklin in paintings like *Heracles' Tomb* and *Villa by the Sea*, about which Henriette Mendelssohn wrote in 1901: "To us . . . the image has become a great elegy for the disappearance of ancient splendor. In the waves, which strike the shore with ritual force, the swan song of a great past resounds."⁵³ But the loss was not irreparable, Böcklin taught; repeatedly, in poems dedicated to the aging painter, he was credited with giving new life to an arcadian world that had nearly disappeared.⁵⁴ "You, alone," wrote Stefan George, "have prevented . . . this cold age's extinguishing of the holy fire."⁵⁵ The power of Böcklin's pagan-pastoral vision had liberated the ancients from the fetters of historicizing, philological classicism and had given German art an entrancing new authenticity. Böcklin, the great Pan of painting, permitted his viewers to break with the past and yet resist the unedifying and superficial culture of the present. They could be mourners and modernizers all at once.

Though they praised him to the skies, the intellectuals of the *fin de siècle* often admitted that they did not entirely understand Böcklin; it was difficult, many confessed, to find the key to what one 1895 commentator described as the "secret magical garden of this painter-mystic."⁵⁶ Yet what would have been, for Böcklin's admired Renaissance greats as for nineteenth-century neoclassicists, disaster—namely, the failure of the painter to communicate

52. Meissner, *Böcklin*, 39.

53. Quoted in Linnebach, *Böcklin und die Antike*, 132.

54. See, e.g., Schack's poem, quoted in Nikolaus Meier, "Böcklin-Gesänge," in *Arnold Böcklin, 1827–1901*, 134.

55. George quoted in *ibid.*, 142.

56. Quoted (in another context) in Tittel, "Die Beurteilung Arnold Böcklins," 123.

his vision clearly—was now fully acceptable, indeed part of the "life" with which he infused his art. Unlike the critics of the 1870s, the viewers of the 1890s did not want to be able to identify the literary sources or exact archaeological provenance of Böcklin's scenes; his mythological figures did not need to tell a recognizable story.⁵⁷ The vitality of the vision, its ability to speak to the spectator's psyche, was more important than the viewer's ability to recognize and 'read' a traditional tale. It is not clear why Böcklin himself broke away from the literary tradition. Perhaps he simply did not think that texts should constrain the painter's vision, any more than that vision should constrain the audience's appreciation of a work of art. If some saw Iphigenia in the mourning woman in *Villa by the Sea*, the painter approved: "That is perfectly fine; everyone should think of the image in the way it speaks to him. It is not necessary that this is exactly the same as what the painter conceived. I did not think of Iphigenia in [creating] the image."⁵⁸ It was surely this sort of radical personalizing of mythological scenes that made it possible for Freud to articulate his Oedipus complex as an aspect of universal experience, and for Eugene O'Neill, several decades later, to write his own *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

By the early 1890s, then, Böcklin had an intense and expanding audience for his art. The French symbolists were enthusiastic; his German-speaking imitators—including Franz von Stuck, Max Klinger, and August Macke—were enthralled. For a brief time, he enjoyed both the endorsement of avant-garde critics like Julius Meier Graefe and great popularity among the more Germanophile *Bildungsbürger*. Three major retrospectives were held in 1897 in honor of his seventieth birthday; the Berlin exhibition drew sixty thousand visitors in one day. In Munich, a celebratory dinner attracted so many fans from so many walks of life that the card room of the royal Hofbräuhaus could hardly hold them.⁵⁹ Reproductions of his work circulated widely and were easy to obtain; *The Isle of the Dead*, it is said, hung in every bourgeois living room and had made the island of Pondiconissi (the so-called 'false' model for the painting) something of a tourist attraction already by the turn

57. Böcklin himself once argued that paintings do have something to tell, but not necessarily a story. Floerke, *Zehn Jahre mit Böcklin*, 69.

