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# Alban Berg and Peter Altenberg: Intimate Art and the Aesthetics of Life\*

BY DAVID P. SCHROEDER

OUR FASCINATION with Alban Berg's music has resulted in a peculiarly unbalanced view of this complex composer, and Berg himself has been an accomplice to the distortion. His public avowals of indebtedness to Arnold Schoenberg, for example, have obscured equally strong forces in his development. Even Schoenberg had little sense of how intoxicating literature in general and certain writers in particular were to his pupil. One of the strongest influences early in his career was Peter Altenberg, without whom we would not have had the *Fünf Orchesterlieder nach Ansichtskarten-Texten von Peter Altenberg*, op. 4 (*Altenberg Lieder*). This work, his first with orchestra and his first without Schoenberg looking over his shoulder, defined Berg's future direction as did no other of his early works.

Berg's relationship with Altenberg was complex. While the two were friendly and Berg saw him for a time as an artistic mentor, Altenberg's relationship with Berg's future wife, Helene Nahowski, and his almost slanderous poetic representation of Berg in "Bekanntschaft" proved troublesome.<sup>1</sup> In his personal library Berg had virtually all of Altenberg's books, and some of these, including *Fechsung*, *Nachfechung*, *Mein Lebensabend*, and *Vita Ipsa*, are among the most heavily annotated of all Berg's books. From these works and the person behind them, Berg discovered the possibilities of artistic autobiography, although not in any conventional sense. Rather than creating his works from himself, Altenberg sought to create himself in his works. His world ultimately became an aesthetic one, taking the form of a literary reality, and the person of the artist was created in the aesthetic process. While his links with nineteenth-century romanticism remained strong, his readers were no longer in the position of

\*Research for this article was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

<sup>1</sup> This poem, published in *Märchen des Lebens* and *Neues Altes*, will be discussed below.

discovering the person of the artist in the work, since the work itself proclaimed the most vivid artistic and personal reality.

It is curious that until now almost all writers on the *Fünf Orchesterlieder* have completely omitted discussion of the poems used by Berg. The mid-century writer H. F. Redlich regarded Altenberg with an element of moral indignation, and he felt a need to dismiss him as an insignificant dabbler on the lunatic fringe. Redlich believed it necessary to tell us that Altenberg “died in Vienna, half-forgotten, in 1919,” and that he “delighted in inventing slightly scandalous texts to picture postcards, in an embarrassing mixture of obscenity and tenderness.”<sup>2</sup> This is indeed a curious characterization of the poet who might have won the Nobel prize for literature had it not been for the outbreak of World War I.<sup>3</sup> One suspects that Schoenberg also may have regarded the texts with embarrassment and distaste: he not only refused to bolster Berg’s confidence after the uproar during the performance of two of the songs on 23 March 1913 but also took his pupil to task over these songs.<sup>4</sup>

Berg seldom discussed Altenberg in his correspondence with Schoenberg, in contrast to his evocations of Strindberg or Balzac, possibly because he felt that Altenberg’s decadence would not meet with his musical mentor’s favor. Altenberg was more frequently a topic in his letters to Webern, who was attracted by aspects of Altenberg’s use of language. For Berg, Altenberg appears to have been very close to the heart of his own artistic outlook, and, one can surmise, he was not prepared to expose the intimate nature of this outlook. To do so would have meant risking Schoenberg’s censure.

### *Peter Altenberg*

For Altenberg, the creation of an aesthetic world went far beyond an indulgence in literature and an intertwining of life and art: the aesthetic world was so pervasive that a change of identity was required, a rejection of his former existence and the formulation of a new reality. The strongest representation of this transformation lay in

<sup>2</sup> Redlich, *Alban Berg: The Man and His Music* (London: John Calder, 1957), 59. Redlich’s unwillingness to read the texts seriously parallels a 1913 review that refers to “these gaily nonsensical postcard texts,” quoted by Willi Reich in *Alban Berg* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 40.

<sup>3</sup> The two Nobel nominees for 1914 were Arthur Schnitzler and Altenberg. See Andrew W. Barker, “Peter Altenberg,” in *Major Figures of Turn-of-the-Century Austrian Literature*, ed. Donald G. Daviau (Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne, 1991), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Jarman, ed., *The Berg Companion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 51.

