



The Gentle Apocalypse

TRUTH AND MEANING
IN THE POETRY OF
GEORG TRAKL

Richard Millington

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Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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the Poetry of Georg Trakl

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Da der Enkel in sanfter Umnachtung
Einsam dem dunkleren Ende nachsinnt,
Der stille Gott die blauen Lider über ihn senkt.
—Georg Trakl, “Helian”

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Abbreviations

- F Ludwig von Ficker. "Der Abschied." In *Erinnerung an Georg Trakl: Zeugnisse und Briefe*, ed. Ludwig von Ficker and Ignaz Zangerle, 181–204. Salzburg: Müller, 1959 (1926).
- HkA Georg Trakl. *Dichtungen und Briefe: Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, 2 vols., ed. Walter Killy and Hans Szklenar. Salzburg: Müller, 1969.
- IA Georg Trakl. *Sämtliche Werke und Briefwechsel: Innsbrucker Ausgabe*, 6 vols., ed. Eberhard Sauermaun and Hermann Zwerschina. Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1995–2014.
- W Hans Weichselbaum. *Georg Trakl: Eine Biographie mit Bildern, Texten und Dokumenten*. Salzburg: Müller, 1994 (2014).

Preface

THE PERCEPTION OF Georg Trakl (1887–1914) as one of the most distinctive and compelling poetic voices of his age, both within the German-speaking world and beyond, is reflected in the proliferation of studies of his life and work that began in the middle of the twentieth century. The abundance of secondary literature produced since then, however, can hardly be said to have brought about a corresponding increase in the level of understanding of Trakl's poetry among specialist or lay readers. Many of the most dedicated and influential scholars have themselves concluded that his poems, for all their resonance and beauty, remain largely impervious to attempts to make sense of them, an idea whose grip is evidenced by its longevity. In 1954, Clemens Heselhaus opened his study of the "Elis" poems with a lengthy meditation on the "hermeticism" of Trakl's work,¹ a term also employed repeatedly more than half a century later by Hans-Georg Kemper in his 2009 essay on Trakl's "magical transformation of non-sense into deep-sense";² while in the first historical-critical edition of 1969, editors Walther Killy and Hans Szklensar characterized the poetry as "moving ever more frequently along the limits of the sayable,"³ an assessment echoed in 2007 by Hermann Zwerschina and Eberhard Sauermann in the introduction to their historical-critical edition, in which they identify the preservation of "the primary obscurity" of Trakl's poems as one of the fundamental principles of their own editorial work.⁴ As its constant reiteration suggests, resignation to the ultimate incomprehensibility of the poetry has become something of a self-perpetuating topos of Trakl scholarship. Of its many formulations, one of the neatest is provided by Martin Seymour-Smith in his encyclopedic *Guide to Modern World Literature*: "It seems to be demonstrable that it succeeds in achieving (at its best) a full coherence. But such demonstrations cannot be made in familiar critical terms."⁵

By setting received notions of impenetrability aside, the present study reevaluates the extent to which the coherence of Trakl's poetry is not only intuitable but also describable. More specifically, it undertakes to show that the poetry—erratically and tentatively in its early stages, but with growing control and self-assurance—encodes a rapidly crystallizing worldview with tightly interwoven affective, ethical, social, historical, and cosmological dimensions, and that the material and methods it employs to do so are continuously reused, refined, or re-thought according to their fit-

ness for purpose. Its premise is that a richer, more informed, less puzzled response to any given poem can be achieved by viewing it in relation to its precursors and to broader trends and patterns traceable through Trakl's oeuvre. The approach it adopts is diachronic and developmental, and close attention is paid throughout to available information concerning the chronology of the individual poems discussed. The interpretations it offers should not be understood as attempts at exhaustive or determinate readings; the intention underlying them, rather, is to put forward a perspective from which features such as ambiguity, polyvalence, and allusiveness, which have all too often prompted commentators to throw up their hands in surrender, come to be seen less as obstacles to comprehension than as intrinsic elements of a sophisticated, purposeful, and evolving system of poetic expression.

By the time Trakl wrote the works for which he is best remembered in the two years or so preceding his death in November 1914, his tone had become deeply pessimistic. A preoccupation with a world in collapse was something he shared with other German-language writers ill at ease with the bourgeois complacency of the late imperial period. Yet what sets his work apart is the peculiar mildness and restraint of his images of universal disintegration. Whereas his contemporary Jakob van Hoddis had famously envisioned shattering dams and trains falling from bridges in his epochal "Weltende" of 1911, Trakl couched his vision of historical crisis in images of migrating birds, abandoned houses, and closing eyelids. His poetry is at once apocalyptic, rustic, and intimate. Its commitment to values such as humility and compassion arises from the poet's conception of truth as a transcendental order to which all creatures, indeed all things, must submit, and in his final years he understood his task as rendering his own creative impulses to its service. It is the emergence of this worldview over the course of several years—with its modulations, tensions, and shifting poetic forms—that the present study sets out to reconstruct.