58. Runkel and Böcklin, *Neben meiner Kunst*, 144.

59. Beth Irwin Lewis, "Kunst für Alle: Das Volk als Förderer der Kunst," in *Sammler, Stifter, und Museen*, ed. Mai and Paret, 190.

of the century.⁶⁰ His paintings now sold for an average of sixteen thousand marks, four times what he had commanded in the '70s and early '80s.⁶¹ When one of Freud's patrons hinted that a Böcklin might be secured for the Modern Gallery in Vienna, the Austrian minister of culture moved quickly to promote the psychoanalyst to a university professorship.⁶² The Swiss artist became a household name, even a household necessity—and, increasingly, the man upon whom Germanophile commentators pinned their hopes for the development of a truly German modern style.

Arnold Böcklin, German Hero

The process by which this Swiss-Italian semimodernist became the iconic German painter, his name coupled with the other two great heroes of the modern-minded, fin-de-siècle *Bildungsbürgertum*, Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Wagner, is rather complicated. It should be noted that the painter himself was no passionate Germanophile, either before or after 1890.⁶³ As we have seen, he revolted early against the conventions and expectations of bourgeois Basel. He married an Italian woman and apparently spoke Italian at home for the rest of his life; the couple lived in Germany as infrequently as possible. Although he perpetually looked to Germany for his market, he felt he had been swindled by German dealers and treated shabbily by Basel society, and he disliked Berlin almost as much as he disliked Paris. It has proved impossible to read into his *Battle of the Centaurs* a hurrah for Germany's victory in the Franco-Prussian war; nor can his post-1890 apocalyptic paintings *War* and *Plague*, as Andrea Linnebach notes, be seen as positive reflections on Germany's rise to world power.⁶⁴ His French symbolist fans

60. Zelger, *Arnold Böcklin: Die Toteninsel*, 54; Gerd Roos, "Giorgio di Chirico und der lange Schatten von Arnold Böcklin," in *Reise ins Ungewisse*, ed. Magnaguagno and Steiner, 208–9.

61. Robin Lenman, *Artists and Society in Germany, 1850–1914* (Manchester, 1997), 162.

62. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, 245.

63. Georg Schmidt described him as a fan of Bismarck, while Norbert Schneider called him an 'enlightened republican.' Schmidt, "Böcklin heute," 55, 57; Schneider, "Böcklins 'Toteninsel': Zur ikonologischen und sozialpsychologischen Deutung eines Motivs," in *A. Böcklin, 1827–1901* (exhibition catalog, Darmstadt, 1977), 116–7.

64. Linnebach, *Böcklin und die Antike*, 138–44.

never viewed him as a nationalist painter,⁶⁵ and even many conservative contemporaries doubted his Germanness. For lovers of military realism, like Anton von Werner and Kaiser Wilhelm II, Böcklin was just as foreign and as repulsively modernist as Monet. "Nature doesn't look like that," Wilhelm apparently jeered.⁶⁶

But Böcklin did clearly prefer German styles to French ones. Of impressionism's claim to represent the world as the eye really sees it, he scoffed: "My houseboy 'sees' too."⁶⁷ He disliked France and the French; for a man of his generation, he traveled remarkably little beyond the triangle linking Italy, Switzerland, and southern Germany. But even though he loved the Italian countryside, Böcklin could not conceive himself as an Italian; he wanted a German education for his children and apparently formed few friendships with Italian nationals. As Gustav Floerke claimed, perhaps rather rashly, "He believed that with Italians—without exception [presumably including his own wife]—one could, at best, have the same sort of relationship one has with a lovely pet."⁶⁸ His circle of students and friends—including Franz von Lenbach, Anselm Feuerbach, and Gottfried Keller—were all German-speakers. Thus, Böcklin was not entirely resistant to Germanization. He belonged to the school of cultural pessimists who saw more creative potential in German *Kultur* than in any other national or international tradition.