his name. The poet's original name was Richard Engländer; the name Peter Altenberg was no mere pseudonym, however, nor was its use an attempt, not uncommon in fin-de-siècle Vienna, to escape identification with a Jewish background.<sup>5</sup> Before the complete rejection of his original name for both life and literature, he passed through a transitional stage, using, for example, "Richard P. Altenberg" and "P. Altenberg-E" in letters to Karl Kraus.<sup>6</sup> The new name was a result of several factors associated with a period of convalescence with a family named Lecher while he was nineteen years old. During this time, which was spent at a resort called Altenberg on the river Danube, he was immensely attracted to the thirteen-year-old tomboyish daughter of the Lecher family, Bertha, who was nicknamed Peter by her brothers.<sup>7</sup> Throughout his life Altenberg maintained erotic fetishes, and he had something of a Lolita complex for girls of Bertha's (Peter's) age. More striking, however, was his apparent identification with her (him), a phenomenon described by Edward Timms: "By adopting this boy-girl's name, he was implicitly repudiating the 'masculine' role prescribed for him by society and initiating that cultivation of a 'feminine' sensibility that is so characteristic of his writings."<sup>8</sup>

After abortive attempts to gain a formal education, Altenberg drifted aimlessly for a number of years, frequenting coffeehouses, moving in and out of sordid hotel rooms, consuming wildly unhealthy amounts of alcohol and drugs, and living off the good graces of his moderately wealthy family. But though this strange denizen of Vienna's nightlife abandoned his respectability, he did so not because of an overwhelming desire to be a bohemian writer: indeed, he turned to writing only after living the dissolute life for a number of years, and even then had no intention of pursuing it as a career. By chance some of his pieces were noticed by Arthur Schnitzler and Karl Kraus, and through Kraus's championing of his works they reached publication.

Altenberg's views of life and literature are set forth in thirteen books beginning with *Wie ich es sehe* (1896) and ending with *Mein*

<sup>5</sup> For various other Jewish writers, such as Felix Biedermann, Siegmund Salzmann, and Egon Friedemann, who became respectively Felix Dörmann, Felix Salten, and Egon Friedell, that may very well have been a factor. See Barker, "Peter Altenberg," 6.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Timms, "Peter Altenberg—Authenticity or Pose?" in *Fin de Siècle Vienna. Proceedings of the Second Irish Symposium in Austrian Studies*, ed. G. J. Carr and Eda Sagarra (Dublin: Trinity College, 1985), 131.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

*Lebensabend*, published in 1919, the year of his death.<sup>9</sup> His style of writing is fragmented, with short pieces in verse or prose poetry in the manner of Baudelaire, covering a wide range of matters pertaining primarily to the soul. Such themes as the blending of masculine and feminine, the cultivation of free-spiritedness, and the virtues of isolation are pointedly evident in the passages Berg used from "Texte auf Ansichtskarten" in *Neues Altes* (1911).<sup>10</sup>

As a creature of urban life, Altenberg looked at nature in a romantic sense: nature was a salvation from the destructive powers of cities. The ultimate goal, he felt, was to find an inherent harmony with nature, which was possible if one found the right degree of reverence for all natural phenomena. By experiencing nature and stripping away the encumbrances of urban social stratification, one could go through a cleansing process and be transformed onto a higher level of human and spiritual existence. Central to his thinking on nature was the idea of forgoing the material world in favor of the spiritual. This notion was particularly appealing to Berg, who quoted his friend's idea and its relation to nature in various letters to Helene.<sup>11</sup>

The *Frauen Frage* was a raging issue at the turn of the century, and Altenberg saw women in much the same way that he did nature, both of them playing an essential role in refining and ennobling the soul. His defense of women and creation of a *Frauenkult* appear to stand in contrast to Otto Weininger's blatant misogyny, a point originally argued by Egon Friedell, who characterized Altenberg's position as "der Positivdruck der Frauenphilosophie Weiningers."<sup>12</sup> Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* was one of the most popular books in Vienna during the first two decades of this century, with twenty-six printings between 1903 and 1925; Berg's own copy was very heavily annotated.

<sup>9</sup> Other unpublished pieces at the time of his death appear in *Der Nachlaß* (1925) and *Die Nachlese* (1930).

<sup>10</sup> For more thorough studies of Altenberg, the following are particularly useful: Irene Köwer, *Peter Altenberg als Autor der literarischen Kleinform* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987); Camillo Schaefer, *Peter Altenberg: Ein biographischer Essay* (Vienna: Freibord, 1980); Josephine Simpson, *Peter Altenberg: A Neglected Writer of the Viennese Jahrhundertwende* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987); and Gisela von Wysocki, *Peter Altenberg: Bilder und Geschichten des befreiten Lebens* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Berg, *Letters to His Wife*, trans. Bernard Grun (New York: St. Martin's, 1971), 23, 33, 75, and 132.