The developmentalist school is a long-established but still relatively marginal branch of Trakl scholarship. Historically it has had to contend with a strong tendency, itself surely a response to the difficulty of applying familiar critical terms to Trakl's work, to construct interpretations based on collections of lines or images chosen for their suitability for supporting a particular argument, isolated from the poems in which they occur, with little or no regard for the relative chronology of the poems in question. The durability of this approach has been aided by its pedigree; its most flagrant practitioner was no less a figure than Martin Heidegger, who, in his Trakl essay of 1953, disposed of chronological and contextual considerations altogether with his claim that the proper way to view the oeuvre was as a single poem.⁶ The enduring influence of Heidegger's position can be detected in its less blatant derivatives; these are more palatable, perhaps, but for that reason arguably do more to obstruct new avenues of under-

standing. One recent example is Rüdiger Görner's critical biography of 2014, which adopts a loosely chronological structure yet plays down differences between compositional periods by arguing for a lack of substantial development in Trakl's poetics after the first collection of 1909.⁷ Meanwhile Iris Denneler has rejected developmentalism not due to a putative lack of evidence but rather on the basis of her philosophical objection to the term's "teleological implications."⁸ While her discomfort serves as a useful reminder of the danger of too easily inferring an overall sense of goal-directedness in the changing shape and texture of Trakl's poetry, her rejection is itself an over-reaction, amounting to a refusal to acknowledge patterns, variations, and innovations that indeed become meaningful when weighed and contextualized with due care. Analysis of developments, the present study contends, need not imply an assertion of their inevitability.

The idea that consideration of the poetry's development is a valid and useful scholarly endeavor can be traced as far back as the 1920s, as Sauermann has shown in his reconstruction of the school's origins.⁹ It began to be treated more seriously only in the decades after the Second World War when the established perception of Trakl as an Austrian cousin of German expressionism gave way to a view of him as a "singular personal and poetic phenomenon" comparable in stature only to Rilke and Kafka.¹⁰ Studies by Kurt Wölfel, Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs, Walter Falk, Regine Blass, and Heinz Wetzel in the 1950s and '60s laid the foundation for the more detailed and better informed developmentalist studies of the 1970s and '80s that became possible following the publication of Killy and Szklénar's historical-critical edition.¹¹ Books by Erich Bolli, Hans Esselborn, and Hildegard Steinkamp stand out as major contributions to developmentalist thought.¹² The most important point of agreement among them concerns the division of Trakl's poetic production into four main phases, the boundaries dividing which have to be thought of as overlapping and permeable to account for his habit of revising or adapting existing material and revisiting earlier techniques, but whose characteristics are nonetheless sufficiently distinct to serve as a robust framework for discussion of his oeuvre *qua* oeuvre. The first phase covers Trakl's early forays into the lyric genre that culminated in his first, unnamed collection of 1909; the second extends from 1910 to 1912, the years in which he wrote most of the poems in the collection published as *Gedichte* in 1913; the third begins in late 1912 and encompasses his work on the last (chronologically speaking) poems of *Gedichte* and all but the very last poems included in his second published collection *Sebastian im Traum* (1915); while the fourth and final phase, starting in the spring of 1914 and cut short by the poet's death in November of the same year, is dominated by a smaller group of uncollected poems, many of which were first published only posthumously.

In 1999, Kemper, who three decades earlier, in the wake of the newly published historical-critical edition, had authored pioneering work on

Trakl's methods of drafting and revision,¹³ declared that the four-fold division just described counted among the "indisputable insights" of recent Trakl scholarship, a perhaps surprising claim in view not least of the blunt dismissal of developmental approaches made by his collaborator Denneler only three years earlier.¹⁴ Directions taken in subsequent scholarship also suggest that its acceptance is not as secure or widespread as Kemper had believed, not so much because of the occasional disavowals of commentators like Denneler and Görner as much as of the wider neglect that developmental perspectives have fallen into. Studies published in recent decades have in fact tended to focus, chronologically speaking, on a narrow range of poems, equivalent to what here we call Trakl's third phase, and concentrating especially on the collection *Sebastian im Traum*. Seven of the eleven works featured in Kemper's *Interpretationen* belong to phase three,¹⁵ while only three of the fourteen studies collected in Károly Csúri's *Georg Trakl und die literarische Moderne* of 2009 consider poems from other phases.¹⁶ The wish to cut straight to the phase-three poems is understandable in light of their strange and alluring beauty, but its unintended cumulative effect has been a narrowing view of Trakl's oeuvre. The prevailing perception of his poetry might be crudely summarized as "*Sebastian im Traum* plus 'Grodek'" (both Kemper's and Csúri's volumes just cited also both contain chapters dedicated to Trakl's final poem), an equation that is not only reductive but also unhelpful for making sense even of the works it privileges. The contrasting impulse for the present study arises from the conviction that much remains to be garnered from the longitudinal perspectives opened up by scholars of earlier decades, and that a return to the developmental framework established by the likes of Bolli, Esselborn, and Steinkamp holds out the prospect of correcting distortions and overcoming interpretive obstacles.