But Böcklin's adoption as a German hero had nothing whatever to do with his own attitudes or initiatives; rather, this process was driven by the search for a German 'modern' style and with battles over the reception of impressionism in the later Wilhelmine cultural world.⁶⁹ By the mid-1890s, German attacks on impressionism had become habitual; in them, commentators voiced resentment of France's presumption that its artists alone defined 'modern' art, revulsion at impressionism's 'unartistic' subject matter (e.g., cities or railroads), and disdain for the style's scientific pretensions. As Peter Paret has described, polemics grew increasingly fierce after the appointment of Hugo von Tschudi to the directorship of the National Gallery

65. See Gaetgens, "Böcklin and Frankreich," 89–111.

66. Report on the Kaiser's visit to the National Gallery in 1899 quoted in Bartmann, *Anton von Werner*, 217.

67. Böcklin quoted in Floerke, *Zehn Jahre mit Böcklin*, 115.

68. *Ibid.*, 10.

69. Paret, *Berlin Secession*, 172.

in Berlin in 1896. A Renaissance specialist, soon after his appointment Tschudi (who was, incidentally, Swiss) became enamored of French impressionist painting and tried to collect more of it; as director of the only Prussian state museum that collected 'modern' (nineteenth-century) art, he thought it necessary to expose Germans to a wide range of contemporary artistic styles. Yet Wilhelm II, whose idea of good artistic taste was the bathetic double row of Hohenzollern sculptural portraits known as the *Siegesallee*, insistently opposed the intrusion of 'foreign' and 'tasteless' art into a museum he believed should be devoted exclusively to good, solid, German art. Tschudi would finally be forced out in 1908, but not until a grand debate had been joined over what sort of art would improve the German soul and guide German painters down the correct creative path.⁷⁰ There were at least three sides in this debate: the conservatives, including Wilhelm II and Anton von Werner, who argued for a return to patriotic, academic realism; the cosmopolitans, including Tschudi, Julius Meier-Graefe, and some of the great secessionist painters of the day (such as Max Liebermann and Lovis Corinth), who were fans of French modern art; and a group I will call the nationalist modernizers. It was this last group that championed Böcklin—especially after Meier Graefe launched an attack on the painter in 1905, causing his popularity among members of the avant-garde to plummet. Thereafter, Böcklin was left almost exclusively to the not-so-tender mercies of his Germanophile fans.

As we have seen, Böcklin's rise to late Wilhelmine fame and fortune occurred precisely in the period in which competition over the definition of 'the modern' and 'the German' was reaching its zenith. For a time, it was possible to believe he represented both. In the context of the Tschudi debates, however, Böcklin's Germanic resonances began to supersede his modern ones. Already in 1898, he had been called the "most German painter of our century"; his art, it was said, seemed "to be born from the soul of our Volk."⁷¹ He was compared repeatedly to Richard Wagner—and also, very often, to that other German cultural prophet, Winckelmann.⁷² The question

70. For Paret's most recent treatment of these events, see his chapter on "The Tschudi Affair" in *German Encounters with Modernism*, 92–118.

71. Friedrich Haack quoted in Paret, *Berlin Secession*, 53–4.

72. For more examples, see Moffett, *Meier-Graefe as Art Critic*, 52–60.

of his actual birthplace (and domicile) could be deflected by insisting, as Gustav Floerke did, on his "unquestionably Germanic [*alemannischer*] skull."⁷³ Naturally, in the context of the debates over impressionism, Böcklin's Germanness was not simply invoked by patriots to embellish the nation's artistic legacy; for sympathetic critics, most of whom were looking for an alternative modern art rather than rejecting modernism out of hand, he became a means to establish the nation's cultural autonomy, its modernity, and, if possible, its primacy. "Whatever Böcklin touched," wrote the influential critic Ferdinand Avenarius in a 1901 elegy for the painter, "became spiritual. Art in this sense, northern, Germanic art, is all that he created. No matter how many ideas he took from the south, even ideas concerning subject matter, he took them as a conqueror who seeks to expand Germany's possessions. If our art is to endure the fight with foreign powers, with foreigners both inside and outside our borders, it will nowhere find a weapon stronger than Böcklin's immortal work."⁷⁴ Here, the colonizing ambitions and rivalries of Wilhelmine *Weltpolitik* were mapped onto the struggle to define an independent national style, and Böcklin's paintings had become the weapons with which to fight—internally and externally—a cultural war.