<sup>12</sup> Friedell, *Ecce Poeta* (Berlin: Fischer, 1912), 178. See also Barbara Z. Schoenberg, "'Woman-Defender' and 'Woman-Offender': Peter Altenberg and Otto Weininger: Two Literary Stances vis-à-vis Bourgeois Culture in the Viennese 'Belle Époque,'" *Modern Austrian Literature* 20, no. 2 (1987): 51-58.

Altenberg's view has much in common with that of his (and Berg's) friend Gustav Klimt, whose own *Frauenkult* focuses on beauty and the essential need that men have for women. At the same time, there are destructive elements in some of Klimt's women; the sensually homicidal *Judith I* comes to mind.

While Altenberg may present a more sympathetic study of women than do his more misogynist compatriots, he writes nothing to suggest that the place of women might be improved in any social or political sense. His primary concern is the extent to which men can assimilate feminine characteristics. Unlike Weininger, in whose bisexual model femininity is a weakness, Altenberg could not envisage the role of the male poet without integration of the *Frauenseele*. On this matter he was in the good company of such poets and other writers as Rilke, Hofmannsthal, Shelley, Wordsworth, Balzac, and Baudelaire. Once again, his vision was shared by Klimt, whose human subjects are almost exclusively either women, or men and women in an embrace in which their two bodies blend into one.<sup>13</sup>

Among Altenberg's numerous portraits of feminine characteristics, most striking are his treatments of prepubescent girls. In "Zwölf" from "See-Ufer" (*Wie ich es sehe*), the heroine, described as "das Kind mit den braunblonden Haaren und den Gazellenbeinen" ("the child with brownish-blond hair and gazellelike legs"), combines "femme fragile" and instinctual animal-like features. She has strength, resolution, and vitality, in contrast to older women, and has not yet become jaded or hypocritical. Associated with sexual awareness is a loss of innocence, naturalness, and honesty, of a free-spiritedness that can never be recaptured.<sup>14</sup> An essential role of the poet is to recreate this state of innocence and freedom, to reenter this dreamlike world and put it forward as a reality more real than the fallen state of the normal, materialistic, adult world. Berg's own subscription to these ideas unfolds, in letters to Helene, through references to "ideal" or "pure" reality as an antidote to "brutal materialism."<sup>15</sup> Those who seek and discover the inner reality of the aesthetic world, according to Altenberg, will surely find themselves at odds with the rest of society, sometimes alienated, sometimes isolated, or at best in solitude. Berg

<sup>13</sup> Gottfried Fliedl, *Gustav Klimt, 1862–1918: The World in Female Form* (Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1989), 194 and 202.

<sup>14</sup> Simpson, *Peter Altenberg*, 84–85.

<sup>15</sup> Berg, *Letters to His Wife*, 90.

had views on isolation similar to Altenberg's, although he believed Helene shared the sense of isolation with him.<sup>16</sup>

*Peter Altenberg and Helene Nabowski*

The nature of Berg's friendship with and admiration for Altenberg was undoubtedly tested in the extreme by Helene's relationship with the poet. While Berg was on friendly terms with Altenberg by 1908 or earlier, Helene was one of the poet's intimates before that, and it appears that for a time the three may have engaged in a peculiar Platonic ménage à trois, unique to the fusion of love and aesthetics embraced by Berg and Altenberg. For both men she was the ideal woman, conforming physically to their highest standards of sensual beauty, and pliable enough mentally to be susceptible to their artistic wills. A heavenly muse who graced their ideologies and artistic endeavors, she appears to have been much more conventional than either man could admit or accept.

In one of Berg's earliest published letters to Helene, it is clear that the impediment to his securing a lasting relationship with her may very well have been Altenberg.<sup>17</sup> If Berg was condescending to Altenberg here, we know that Altenberg held a similar view of Berg where Helene was concerned, and this he published for all the world to see, indirectly in 1908 and with overt reference in 1911. In *Neues Altes* (1911) there are three poems specifically about Helene: "H. N.," "Bekanntschaft," and "Besuch im einsamen Park," the last of these appearing also in *Märchen des Lebens* (1908). The two later pieces were written after Berg had come into the picture, while "H. N." may have been realized before that point.