Encouragement for re-adopting a more comprehensive view of Trakl's poetry comes from Zwerschina and Sauermann's new historical-critical edition known as the *Innsbrucker Ausgabe*, whose six volumes were published over a period of almost 20 years between 1995 and 2014. In this edition, all Trakl's known works are arranged chronologically in order of their first drafts, and all versions of any given work are presented and described together to give a comprehensive overview of its compositional history. The present study has been greatly facilitated by Zwerschina and Sauermann's painstaking chronological reconstruction. The ordering of the commentaries on individual poems within the four main parts of this book follows their arrangement in the *Innsbrucker Ausgabe*, and the selection of poems itself reflects a wish to provide a broad chronological spread in which the poet's productive periods are represented proportionately. For a similar reason, greater weight has been attached to developmental significance—for example, the first appearance of a theme, motif, or technique—than to aesthetic quality, which in combination with space limits

has resulted in the omission of several poems among Trakl's most frequently anthologized. "De profundis" (II) (*HkA*, 1/46), for example, is excluded here because its startling anaphora replicates a technique already discussed in connection with the slightly earlier "Psalm" (*HkA*, 1/55–56, q.v.), while the need to include "Helian" (*HkA*, 1/69–73), "An den Knaben Elis" (*HkA*, 1/26 and 84), "Sebastian im Traum" (*HkA*, 1/88–90), and "Gesang des Abgeschiedenen" (*HkA*, 1/144, qq.v.) as developmental milestones means that the theme of the child of nature is well covered, leaving no room for "Kaspar Hauser Lied" (*HkA*, 1/95).

Alongside the *Innsbrucker Ausgabe*, Killy and Szklenar's original two-volume *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* remains an equally important point of reference, not just thanks to its more manageable size but because of the respect implicit in its layout for Trakl's estimation of the varying levels of presentability or completeness of his own works, as well as his own preferences for their arrangement. Whereas Killy and Szklenar draw clear hierarchical distinctions between categories such as published collections, other published works, unpublished works, and drafts, Zwerschina and Sauermann's prioritization of Trakl's processes over his products logically tends to blur differences between scribbles, sketches, drafts, and finished poems, a tendency that the editors embrace with a surprising claim: "eine flüchtige Niederschrift auf irgendeinem Zettel besitzt für einen gewissen Zeitraum—seien das Sekunden oder Wochen—nicht weniger Gültigkeit und weist nicht mehr Vorläufigkeit auf als eine maschinengeschriebene Reinschrift oder ein Druck" (*IA*, 1/12). They cite Trakl's "sometimes remarkable disinterest" in the products of his writing in support of their stance (*IA*, 1/13). Although the poet, from the depths of his emotional darkness, did indeed occasionally express indifference or even disdain towards his own finished work,¹⁷ Zwerschina and Sauermann's characterization underestimates his undeniable interest in its dissemination and the value he attached to others' opinions of it. It is especially difficult to reconcile this supposed "disinterest" with the time and care he devoted to the preparation for publication of *Gedichte* and *Sebastian im Traum*, and a more accurate picture of his attitude to his own completed works can be inferred from his decision to include in these two collections so many that had already been published individually or in smaller groupings elsewhere.

The present study aims to achieve a happy medium between the strategies of the *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe* and the *Innsbrucker Ausgabe* by presenting poems in chronological order while giving precedence to versions of works that the poet himself, at one time or another, deemed ready for publication and, no less importantly, taking the poet's own collections as a basis for larger structural divisions.¹⁸ The last principle is intended not least as a corrective to the extraordinary lack of attention that scholars have paid to Trakl's collections as works of verbal art in their own right. This

lack is perhaps best understood, alongside the disregard for the textual integrity of individual poems attendant upon Heidegger's "single poem" theory, as a further symptom of the long-standing bias that has seen the dazzling quality of Trakl's language and imagery at a micro-level diverting interest from larger compositional units. Each main part of this study contains commentaries on a representative selection of poems in a single collection, with the necessary exception of the fourth and final part, which deals with the uncollected works of Trakl's last months. As each collection stands as the centerpiece of a particular phase in the development of his poetics, the discussion of the three collections (plus the uncollected final works) blends relatively easily with analysis of the four phases. The only significant divergence occurs in the collection *Gedichte*, which combines poems from throughout the second phase with a smaller group of early third-phase ones. As the second part of the study has to take account of two major transitions (from the first phase to the second and from the second to the third), which together count as the two most important moments in the overall development of the poetry, it has become the longest of the four. One further respect in which this book bucks the trend of Trakl scholarship, then, is by devoting more space to *Gedichte* than to *Sebastian im Traum*.

