

Christoph Stölzl **The exaltations of an itinerant preacher: How Heinrich Maria Davringhausen envisioned the poet Theodor Däubler**

What a portrait! A demonic figure, larger than life, sits like a master of the universe amidst an exotic landscape of ocean coves and palm forests. Behind him stretches a minerally luminescent mountain range, among the peaks of which miniature metropolises nestle. Above him a night sky decorated with sun, moon, and a comet's tail. The setting is so majestic, one almost expects to see a throne. Far from it – the figure sits on a small stool, reading out loud from a booklet, his right hand raised in a declamatory gesture. The substance of what he is saying can be guessed even without knowing anything about the literary work of Theodor Däubler. His garments exude a glowing-hot red, the heat has reached his face from the inside, giving even his eyes a reddish shimmer. It is the sort of eternal incandescence that can come only from the sun. And it is indeed the sun, in all its power and mystery, which is at the very centre of Däubler's poetry. One day, according to his cosmogony, it will merge with the earth so as to create an entirely new world. Yet upon closer examination, it becomes evident that Davringhausen's painting has nothing at all to do with the sun's warming rays. Its eerie lighting reveals instead that it was created at the height of an apocalyptic conflict lit up by firework-like detonations. Shortly before the work's creation in 1917, both painter and model had moved to Berlin and its percolating avant-gardist milieu. The war, with its unprecedented destruction, had triggered artistic upheavals in the German capital, turning the traditional uses of language and imagery on their head and giving rise to utopian visions as well as unsparing glimpses into harsh social realities. The designation "Expressionism" that came to be applied to these transgressions and revolutions was actually little more than a generally accepted expedient compromise. Davringhausen, for his part, had just familiarized himself with the techniques of Cubism. But now, in the witches' cauldron of Berlin, he befriended rebels like George Grosz and the Herzfelde (Heartfield) brothers, who were experimenting with a return to "primitive" forms. Practically overnight, he became a pioneering exponent of the painting style that soon came to be called "Magical Realism." His portrait of Däubler is not only a breakthrough work of this style, it is also one of its first pinnacles.

So who was Theodor Däubler? Today, his status as a "figure" seems to stand in stark contrast to the relative obscurity of his writings, but this was no different during his lifetime. Däubler became something of a legend, a myth, quite early on in his career. Although a contemporary of more staidly bourgeois literary lions like Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Däubler was a complete non-conformist right from the outset. Refusing to make any concession to the laws of the literature market, he preferred to eke out a living as a sort of itinerant preacher, mendicant monk or troubadour – travelling almost constantly throughout the whole of Europe, particularly Italy and Greece, and even to the Near East. His work was published only sporadically. His main oeuvre was a 30,000 verse text which he titled *Das Nordlicht* and which he reworked repeatedly. This was no Classical epic, but rather a variegated poetic collage that borrowed from all forms and styles, from traditional prosody to the speculative excursions of Symbolism and the ecstatic raptures of Expressionism.

Däubler was born in 1876 in Trieste, then part of the Habsburg Empire, as the son of a German merchant. His performance in school was marred by his chronic truancy and his excessive devotion to the Greek and Roman classics and

contemporary innovators like D'Annunzio, Strindberg, and Ibsen. After stint as a cabin boy on a Mediterranean steamer and many trials and tribulations, he earned his school-leaving diploma in Italy and performed his mandatory military service before going through a period of mental illness. This was followed by a series of trips to Italy financed by his family. Soon, he felt the stirrings of a burning ambition to create a great work of literature, a mystical cosmic vision that would encompass all epochs and cultures, based on heliocentric mythology: *Nordlicht*.

By 1901 he was totally indigent and moved to Paris, where he remained until 1906. Although famished and forced to sleep under bridges, he soon was celebrated in Bohemian cafés as a sparkling conversationalist with an encyclopedic store of knowledge. Paris was alive with the vibrant spirit of modern art and Däubler plunged in head-first. He made the rounds of the ateliers, became personally acquainted with Picasso and Matisse, and delved deeply into the work of Cézanne. He became intimately acquainted with the international avant-garde living in Paris. It was during this time already that he began cultivating the persona he would be known for until the end of his life: That of the corpulent, shaggy-haired, and long-bearded polyhistor who dared to show up in any company in ragged clothes, confident in his ability to hold his listeners spellbound while proudly thumbing his nose at his evident poverty. The side that he preferred to keep hidden, however, was his suffering over unfulfilled amorous passions. We can glimpse this in the many passages of *Nordlicht* which deal with sexual relationships, albeit cloaked in mythological stories and settings. Only much later would he summon up the courage to acknowledge his homosexuality.