Beginning with the lines "Wie wenn die müde Seele noch einmal auf längst gesprungenen Saiten ihre begeistertsten Klagen singen dürfte, so ist es, wenn du zu mir kommst, Helene N.!" ("How when a tired soul once again finally dares to sing with broken strings its spirited laments, so it is, when you come to me, Helene N."), "Besuch im einsamen Park" pursues Altenberg's magical realm of melancholy, a favorite image that Helene, with her inherent sadness and fragile nature, no doubt evoked.<sup>18</sup> His desire for her remains firm: "Ich möchte dich ins Zauberreich entführen,

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 132–33, 200.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Altenberg, *Neues Altes* (Berlin: Fischer, 1911), 205. All translations, unless otherwise specified, are mine. I would like to thank Gerald Jonas for valuable suggestions concerning the translation of Altenberg's poetic texts.

wo du mein Kindchen wirst, gewiegt, getragen, beschützt, in überzärtlichen Armen, an einem für dich bebenden Herzen — — —” (“I would like to abduct you to the realm of magic, where you would become my child, cradled, carried, protected by overly affectionate arms, held to a heart which trembles for you”). The desire is not physical: she is offered safety and protection from a world hostile to beauty, and would be his child, still innocent, in the magical pre-adult, ingenuous realm he describes in “Zwölf.” A figurative transformation is under way as she leaves the prepubescent Altenbergian world to join what he regards as the sexually dangerous and more materialistic world of Berg: “Helene N., komm’ wieder in den Park, wo Irre ihre irren Träume träumen — — —. Du wirst hier doch vielleicht mehr Menschlichkeiten finden, als in der Welt, die sich frech fälschlich für die normale hält!!!” (“Helene N., come again into the park, where the deluded dream their dreams. You will still perhaps find more humanity here, than in the world that impudently and falsely considers itself normal”). Aesthetic abduction remains his last hope.

While Berg and his less sensitive orbit are presented here by implication only, in the prose-poem “Bekanntschaft” the composer is actually woven into the dialogue and speaks with a counterfeit, mimicking voice. Near the beginning the poet describes Helene, using his favorite hair image: “Sie sah aus wie eine riesig hohe, schlanke, aschblonde russische Studentin, nur sehr müde von ungekämpften Kämpfen” (“She looked like a tall, thin, ash-blond Russian student, only very tired from unfought battles”).<sup>19</sup> Here is his vision of physical perfection in a woman. Her face radiates both inscrutability and profundity: “In ihrem starren Gesichtsausdruck, wie eh und je, sucht man ihr Leiden zu erspähen, und findet nichts und findet dennoch alles!” (“In her fixed facial expression, as always, one searches to catch sight of her sorrow, and finds nothing and nevertheless finds everything”). The poet warns her to avoid well-tended gardens and urges her instead to frequent open fields and untrod paths. On her own she cannot find this world of innocence and nature, but with her beloved youth (Berg) she can. Berg now makes his entry and thanks the poet for the soul he has won by following the poet’s advice. To this the poet reacts bitterly: “Da wandte sich der Dichter entrüstet und tief verzweifelt ab” (“Then the poet turned away indignantly and full of despair”). In the final lines, the young composer is shown to be soulless and a counterfeit: “Denn von Gott müssen solche Erkenntnisse direkt in unsere Herzen kommen, da die

<sup>19</sup> Altenberg, *Neues Altes*, 87. Translation by Karen Monson, *Alban Berg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 44.

Wirkung sonst nicht von Dauer ist und unheilig – – –!“ (“Surely such recognition must come directly to our hearts from God, or the effect has no duration and is unholy”).

Although these sentiments cannot have sat well with Berg and Helene, etched as they were in poetic stone, neither did they precipitate a break with Altenberg. Berg and Helene of course knew the piece well before it was published in 1911. They referred to it in an exchange of letters in August 1910, in which Berg was annoyed that Helene did not understand his position on morality, that he was not a defender of reprehensible behavior or prostitution.<sup>20</sup> The issue of Altenberg’s attitude toward Berg becomes much more directly apparent in the latter’s copy of *Neues Altes*. The final eight lines of text, beginning at the point where Berg speaks to the poet, are crossed out in pencil, with marks evidently in Helene’s hand. No other annotations are to be found in this piece.<sup>21</sup>

“H. N.” is much more a love poem than the other two, the poet finding all he needs in the look in her eyes, that special quality which sets her apart from other women, that fragile nature which likens her to a cut flower triumphant over sturdy plants. Once again she is compared to an innocent twelve-year-old, with the poet as her mother: “ich sie gerührt betrachte und begreife, wie eine Mutter ihres geliebten Kindes Rätsel – – –” (“I observe and touch her, moved, like a mother trying to understand the riddles of her beloved child”).<sup>22</sup> Her magic depends on the poet, who can preserve her in an innocent state, safe from the world “die dich brutal genießen will!” (“that wants to enjoy you brutally”). It was this brutal reality from which Berg had insulated himself and from which he believed he could protect Helene. In the Bergs’ copy, a photograph of Helene has been glued to the opposite page (p. 44), showing her in a full-length white or off-white dress, right hand on hip, chin high and head cocked somewhat arrogantly to the right.<sup>23</sup>

Helene was one of a number of young women adored by Altenberg; he put them on display not only for the world in his writing, but also for himself in a much more private and decadent way. He covered the walls of his hotel room with nude photographs of girls and

<sup>20</sup> Berg, *Briefe an seine Frau* (Munich and Vienna: Albert Langen and Georg Müller, 1965), 182.