The present study aims to steer a reasoned middle course concerning another divisive aspect of Trakl scholarship: the relationship between the poet's art and his "almost completely deranged life."¹⁹ Encouraged by veiled autobiographical references in the texts themselves, many commentators have responded to the difficulty of making sense of the poetry in conventional terms by turning to the poet's biography as an interpretive aid. As the fashion of applying concepts borrowed from psychoanalysis to the study of literature grew in the second half of the twentieth century, the biographist school snowballed, producing an avalanche of studies that viewed the poetry primarily in relation to Trakl's real or presumed mental and emotional instabilities.²⁰ The popularity of psychoanalytical perspectives has no doubt further contributed to the readiness with which so many commentators negate the referentiality or meaningfulness of Trakl's language or the coherence and integrity of his works, negations presented by psychologizing critics as both symptoms and proofs of his "madness." On the other hand, the excesses of Trakl's would-be psychiatrists have prompted an understandable distrust of biographically-informed readings among more scrupulous scholars. Maria Carolina Foi, for example, notes that "precisely because [Trakl's] existence was so brief and tormented, it is easy to run the risk of interpreting his life and his work reductively, according to a relationship of cause and effect."²¹

The approach adopted here to the relationship between the writer and his works has been shaped by an awareness of the methodological warnings issued to literary scholars by Roman Jakobson:

We must not, of course, succumb to either vulgar *biographism*, which takes a literary work for a reproduction of the situation from which it originated and infers an unknown situation from a work, or to vulgar *antibiographism*, which dogmatically denies any connection between the work and the situation. . . . The situation is a component of speech; the poetic function transforms it like every other component of speech, sometimes emphasizing it as an efficient formal device, sometimes, on the contrary, subduing it, but whether a work includes the situation positively or negatively, the work is never indifferent to it.²²

In order to give biographical factors their due as one component among many of Trakl's poetic speech—and one with obvious relevance to its development over the span of his literary career—the opening section of each main part of this book will sketch the biographical background to the works discussed in subsequent sections, and the commentaries on individual poems will refer to details from their author's life when these promise additional insights. Moreover, the introduction that follows is intended to set the scene for a close consideration of Trakl's poetic works by highlighting key aspects of the historical context and his social milieu. As well as Trakl's own correspondence, these sections draw heavily on Hans Weichselbaum's authoritative biography, first published in 1994 and reissued twenty years later to mark the centenary of the poet's death.²³

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Introduction

WHEN TRAKL WAS BORN into the German-speaking heartland of the Habsburg Empire in 1887, the world he became a part of was—in a sense that would deeply color his later poetry—already old. The reigning monarch Franz Joseph I had occupied the Austrian throne for almost four decades, while the state’s dynastic roots could be traced back as much as nine centuries. By the time of the poet’s death in 1914 at the age of just twenty-seven, the empire had become embroiled in a war that would result in its dissolution four years later, and the creation of a host of new states on its former territory. Its ultimate disintegration was swift by the standard of its own nearly millennial history, but the fall of the empire reflected the much longer-standing failure of successive Habsburg governments to resolve the “nationality question,” that is, to propagate a supranational consciousness strong enough to outweigh the nationalist aspirations and rivalries that had been growing among the empire’s many ethnic and linguistic communities for much of the previous century.¹ In a way that would be memorialized by Joseph Roth in his 1934 masterpiece of Habsburg nostalgia *Der Radetzskymarsch*, the zeitgeist of the empire’s final decades was tinged with an awareness, occasionally erupting into presentiments of impending disaster, of the age and weakness of the established political and cultural order. In a letter of June 1913, Trakl himself chose the epithets “gottlos” and “verflucht” to characterize the still-young twentieth century (*HkA*, 1/519). Although the poetry itself is never overtly political, this decadent undercurrent is one aspect of what Jakobson calls the “situation” that chimes unmistakably with the main theme of Trakl’s work: its almost obsessive preoccupation with parallel processes of decay in the natural and human worlds.

If frailty and vulnerability are the features that stand out in a wide-angled view of the late Habsburg Empire, a closer perspective reveals its major urban centers to have been sites of great intellectual energy and fertility. The capital Vienna in particular, at the time one of the largest cities in the world, became a hub for thinkers, writers, artists, and musicians from across the Empire, giving rise to the cultural flowering known as the *Wiener Moderne*. Trakl’s own contact with the Viennese art scene was largely mediated by a student-led group, established in 1908, called the Akademische Verband für Literatur und Musik (W, 92–95). The association’s activities included organizing public lectures by luminaries such as

architect Adolf Loos, celebrity critic and editor of the journal *Die Fackel* Karl Kraus, and writers Arthur Schnitzler, Frank Wedekind, and Stefan Zweig, as well as concerts featuring compositions by Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern. The association also published its own avant-garde literary journal *Der Ruf*, for which Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka provided cover art and posters. Trakl contributed poems to *Der Ruf*; he became friends with Loos and Kraus and dedicated poems to both (*HkA*, 1/55, 1/88, and 1/123);² while the letters he wrote to his close friend Erhard Buschbeck in early April 1913, in the wake of the latter's intervention to defend the conductor Schönberg during the infamous *Skandalkonzert* of March 31, testify to his interest in contemporary music and sympathy with its artistic ambition (*HkA*, 1/508–9; *W*, 93).