One of the major ways in which Böcklin was said to demonstrate his 'Germanness,' not surprisingly, was in his unique ability to reanimate the world of the Greeks. Henry Thode said of Böcklin's work: "The covenant is fulfilled: the Germanic and the Greek have united."⁷⁵ Franz Hermann Meissner's popular biography of the painter (1898) introduced his subject with a long disquisition on Germany's exceptional ability to reconjure the magic of Greek antiquity and the "instinctive drive of the race's blood" toward the mythical.⁷⁶ Böcklin had revitalized an essential national-cultural tradition by stripping it of its pedantry, Meissner exulted. Rather than reading books, Böcklin wandered through the streets and houses of the Pompeian necropolis, experiencing the *völkisch* life-pulse that coursed beneath the "cold marble statuary of official ancient classicism." Haunted by Roman ghosts

73. Floerke, *Zehn Jahre mit Böcklin*, 10.

74. Avenarius quoted in Paret, *Berlin Secession*, 172.

75. Thode quoted in Linnebach, *Böcklin und die Antike*, 53.

76. Meissner, *Böcklin*, 10–4 (quote, 14).

and reveling in Goethe's spiritual surroundings, Böcklin, Meissner concluded, became a 'modern Greek' during his years in Weimar and now represented the reincarnation of Faust's marriage with Helen of Troy.⁷⁷

By the time this process of Germanization shifted into high gear, Böcklin himself was ailing, though still producing. We do not know what he thought of these patriotic tributes, but he probably disliked them; he refused even to attend the exhibition and seventieth-birthday festivities held in his honor in Basel. Had he paid careful attention to his fans, Böcklin surely would have noticed a peculiarity in his post-1895 reception. This was the increasing emphasis put on his 'serious' pictures. While they constitute the larger share of his work, by no means did they entirely reflect his world view, the humorous side of which can be seen in paintings like *Sleeping Diana Watched by Two Fauns* and *Playing in the Waves* (see Figures 8 and 10). His later admirers, it seems, strongly preferred his pessimistic pictures to his pastoral landscapes and comic scenes; only the former seemed worthy of counting as truly 'German' modern art. We have already noted the enormous popularity of *The Isle of the Dead*—a print of which hung in Georges Clemenceau's dining room; second most popular was probably *Holy Sanctuary*, which Thomas Mann exhibited over his writing desk—to draw his mind away from banal, bourgeois concerns.⁷⁸ When Avenarius produced a Böcklin-Mappe in 1901, it contained framable copies of these two images as well as *Silence of the Forest*, one of the painter's few Germanicizing paintings; it also included copies of *Maria Tending the Corpse of the Savior* (a histrionic picture disliked by Burckhardt) and two now little-discussed images, *The Attack* and *Poetry and Painting*.⁷⁹ For Avenarius, these paintings—not the light-hearted or erotic ones—represented Böcklin's best work. And it was exactly patriotic critics like Avenarius and the Heidelberg art historian Henry Thode, seeking to promote German modernism, who unintentionally gave the Swiss-Italian painter a reputation for Germanic chauvinism and bathetic seriousness. Though a few—most notably Giorgio di Chirico—were still able to recover a parodistic and playful Böcklin, his long-term reputation was greatly damaged by the post-1895 emphasis on his most melancholy canvases.

77. *Ibid.*, 48, 114–5.