<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank the Alban Berg Stiftung for placing Berg’s entire personal library at my disposal.

<sup>22</sup> Altenberg, *Neues Altes*, 45. Translation adapted from Monson, *Alban Berg*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> This photograph can be seen in Berg, *Letters to His Wife*, opposite p. 240; and Berg, *Briefe an seine Frau*, plate 6 following p. 304.

women of his acquaintance, each of them framed in oak and signed by the subject.<sup>24</sup> For Altenberg nudity was a sign of being unencumbered by bourgeois society, and the perception of it as indecent was itself indecent: in his words, “Es gibt nur eine Unanständigkeit des Nackten — — — das Nackte unanständig zu finden!” (“The only indecent thing about nudity is finding nudity indecent”).<sup>25</sup> Persuading women to pose for these shots, taken by a professional photographer at Altenberg’s expense, was apparently not very difficult, since those in his circle considered it something of an honor to be included in his gallery.<sup>26</sup> Among the various photographs of Helene at Trauttmansdorffgasse 27, the former Berg apartment and now the Alban Berg Stiftung, is one of her in the nude at about age twenty, now cropped to show her only from the chest up. This picture was found in the pages of Altenberg’s *Das Nachlass*, and while that may be coincidental, in all likelihood it was taken by him for his gallery.<sup>27</sup>

### *Berg’s Literary World*

In his late adolescence, prior to directing his energies to musical composition, Berg fully intended to be a poet, as he explained to Webern in a letter dated 18 July 1914.<sup>28</sup> He had a voracious appetite for reading during those years—evident from his early correspondence with Paul Hohenberg and Hermann Watznauer, as well as from the reminiscences of Frida Semler<sup>29</sup>—devouring the works of Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Altenberg, Goethe, Schnitzler, Wilde, Wedekind, and Kraus. The impact of this reading on him was unusual, for in these writers Berg saw the possibility of another realm of existence; through

<sup>24</sup> Reproductions of the photographs on Altenberg’s walls at the Graben-Hotel are given in Hans Bisanz, *Peter Altenberg: Mein äußerstes Ideal. Altenbergs Photosammlung von geliebten Frauen, Freunden und Orten* (Vienna and Munich: Christian Brandstätter, 1987), 34–37.

<sup>25</sup> Altenberg, “Selbstbiographie,” in *Was der Tag mir zuträgt* (Berlin: Fischer, 1901), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Schaefer, *Peter Altenberg*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> She is shown posing in a reclining position, her head supported by a cushion, with arms crossed behind her head. The pose itself is artistically cultivated, resembling Klimt’s *Recumbent Female Nude with Study of Arms* (1898)—shown in Fliedl, *Gustav Klimt*, 62—or Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*.

<sup>28</sup> This is also noted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, trans. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>29</sup> Frida Semler Seabury’s memoir of Berg appears in “1903 and 1904,” *International Alban Berg Society Newsletter* 1 (1968): 3–6.

them he found access to an inner world not unlike that already described in relation to Altenberg.

Entry into this world involved much more than passive reading, and Berg took active steps to make it a part of his higher reality, both in his own poetic endeavors and in attempts to organize his thoughts on a variety of subjects evoked by the works he was reading. This organization took the form of a collection of quotations from a wide range of authors—among them Goethe, Jean Paul Richter, Kraus, Wedekind, Schopenhauer, Altenberg, and Wilde—entered in twelve neatly arranged notebooks.<sup>30</sup> In all, there are 232 authors listed in Berg's index, including current Austrian and German writers, great writers of the nineteenth century, and writers of the more distant past, reaching back to classical Greece and Rome. By Berg's own numbering there are 2,061 quotations. All the notebooks are set up so that subject headings appear on the left side of the folio while the corresponding quotations are on the right. Hundreds of subjects are covered, sometimes in clusters that are related, but often in no particular order. The quotations are all carefully identified as to author, title, part or section of a book, and page number. Women's issues dominate Book 1; the subject headings include "Vom Einfluß der Frauen," "Von der Liebe," "Vom Wert der Frau," "Von der Mode der Frauen," and "Vom Ewig-Weiblichen." Almost all the quotations associated with these headings, as well as the other subjects covered in Book 1, are by Goethe. Subjects in Book 2 include "Vom Dichter," "Von den großen Geheimnissen," "Von der Religion," "Vom Glauben," "Vom Selbsterleben," "Vom Seelenleben," "Von den Künsten," "Von Wahrheit und Lüge," "Vom Küßen," "Von der großen Sehnsucht," and "Von der Originalität eines Werkes."