Despite these links, Trakl never became more than a peripheral figure in the Viennese art scene. Of much deeper importance for his own literary development were his connections in the provincial centers Salzburg and Innsbruck. In the former, the early experiments in journalism, drama, and short fiction he pursued during his three-year apprenticeship at the chemist's shop Zum weißen Engel from September 1905 onward were encouraged and facilitated by dramatist Gustav Streicher (*W*, 52–54 and 62–64), while a small group of artistically-minded school friends, Buschbeck foremost among them, remained an important point of reference for Trakl long after his native city ceased to be his main place of residence. The accelerated literary production of his final years, on the other hand, cannot be separated from his integration into the so-called *Brenner* circle, centered on the publisher of the journal *Der Brenner* Ludwig von Ficker, soon after Trakl's move to the Tyrolean capital in April 1912. Although his acceptance into these circles must certainly have validated his understanding of his own literary calling, even Trakl's Salzburg and Innsbruck connections have to be seen as sources more of moral and practical support than of artistic inspiration. The most crucial developments in his poetics occurred independently of the fashions and proclivities of his age, and his most important literary models were not contemporaries but predecessors. The works of Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche all provided, at various times, motifs that he integrated into his own writing or ideas to which he responded—in Nietzsche's case, increasingly with dissent.³ These three, however, ultimately occupy a second tier in his pantheon of precursors, behind Rimbaud and Hölderlin, the close combination of whose influence in the works of the third phase Bernhard Böschenstein describes as Trakl's "boldest poetic innovation" of all.⁴

Weichselbaum notes Trakl's practice of asserting his affinity with his favorite precursor poets by implying one or the other as a probable referent of the term "brother" (*W*, 16; the probable Hölderlin reference in "Helian" is an example among the present selection). The most likely historical correlates of other kinship figures evoked in many poems are, unsurprisingly,

members of the poet's own family, whose origins illustrate something of the demographic mobility of the Habsburg Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century (W, 11). Georg's father Tobias Trakl (1837–1910) was an ironmonger who, in pursuit of economic opportunities, had moved as a young man to the Austrian half of the empire from a German-speaking community in Ödenburg (Hungarian Sopron), western Hungary (W, 12). The family of the poet's mother Maria Trakl, née Halik (1852–1925), originated in Prague, then capital of the Habsburg crownland Bohemia, and Georg's maternal grandfather Augustin Halik is said to have known both German and Czech (W, 14). Tobias, already a widower with a son by his previous marriage (W, 13–14), had met Maria in Wiener Neustadt, just south of Vienna, in 1875, and the couple had originally settled there following their marriage in 1878. The next year, following the death of a first child aged just eighteen months, they moved 250 kilometers westward to Salzburg, which lay on the border with the recently established German Empire (W, 15). Over the next two decades, Tobias Trakl rose to become one of the most respected businessmen in his adopted city, allowing the six further children born to the couple there between 1880 and 1891, the fourth of whom was Georg, to grow up in secure material circumstances (W, 16).

Both Trakl's parents are reported to have been emotionally rather remote from their children, whose upbringing was overseen in large part by their Alsatian governess (W, 30). The children's relations with each other, by contrast, were warm and remained so into adulthood; this attachment, built on hours playing together in a family-owned garden, detached from their house and sheltered from the bustle of the surrounding city (W, 21), suggests itself as a biographical basis for the intragenerational solidarity that would become the most enduring positive motif in Trakl's later poetry. Georg's relationship with the youngest of his siblings Margarethe, known as Grete, was especially close, and his undisguised affection for her was apparent even to his school friends (W, 57). A talented pianist, Grete went on to study music in Vienna and Berlin; in the German capital she met and eventually married opera director Arthur Langen, who was thirty-four years her senior (W, 102–5), but the marriage soon broke down and Grete, destitute and unhappy, committed suicide in 1917, outliving her beloved brother by just three years (W, 185). The prominence of sister figures in the poetry is without doubt a reflection of the special bond between him and Grete. Much less certainty attends the persistent speculation that their relationship became incestuous, which necessarily relies on a "vulgar biographical" perspective inferring an unknown situation from the poet's literary work.⁵ There is no clearer demonstration of Weichselbaum's credibility as a biographer than his justified skepticism on this point (W, 59–60); "Vieles spricht dagegen," he notes tersely (W, 59).