When World War I broke out, Däubler distanced himself from the jingoist patriotism of many of his fellow artists, but also stayed away from the anti-war activism of the Expressionists. He lived in mortal fear of being drafted, but was spared. He spent the war years in Dresden and Berlin, far from the front lines, warmly accepted by a circle of intellectuals and artists hungry for the future. They included Franz Pfempfert, Herwart Walden, Gottfried Benn, Else Lasker-Schüler, the Herzfelde/Heartfield brothers, George Grosz, Count Harry Kessler – as well as Heinrich Maria Davringhausen. In 1917, Däubler published *Das Sternchenkind*, an anthology of poetry that would become his only successful publication. Since 1914, he had been writing about the avant-garde in the visual arts, starting with Picasso. In *Der neue Standpunkt*, a book from 1916, he exalts Munch, Barlach, Lehndruck, Matisse, Rousseau, Chagall, Picasso, and Franz Marc, Ludwig Meidner, all of whom he knew personally, to the status of epoch-making creators. In retrospect, Däubler the art visionary seems at least as important to us today as the mystic bard of *Nordlicht*. He was the first to draw attention to the significance of George Grosz, for example.

In 1919, Austria lost Trieste to Italy as part of the post-war settlement and Däubler had to choose his future national affiliation. He decided against Germany



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and became an Italian citizen. But where he truly felt at home was in his dream world, the Mediterranean civilization of antiquity. From 1921 until 1925, thanks to grants from various private sponsors, publishers, and foundations, he was able to travel to Greece, which he systematically explored on foot. His further travels also took him to Palestine, Syria, and Constantinople. Now basking in the "Hellenic" sunlight, he was finally able to embark on a passionate romance with a younger friend, the painter Lukas Peterich. From a literary standpoint, these years on the road were a dismal failure, however: Däubler never managed to produce the ambitious book on Greece which he had promised his financial backers.

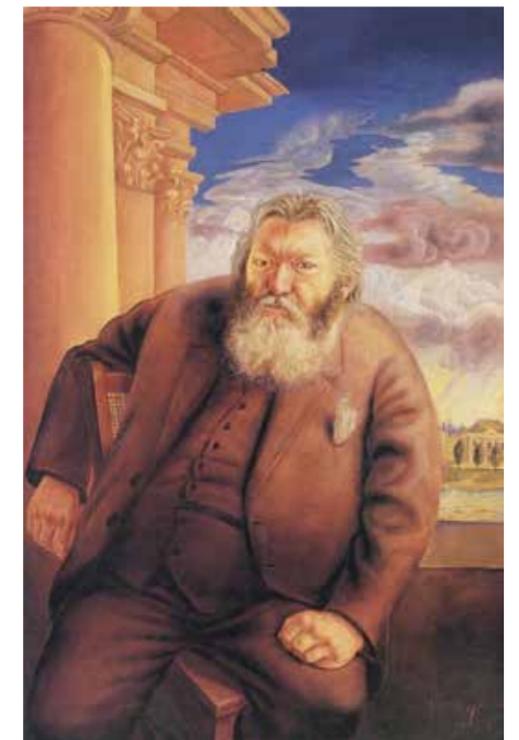
But this did not prevent his being showered with accolades and awards during the 1920s, if only because of the aura of genius that continued to hover over him. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize and appointed President of the German PEN Club. In 1928, he was admitted to the Poetry Section of the Prussian Academy of the Arts. An audience with the Pope rounds out this sunset period in which the poet found mainstream acceptance. He died in 1934 from a tubercular infection which he had presumably contracted in Greece from his lover Lukas Peterich. If this is true, the close kinship between Eros and Thanatos would fit in perfectly with Däubler's life-long efforts to mine the deep quarry of Classical myth.

After Däubler's death, the last, disappointing phase of his life was soon forgotten, as were his writings in general. What remained above all were the anecdotes surrounding his unforgettable physiognomy: Whenever he would go for a stroll in Capri or in Greece, it was said, children congregated to kiss his hands, believing that they had met God the Father himself.