Each notebook begins with the title "Von der Selbsterkenntis," and in the upper left corner near the title there appears a distinctively fused version of Berg's initials over a drawing of scales with a level balance. The balance changes in the final book, where the left scale drops lower than the right. The title of the project is significant, as it implies that the books are of personal importance for Berg, and it gives an early indication of the unusual value he placed on literature. In spite of his filing cabinet approach to the organization and retrievabil-

<sup>30</sup> 21 Berg 100/I–XII, Musiksammlung, Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. Berg started the collection around 1902 and continued to make entries until at least 1908. Each notebook has approximately sixty pages and concludes with an index. There is a separate index volume for the entire set, arranged alphabetically by author, with hand-cut alphabetical tabs.

ity of the quotations, which might suggest that they were intended for poetic, literary, or journalistic endeavors, it appears that his scrupulous arrangement may have simply served a more personal function. In a lengthy letter to his young American friend Frida Semler, dated 1907, Berg professed some knowledge of “human nature in general, and the feminine soul in particular,” but admitted that “this knowledge I have learned more from literature than from personal experience.” While some might dismiss knowledge acquired in this manner, regarding learning from books as less valid than the actual experience of life, for Berg it was very much the opposite: “Yet even though it would seem that I am too young to speak in this manner, I can affirm that I have never made a mistake. Quite to the contrary, my intuition has always been correct.”<sup>31</sup> While he may have been teasing her a little, it nevertheless appears that he believed his intuition was directly associated with his knowledge of literature, and his repertory of literary quotations could quite rightly be labeled self-knowledge.

In these notebooks he creates a compendium of thought on virtually every subject important to a young artist searching for meaning. This was not a confusion of priorities on his part, but rather the creation of both an inner world and a sense of himself that resonated with the great literary minds of the past and present. The inclination for such creation would not grow weaker as he became older; if anything it intensified. That which shaped him early in life determined his works as well, and belonged to the inner world that Berg shared with his literary accomplices. Altenberg was clearly one of these accomplices, and indeed the arrangement of Berg’s notebooks bears similarity to the presentation of material in Altenberg’s own works, such as *Was der Tag mir zuträgt*, which appeared at about the same time that Berg’s literary project began. In the second edition of this book (1902), the second item is a type of autobiographical sketch; it informs the reader that Altenberg’s writing is not art but a series of “Extrakte des Lebens” (“extracts of life”), which in this case covers subjects from the emergence of a new species of man to the transformation achievable through eating easily digested foods.<sup>32</sup> Among the “extracts” in the book are “Selbstanzeige,” “Selbstbiographie,” “Flirt,” “Die Liebe,” “De Libertate,” “Götzendämmerung,” “Die

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Donald Harris, “Berg and Frida Semler,” *International Alban Berg Society Newsletter* 8 (1979): 9.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew W. Barker, “Peter Altenberg (1859–1919),” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 81, *Austrian Fiction Writers, 1875–1913*, ed. James Hardin and Donald G. Daviau (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), 6.

Massenmörder," "Neu-Romantik," "Hochzeit," "Zwei junge Paare," "Tristan und Isolde," "Emotion," "Fjaestad oder: Weg des Weibes," "Des Dichters Freundin," "Ansichtskarten," "Lucifer, Licht-Bringer," and "Aphorismen einer Primitiven."

While Berg's collection of quotations embraces numerous writers, certain authors appear with marked frequency, revealing his cultural and spiritual biases. During the years that he collected these quotations, he gradually became aware of new writers, particularly ones whose works were either recent or just becoming available in German at that time. The fact that Goethe dominates the first book reflects Berg's youthful reading and education. Goethe remained one of his favorite authors throughout his life, although not one perhaps to have had the strongest influence on him. In the case of Ibsen, heavily quoted in the first three books, Berg was enormously taken by him, in part because of Ibsen's dogged adherence to ideals. But enthusiasm for Ibsen did not last. Strindberg, on the other hand, is quoted much less than Ibsen, no doubt because the works of Strindberg (who was twenty years younger than Ibsen) became available in German considerably later than those of the Norwegian playwright. Strindberg soon became Berg's favorite writer, and the complete falling out of the two Scandinavians may very well have influenced Berg's allegiance, just as Kraus's axe grinding influenced him somewhat later. Quotations by Kraus are found in every book but the first.