One factor that set the Trakls apart from their fellow citizens of overwhelmingly Catholic Salzburg was their Protestant religion, to which

Georg's mother had converted in 1878 in order to marry his father (W, 15). Fortunately for the family, the city's prosperity meant that denominational differences were easily tolerated (W, 19). The tolerance was clearly reciprocal: early religious influence on the future poet is likely to have come from the children's devoutly Catholic governess (W, 30), while the elementary school Trakl attended between 1892 and 1897 also had a Catholic imprint, yet he and others, including Buschbeck, were permitted to leave school for two hours of religious instruction per week from a Protestant pastor (W, 38). The lasting impact of his early exposure to religious teaching can be seen in several aspects of Trakl's poetry: in the critical attitude to ecclesiastical doctrine especially evident in the earliest poems, in the rich biblical imagery characteristic of much of his work, and most deeply of all, perhaps, in the strong echoes of Christian cosmology in the view of the origins and fate of the world inscribed in the late poetry. The question of whether Trakl ought properly to be thought of as a Christian poet has prompted considerable debate (W, 117–18);⁶ the answer must depend on how much deviance particular understandings of Christianity will permit. Certain values conventionally associated with Christian doctrine, especially humility, forbearance, and compassion, were certainly central to his own worldview, and Trakl was himself inclined to formulate his own ethical concerns in religious terms, whether in poetry or conversation. This tendency is exemplified in a diary entry of his Innsbruck friend Karl Röck: "Er hat eben das gewaltige Gemüt für all diese Untergehenden, Verfallenden, Irre werdenden, dem Irrsinn u. allem anderen durch scheußliche Krankheiten verfallenden [*sic*]; die Beladenen und Belasteten, die Säufer, Dirnen, Wahnsinnigen, . . . Er ist geneigt, dies alles noch zu vermehren, dieses Weltunglück, er erblickt die Fürsorge, die Liebe, die Woltat [*sic*] des lieben Gottes gegen die Menschen in diesen Schicksälen."⁷ Conversely, various features of the poetry sit much less easily with orthodox interpretations of scripture, as the present study will have several occasions to show: Trakl's biblical references often involve localization and abjection of canonical narratives; the God who appears in his poetry is neither omnipotent nor exclusive; and the prospect of ultimate redemption or absolution, whether for individuals or humanity at large, is rejected with a vehemence that increases from one phase to the next. The rustic flavor of many poems supports Seymour-Smith's contention that Trakl's "use of Christian material is a pagan use" (578–79).

The other major source of Trakl's cultural references is classical mythology. An introduction to the classical world was afforded him at the gymnasium he attended from 1897, where both Latin and Greek were central elements of the curriculum, although the ancient languages, along with mathematics, soon proved academically problematic for him (W, 39). Unsatisfactory performance in these three subjects meant he was required to repeat his fourth year (W, 39), at which point his attitude towards

school in general became aloof and sardonic (W, 41–42), and he would have had to repeat the seventh as well if he had not instead decided to abandon school altogether in September 1905 (W, 44). Trakl's perception of classical mythology as a wellspring of cultural meaning almost certainly developed, therefore, above all from his own reading, in which Nietzsche's works, viewed as pernicious by the future poet's teachers, featured prominently during his school years (W, 42). Trakl's younger brother Fritz later underlined Georg's teenage love of reading, and besides Nietzsche, other writers whose works he is reported to have consumed with passion include Ibsen, Dostoevsky, Verlaine, and Rimbaud (W, 42–44).

The possibility of entering training after only six complete years of secondary schooling suggests itself as one of several reasons for Trakl's decision to pursue a career in pharmacy; others include the attendant requirement to do just one year of military service rather than the standard three, as well as the ease of access this sector offered to psychoactive substances (W, 51). The drug use that would intensify over the course of his brief adult life had already begun during his final school years. Smoking was in itself already considered a serious breach of school discipline, but Fritz later recalled his brother's habit of brushing his cigarettes with an opium tincture (W, 45), while in his earliest surviving letter, written in summer 1905, Trakl talks of once again having sought refuge in chloroform: "Die Wirkung war furchtbar" (*HkA*, 1/469). In the years that followed, he would have occasion to become acquainted with the more or less terrible effects of many other substances; to judge by the frequency of references in his later correspondence, he eventually settled on alcohol and Veronal, the first barbiturate to be marketed for medicinal purposes, as his two drugs of preference, while his early death would be brought about by an overdose of cocaine. "Ein starker Trinker und Drogenesser" is the characterization later offered by Ficker (W, 45), a man by no means given to cheap sensationalizing, least of all in matters concerning his brilliant protégé. This aspect of the poet's life, too, has its poetic correlative, although one distinguishing feature of Trakl's literary approach to drugs is the lack of an obvious confessional gesture, a lack that places him outside the dominant tradition inaugurated by Thomas De Quincey's early nineteenth-century account of his opium-induced visions. Instead, Trakl closely integrates direct and indirect references to certain intoxicants and states of intoxication into his poetic diction. His works show an overwhelming preference for wine over other substances, which is less a reflection of his real-life habits than a sign of how well this beverage fits into a wider framework of rich pastoral and religious imagery.⁸