78. Linnebach, *Böcklin und die Antike*, 100.

79. Gerd Roos, "Giorgio di Chirico," 206–7.

This process of patriotic domestication surely diminished Böcklin's status as a 'modernist.' But even more important was Meier Graefe's *The Case of Böcklin (Der Fall Böcklin)* of 1905, a vituperative attack on the artist by Germany's best-known art critic and champion of modern art. The title of the book was apt, for just as Friedrich Nietzsche had renounced his early admiration for Wagner in *Der Fall Wagner* (1888), Meier Graefe rescinded his earlier appreciation for Böcklin—and accused the painter of many of the same sins Wagner had purportedly committed. The painter, Meier Graefe argued, was not only a superficial dilettante with an inexcusably wide and fanatical circle of followers: he was a danger to German *Kultur* as a whole. For Meier Graefe, Böcklin was a personality, not an artist. After 1860, his work had become anachronistic and illogical, ignoring the rules of painting in favor of a stupid, self-interested individualism. His bizarre colorations and figural placements made the inessential parts of a painting seem central; in striving for effect, he destroyed the unity of the image to such an extent that Meier Graefe was willing to concede him merely the status of a mosaicist, not that of a painter. "Böcklin's evolution is like that of the impatience of a pianist, who pounds the keys harder and harder, the more incorrectly he plays," he fulminated.⁸⁰ Moreover, the critic lamented, the cheap tricks of this 'barbarian' had worked so well that his art was obscuring all memory of the greatness of the European artistic tradition. Böcklin was the product of "our styleless age," in which all philosophical systems lay in ruins and individual freedom had triumphed to the detriment of cultural development.⁸¹ If this decadent cult were not eradicated, Meier Graefe warned, Germany's potential cultural greatness would never be realized.

Meier Graefe's long polemic incited a bitter debate and inspired the publication of dozens of discussions of 'l'affaire Böcklin.' The Wagnerian Thode responded with eight public lectures on recent German painting, in which he attacked proponents of internationalism in art and identified a Berlin conspiracy which—for financial and ideological reasons—was attempting to foist 'un-German' impressionism on Germany.⁸² Max Liebermann issued an

80. Alfred Julius Meier Graefe, *Der Fall Böcklin und die Lehre von den Einheiten* (Stuttgart, 1905), 78.

81. *Ibid.*, 86, 248, 109–10.

82. Paret, *Berlin Secession*, 174–6.

angry reply to Thode, but there was no convincing the nationalist professor (who had married Wagner's daughter and who wrote regularly for the *Bayreuther Blätter*) that Böcklin was not the avatar of German modernism. Polemics continued for some years, but gradually left Böcklin behind; debates among connoisseurs increasingly focused on the technically more experimental expressionists. Younger German artists began to look elsewhere. By the spring of 1907, for example, August Macke had wholly abandoned his passion for Böcklin's paintings and could hardly believe he had loved them so much: "The images all seem to me so pathetic, so affected and bright, I can't look at them anymore." He now preferred Japanese woodcuts or the paintings of Manet, who, he wrote, "himself possessed so much poetry that he didn't need to make women into Naiads, his unpretentious and simple soul didn't need any symbols to paint the sea."⁸³ But for the German petit bourgeois, Böcklin's work continued to serve as a sort of 'pillars of Hercules' beyond which modern taste could not go. It is not accidental that Hitler and Goebbels regarded Böcklin as a great German artist, while Emil Nolde (a Nazi sympathizer), Macke (who died at the front in 1914), and of course Max Liebermann counted as 'decadent.'

Böcklin was not a decadent painter, either in terms of subject matter or technique. He did not evolve in the direction of abstraction, as did Gustav Moreau, Ferdinand Khnopff, or Gustav Klimt; nor do his canvases display the violent sexuality or antibourgeois blasphemy exemplified by Félicien Rops, Max Klinger, or Franz von Stuck. His decorative tendencies did inspire secessionist pioneers, but he himself did not 'secede.' He attempted to revitalize mythological landscapes, but he did not—in contrast to Max Ernst (born in 1891)—seek self-consciously "to become a magician and find the myth of his time."⁸⁴ Like the figure of Titian in the short play Hugo von Hofmannsthal revised for Böcklin's funeral, the artist was engaged primarily in the craft of producing paintings rather than the cerebral sport so despised by the vitalists—philosophical criticism.⁸⁵ He was fundamentally a respect-

83. Macke quoted in Elisabeth Erdmann-Macke, *Erinnerung an August Macke* (Stuttgart, 1962), 269, 270.

84. Ernst quoted in M. E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin, Tex., 2001), 34.

85. Hofmannsthal added a new preface to this play (originally written in 1892) so that it could be performed as part of the funerary rites for Böcklin in 1901. See "Der Tod des Tizian: Ein dramatisches Fragment," in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Sämtliche Werke III*, ed.