Other writers often quoted by Berg include Altenberg, Franz Grillparzer, Nietzsche, Schnitzler, Theodor Storm, Frank Wedekind, Wilde (who with Ibsen was one of his early favorites), and Weininger, whose *Geschlecht und Charakter* dominates Book 7. While these are the predominant writers, others who turn up with some consistency are Hermann Bahr, Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, Otto Ernst, Karl Gutzkow, Maxim Gorky, Gerhart Hauptmann, Hesse, Hofmannsthal, Jean Paul Richter, Heinrich Kleist, Gottfried Keller, Lessing, Thomas Mann, C. F. Meyer, Peter Rosegger, Wagner, and Fritz Wittels.

### "*Texte auf Ansichtskarten*"

Berg's texts for the *Fünf Orchesterlieder* were extracted from the section of *Neues Altes* designated "Texte auf Ansichtskarten," under the three subheadings "Rokoko," "Schneesturm," and "Weg im Winter." Altenberg was a fanatical collector of postcards, amassing a collection of about ten thousand by the time of his death. Like his poetic extracts, his postcards, with pictures of landscapes, women,

children, and animals, represented another aspect of his fragmented view of the world. While Berg may not have been a collector of postcards himself, he shared Altenberg's view of their significance.<sup>33</sup> It is not clear if the texts used in this section of *Neues Altes* were actually derived from postcards, or if Altenberg simply gave this section a title that supports the image of smallness and fragmentation.<sup>34</sup> Berg's five short texts (given in Appendix B) represent less than one-sixth of the entire set, and they are taken out of order to suit Berg's own purposes. In the surrounding texts one finds much of relevance to the understanding of the material used by Berg, and it is therefore useful to examine the set as a whole (the full texts appear in Appendix A).

The opening section, "Rokoko," includes two of the texts used by Berg. The title itself evokes strong associations with fin-de-siècle Viennese artistic movements, which not only were of interest to both Altenberg and Berg but also had an influence on Berg's setting of the texts. Painters, architects, and designers of furniture and crafts that were associated with the *Jugendstil* or Secessionist movement admired the decorative and ornamental aspect of the rococo, and incorporated it into their respective styles. Of the painters, Klimt stands out particularly, and it should be noted that the ornamentation in his paintings serves much more than a purely decorative function. In some works it provides a means of bringing together antithetical themes; in others the profusion of surface beauty distracts from more ominous objects, such as the severed male head in *Judith I*. While the nature of the association is with a cult of aesthetic beauty, this by no means precludes darker romantic images. The link with a painter like Klimt appears to be pursued by Altenberg, especially under the subheading "Frau E . . . R . . . . ." which immediately precedes the first text used by Berg (the fourth song in his order of presentation).

"Rokoko" begins on a familiar theme: the poet seeks his own "echte Märchenland," a reality imbued with romanticism and childlike innocence. The text that follows establishes the link with *Jugendstil*:

Frau E . . . R . . . . .  
Schaffst du denn Symphonien, weibliches Beethoven-Antlitz?!?

<sup>33</sup> Berg, *Briefe an seine Frau*, 102 and 111.

<sup>34</sup> Gert Mattenklott has nevertheless linked Berg's texts with five postcards from the Altenberg collection held at St. Etienne's Gallery, New York, in "Keine Ansiedlungen": Peter Altenbergs Texte der fünf Orchesterlieder Alban Bergs op. 4," *Hofmannsthal Blätter* 27 (1983): 74–91.

Du bist ein Weib, kannst dich nicht austönen!  
 Nicht dich erlösen!  
 Ein Spiegelbild der Welt kannst du nicht sein!  
 Zur Tagesstat zu groß, zur ewigen zu klein!  
 So bleibst du Weib und kannst's dennoch nicht sein!<sup>35</sup>

("Do you create symphonies, feminine Beethoven-face? You are a woman, unable to sound forth! Cannot set yourself free! You cannot be a mirror reflection to the world! For daily deed too large, for eternity too small! So you remain a woman and nevertheless cannot be!"). Perhaps the most curious image here is the "feminine Beethoven-face." By evoking the name of Beethoven, Altenberg identified himself with a widespread Beethoven cult among such writers and artists as Strindberg, Schnitzler, Klimt, and Max Klinger. Beethoven was the subject of a number of their works, and he was a powerful image in some individual pieces. Strindberg, for example, used various Beethoven movements in D minor as either the structural basis or a recurring image in several of his plays.<sup>36</sup>