Although it does not appear to have interfered in any way with his introduction to pharmaceutical practice at Zum weißen Engel, where he completed his apprenticeship without incident in 1908 (W, 69), Trakl's continuing drug habit almost certainly contributed to his later difficulty

with securing and maintaining regular employment. A closely related factor was his never-more-than-lukewarm enthusiasm for the prosaic enterprise of achieving financial stability within the rapidly modernizing industrial society he had been born into, which he perceived as materialistic and alienated from nature. The cynicism towards established authority he had developed at high school carried over into his attitude as an adult towards the pursuit of wealth and respectability. Accordingly, he never practiced his professional occupation with anything more than due diligence—and sometimes, seemingly, with much less. Evidence for the latter can be seen, for example, in the caustic remarks his supervisor added to Trakl's file at the completion of his trial period as a military pharmacist (*Medikamentenakzessist*) in Innsbruck in late 1912 (W, 123–24). At what was arguably the height of his non-literary career, Trakl's continuing cynicism towards conventional middle-class aspirations was evidenced by his comment: “allerdings ist es traurig, wenn man dann einen schlechten Witz mit sich macht und k.u.k. Militär-Medikamentenakzessist wird” (*HkA*, 1:491). As Weichselbaum underlines, Trakl's commitment to his artistic calling ultimately proved irreconcilable with the conformist pressure of the bourgeois mainstream in late-Habsburg Austria (W, 51).

Zwerschina and Sauermann's chronology shows that Trakl's earliest extant lyrics date to the period of his apprenticeship (*IA*, 1/83–98), but these works would remain unpublished until several decades after his death. The focus of his literary activity over these three years lay in other genres, and his first works to achieve public exposure point rather to his interest in theater and to his own theatrical ambition. His first two publications, in January and March 1906, were both previews for the *Salzburger Zeitung* of upcoming plays at the city's municipal theater (*IA*, 1/47–54), which later the same year became the venue for one-off performances of two one-act plays of Trakl's own authorship: *Totentag*, about a young blind man struggling to come to terms with the imminent marriage of his beloved sister, on March 31 (*IA*, 1/55–59), and *Fata morgana*, in which a traveler in the desert is beguiled by a chimerical Cleopatra, on September 15 (*IA*, 1/80–82). Several reviews of both plays appeared in the local press (reproduced in *IA*). Overall the critics found *Totentag* amorphous and derivative, but they also made several encouraging remarks, especially about Trakl's diction, whereas to *Fata morgana* their response was unanimously dismissive, one reviewer even stating that “Georg Trakl besitzt auch nicht die leiseste Ahnung, was zu einer Bühnenszene nötig ist” (*IA*, 1/82). The young playwright's reaction was to burn all copies of both plays (*IA*, 1/55 and 80). Trakl's interest in writing for theater was blunted but not obliterated. In the following years he would work on at least four further plays: *Don Juans Tod* in 1907–8 (*IA*, 1/128–50), the puppet plays *Blaubart* (*IA*, 1/295–351) and *Kaspar Hauser* (*IA*, 1/39–40) in 1910, and an untitled draft, probably also begun in 1910, that he would resume

work on in spring 1914 (*IA*, 4.2 /156–90). None of these, however, were produced or published during his lifetime, and there is no conclusive evidence that any of them were even completed. Three of them exist today only as fragments, while we know about *Kaspar Hauser* only from second-hand reports.

In addition to the two stage productions, 1906 was also the year in which Trakl made his literary debut in print. In the months between the performances of *Totentag* and *Fata morgana*, three short works appeared in the *Salzburger Volksblatt*: “Traumland,” a neoromantic reminiscence of the narrator’s love for a dying girl (*IA*, 1/64–68); “Barrabas,” which imagines the sensual indulgences enjoyed on the day of the crucifixion by the murderer liberated in Jesus’s stead (*IA*, 1/69–73); and “Maria Magadalenä,” a dramatic dialogue, also set in Palestine, in which a Roman called Marcellus describes his amazement at the title figure’s impulsive abandonment of her glamorous life as a dancer and courtesan to become an ascetic follower of a “strange prophet” (*IA*, 1/74–79). Marcellus himself, acutely conscious of his own foreignness in the Holy Land, has been singled out as a prototype of the alienated misfit who would become a stock figure in Trakl’s later work (cf. *W*, 60). “Mir geziemt es, im Dunkel zu wandern,” Marcellus states portentously (*IA*, 1/78). Another representative of the type can be found in the short prose piece that was published in the *Salzburger Zeitung* in December of the same year. Entitled “Verlassenheit,” it evokes an ancient castle, decrepit and overgrown, whose sole occupant is a melancholic count haunted by the lost glory of his family seat (*IA*, 1/99–103).