On Heinrich Maria Davringhausen

Like Theodor Däubler, the Rhineland native Heinrich Maria Davringhausen also belonged to Berlin's intellectual and artistic avant-garde in the period from 1915 to 1917. He, too, was part of the circle centered around the Herzfelde/Heartfield brothers, George Grosz, Else Lasker-Schüler, and Gottfried Benn, all of whom felt the urge to do "something" in opposition to the war. The magazine *Die Neue Jugend*, which debuted in July 1916, became their mouthpiece, while Davringhausen and Däubler became two of its most important collaborators. After the war, Davringhausen joined the *Novembergruppe* in Berlin as well as the Düsseldorf-based association *Junges Rheinland*. In 1918, he moved to Munich, where he soon became a leading member of the city's New Objectivity circle, together with Alexander Kanoldt, Georg Schrimpf, and Carlo Mense.

Our painting, one of Davringhausen's main works, was created in Berlin in January 1917. The glowing image captures the scintillating persona of his poet friend Theodor Däubler, who was also affectionately known as the "unshaven Buddha" by his fellow artists. Davringhausen drew inspiration from a wealth of sources, such as Expressionist and Futurist paintings, folk art pieces or the "naïve art" of Henri Rousseau, many of which he had seen in art journals such as *Der Sturm* and *Der Blaue Reiter*. In the process, the artist developed an idiosyncratic approach uniquely his own which made him one of the pioneers of Magic Realism.



Otto Dix. Portrait of the poet Theodor Däubler. 1927. Mixed media/panel. Löffler 1927/9. Cologne, Museum Ludwig.

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Aachen 1894 – 1970 Nice

“Der Dichter Däubler”. 1917

Oil on canvas. 180 × 161 cm (70 7/8 × 63 3/8 in.).
Monogrammed and dated on the reverse: H.M.D.
January 1917. On the stretcher a label of the exhibition Berlin 1987 (see below). Catalogue raisonné: Eimert 101 / Heusinger von Waldegg 47. Minor retouchings. [3334] Framed.

Provenance

Family of the artist (until 2006) / Private Collection, Europe

EUR 300,000–400,000

USD 349,000–465,000

Exhibition

Heinrich Maria Davringhausen. Munich, Galerie Neue Kunst Hans Goltz, 1919, cat. no. 16 / Das junge Rheinland. Dusseldorf, Städtische Kunsthalle, 1919, cat. no. 47 / Heinrich Maria Davringhausen. Frühe Bilder. Gedächtnisausstellung 1894–1970. Cologne, Galerie am Rhein, 1971 / Heinrich Maria Davringhausen: Der General – Aspekte eines Bildes. Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum, 1975, cat. no. 16, ill. p. 19 / Theodor Däubler, 1876–1934. Marbach, Schiller-Nationalmuseum, Kabinett-Ausstellung, 1984, Marbacher Magazin 30/1984, p. 106, ill. p. 61, and exhibition-directory no. 85 / Ich und die Stadt. Berlin, Berlinische Galerie im Martin-Gropius-Bau, 1987, cat. no. 26, ill. p. 293

Literature and illustration

Kurt Pfister: Davringhausen. Zu der Ausstellung bei Goltz. In: Münchner Neueste Nachrichten (evening edition), 12.5.1919, p. 2 / Anonymous: Heinrich Maria Davringhausen. Zur Ausstellung bei Hans Goltz. In: Der Weg, 1. vol., 1919, no. 4, p. 8 / exh. cat.: Die zwanziger Jahre in the Porträt. Porträts in Deutschland 1918–1933. Bonn, Rheinisches Landesmuseum, 1976, p. 215 (mentioned) / Adam C. Oellers: Ikonographische Untersuchungen zur Bildnismalerei der Neuen Sachlichkeit. Mayen, self-published, 1983, ill. p. 501 / Thomas W. Gaehtgens: Faszination und Verführung. Berlin als Provokation für die Kunst. „Ich und die Stadt“ in the Martin-Gropius-Bau. In: Weltspiegel, 16.8.1987, ill. p. 1 / exh. cat. Süddeutsche Freiheit – Kunst der Revolution in München 1919. Munich, Galerie im Lenbachhaus, 1993, ill. p. 53 / auction 7353: Impressionist and modern art. Evening sale. London, Christie's, 6. February 2007, no. 79, ill. p. 237

- The poet Theodor Däubler portrayed as a seer and cosmic judge
- One of Davringhausen's key works and a particularly haunting psychological portrait of an artist
- Davringhausen merges the artistic currents of his day into a visionary style all his own



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