able, if playful, nineteenth-century pagan, a modernist who could not leave *Museumskultur* entirely behind. He may not have been a German painter, but neither could he speak the language of international modernism. Although considered a forerunner of the symbolists, it is by no means clear that his images perform a kind of synaesthesia; as Andrea Gottdang has argued, he used open mouths and harps simply to make ancient experience more immediate to modern viewers.⁸⁶ It appears that Böcklin was aware of the pervasive fin-de-siècle problem of the inability of language to communicate clear meanings. But unlike T. S. Eliot (for example), he did believe that mermaids—and paintings of mermaids—could sing to us, as long as we agree to look for meaning at an emotional and instinctive level, not at the level of consciously-articulated ideas.

Böcklin, then, was not quite a modernist—but his own, rather naïve revolt against neoclassicism undoubtedly set the scene for modernism and offered one important road into the (non-French) open. Using conventional terminology, his work is best characterized as transitional, linking late romanticism to early forms of modernism. He did not make the full break from history, tradition, and meaning as did the artists of the next generation—but can we be sure that his innovations were less important than those of the modernist painters who—as many of them admitted—had once stood on his shoulders? Unlike most of these card-carrying 'modernists,' Böcklin had a keen popular following, some of whom did him the disservice of stripping away his comedic, ironic side and suppressing his cosmopolitanism—just as was the case with his fellow Baseler Friedrich Nietzsche. We should not, in my view, dismiss Böcklin's popular, transitional art as merely a 'not yet' or worse, as 'kitsch.' Instead, his story may help us appreciate not only the hesitations and choices taken in the journey toward artistic modernism—the points at which travel speeds up and baggage must be thrown off the train—but also the creative power of the premodern generation, of long neglected figures like Adolph Menzel and Hans Makart.⁸⁷ Reclaiming this

Götz Eberhard Hübner, Klaus-Gerhard Pott, and Christoph Michel (Frankfurt, 1982), 221–35.

86. Andrea Gottdang, "'Man muss sie singen hören': Bemerkung zur 'Musikalität' und 'Hörbarkeit' von Böcklins Bildern," in *Arnold Böcklin*, 131–7.

87. Paret makes this important point in two different ways in *German Encounters with Modernism*, 7–44, 119–32.

transitional moment may also serve to remind us of the long-lasting power that classical antiquity exerted over the European imagination. Having now lost the thread of the classical tradition, we may not be able to recognize the modernness of Böcklin's artistic vocabulary or appreciate the Dionysian transports to which his paintings gave rise. But we may yet conclude that the landscapes in which Böcklin's fauns and nymphs frolicked have much to tell us about the process by which 'German' art became modern and even the most ardent admirers of the classical world left the long tradition of *ut pictura poesis* behind.

Stefan George and Androgyny

ROBERT E. NORTON

Before Stefan George (1868–1933) became, in the last few years of his life, a prophet and sage to an ever-growing number of German intellectuals, he had assumed the place of master and guide to a diverse group of intellectuals—philosophers, historians, artists, and poets. Even before he had made a name for himself as one of the finest German poets of his day, he had already begun to regard poetry as an extraordinary, perhaps even singular, power. True poetry, he had already believed, provided the blueprint for what would come. Poetry foretold, because it was the source for, what was to be. It engendered the future. Yet what is perhaps most remarkable about George's formulated this conception of poetry at the very moment when he himself, was being challenged.

Ever since he had been to Paris in the summer of 1889, when the one-year-old Étienne George, as he was known then, met Paul Valéry and became acquainted with symbolist poetry, Stefan George was henceforth known, partly in homage to his Parisian friend, with one of symbolism's central paradoxes: how to come through the poetic word and yet not to fall prey to sterility or its poetic equivalent, silence. The figure of the androgyne, which was seen as representing both an affront to nature and a means to overcome its demands, seemed to offer a means to pre-empt both the poetic and personal spheres. What follows is a brief account of George's most sustained exploration of this possibility—the androgyne of the failure of the androgyne to deliver what it appears to promise. It is his third book of poetry, which he published in 1892.

In the winter of the previous year, George had reviewed Hofmannsthal that he was worried he did not know w