Perhaps discouraged by the failure of his two plays, Trakl published nothing further for the next twelve months. Then in December 1907 he made a tentative reappearance in print with another preview for the *Salzburger Zeitung* (*IA*, 1/106–7), which was followed in February 1908 by a tribute in the *Salzburger Volksblatt* to his then-mentor Streicher (*IA*, 1/108–11). The established dramatist’s place as a stylistic role model for Trakl can be gauged from the latter’s admiration for the “Mollklang” of the language in Streicher’s play *Monna Violanta*. This produces a “contemplative mood” in the listener and “fills the blood with dreamy drowsiness” (*IA*, 1/111), an effect that might equally be ascribed to many of Trakl’s own lyrics (cf. *W*, 63). Curiously, Trakl’s presentation of Streicher’s work is essentially developmentalist, as he traces the older writer’s progression from naturalistic *Heimatkunst*, via historical tragedy and Ibsen-like psychological drama, to the Neoromanticism of his latest work. “Die Entwicklung dieses Schriftstellers könnte verwunderlich und seltsam erscheinen,” Trakl says of Streicher, before arguing that an understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic forces sketched in his tribute will help readers to make sense of its apparent peculiarity (*IA*, 1/110). Trakl’s foray into literary analysis thus emerges as a further conceptual model for the approach to his own poetry adopted in the present study.

Considered together, Trakl's early publications cannot seem other than eclectic, yet in them can be found many of the thematic elements that would become integral components of his later poetics: entanglements of sin and virtue, beauty and mortality; sibling attachment as a moral and emotional anchor; oblique reinterpretations of biblical stories; a view of the historical present as a moment of degradation vis-à-vis a fuller and more vigorous past; and the lonely fate of outsiders in general and final heirs to proud dynasties in particular. The appearance of these elements, however, is hardly sufficient basis for reading the apprenticeship-era works as anything like a blueprint for the poetics of his later years. The singularity of Trakl's poetry has less to do with the nature of its thematic components, whether viewed individually or as a set, than with the ways these are woven together into a web of sound and sense, complex and incantatory in its form, coherent and deeply resonant in its meaning. As the first part of the present study will show, even Trakl's earliest work in the lyric genre offers few indications of the remarkable development his poetry would undergo over the few short years of its production.

1: Tapping the Melodies Within: *Sammlung 1909*

Horror and Inspiration in Vienna

AT THE COMPLETION of his three-year apprenticeship at the chemist's Ashop Zum weißen Engel in October 1908, Trakl moved from Salzburg to Vienna to undertake two years of pharmacy studies. It is clear from his own accounts that the cruelty and indifference of the modern metropolis made a strong impression on the young man accustomed to the more sedate environment and relative security of his provincial hometown. In a letter to his older sister Hermine, written after just a few days in the city, he portrayed his arrival there as a kind of unmasking, a lifting of the protective veil of subjectivity and a shocking exposure to the baseness and ugliness of humanity: "Als ich hier ankam, war es mir, als sähe ich zum ersten Male das Leben so klar wie es ist, ohne alle persönliche Deutung, nackt, voraussetzungslos, als vernähme ich all jene Stimmen, die die Wirklichkeit spricht, die grausamen, peinlich vernehmbar. Und einen Augenblick spürte ich etwas von dem Druck, der auf den Menschen für gewöhnlich lastet, und das Treibende des Schicksals" (*HkA*, 1/471–72). The vision, he told Hermine, would become intolerable were it to persist, most importantly because it is accompanied by the realization that the same animalistic drives that he sees shaping the lives of his fellow humans are no less powerful within himself, where they even assume demonic form: "Ich glaube, es müßte furchtbar sein, immer so zu leben, im Vollgefühl all der animalischen Triebe, die das Leben durch die Zeiten wälzen. Ich habe die fürchterlichsten Möglichkeiten in mir gefühlt, gerochen, getastet und im Blute die Dämonen heulen hören, die tausend Teufel mit ihren Stacheln, die das Fleisch wahnsinnig machen. Welch entsetzlicher Alp!" (*HkA*, 1/472). Happily, then, the sensitive twenty-one-year-old reassured his older sister that he had been able to shut out his nightmarish vision of unmasked reality by turning his perception inward and attuning his ear to the melodies within himself: "Vorbei! Heute ist diese Vision der Wirklichkeit wieder in nichts versunken, ferne sind mir die Dinge, ferner noch ihre Stimme und ich lausche, ganz beseeltes Ohr, wieder auf die Melodien, die in mir sind, und mein beschwingtes Auge träumt wieder seine Bilder, die schöner sind als alle Wirklichkeit! Ich bin