The central theme of the Fourteenth Exhibition of the Viennese Secession in 1902 was Beethoven, with Klinger's Beethoven sculpture as the centerpiece. Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze*, which covered three upper walls of a main exhibition room, presented an allegory of Beethoven as savior, not so much of all mankind as of the individual soul.<sup>37</sup> The implication of Altenberg's text—that woman has the power to be an agent of salvation for man but not for herself—ties in directly to Klimt's view of women. At the conclusion of Klimt's visual narrative stand a nude man and woman kissing, surrounded by the Paradise Angels, in what Gottfried Fliedl describes as a "symbiosis between erotic humanity and nature" (Fig. 1).<sup>38</sup> While the kiss may signify that man has been saved by woman, his virile body (seen from the back) covers hers almost completely, and in neither case do we see a face. Male and female faces are projected in the ornament surrounding the embracing, merging pair, the male face wide-eyed and penetrating, the female with passive, closed eyes.<sup>39</sup> Altenberg's reference to symphonies brings to mind Klimt's projection of a salvation motif in

<sup>35</sup> Altenberg, *Neues Altes*, 60.

<sup>36</sup> David P. Schroeder, "Berg, Strindberg, and D Minor," *College Music Symposium* 30, no. 2 (1990): 74–89.

<sup>37</sup> Fliedl, *Gustav Klimt*, 104–13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>39</sup> The lines around the male face, however, resemble the helmet worn by Athena in Klimt's *Pallas Athena*, giving this face a female context.

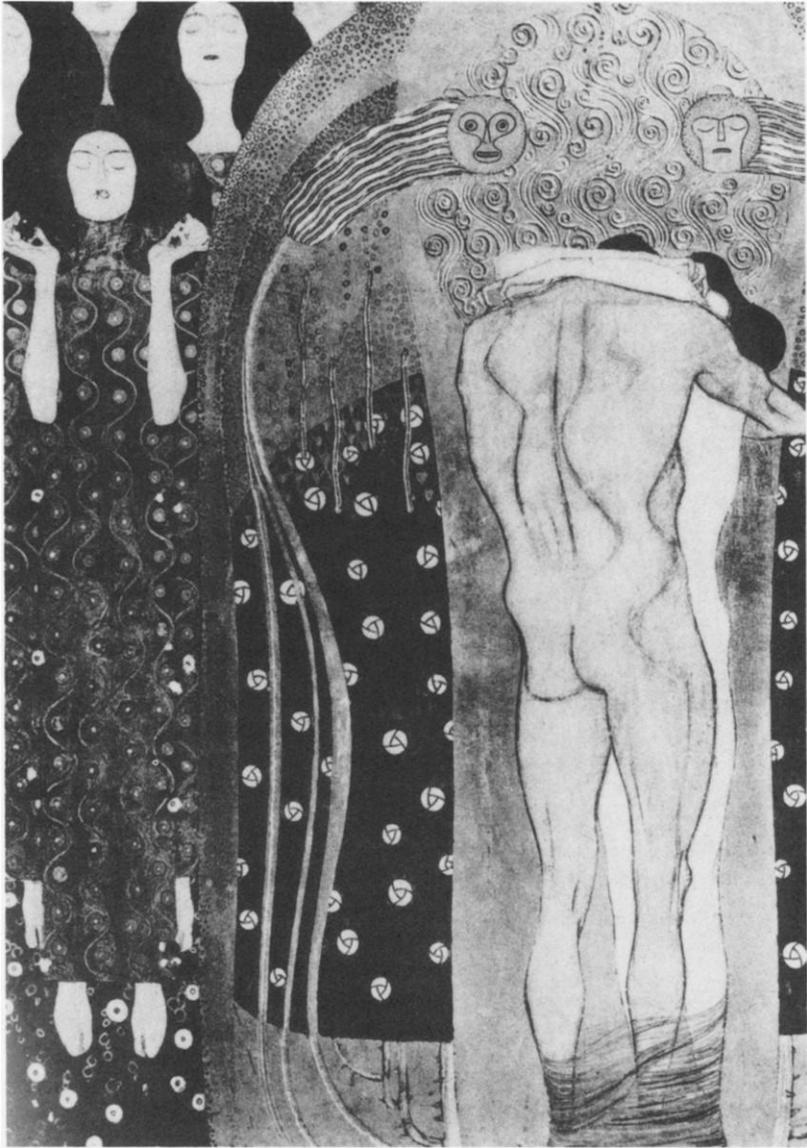


Figure 1. Klimt, *Beethoven Frieze*, detail of panel 3: "The Longing for Happiness Finds Surcease in Poetry," Österreichische Galerie, Vienna

the fourth movement of the Ninth Symphony, and his "weibliches Beethoven-Antlitz" corresponds precisely with Klimt's passive female face, detached from a body and absorbed into the nature-flower images of decoration.

In the fourth line of "Frau E . . . R . . . ." the association with Klimt becomes even stronger. "Ein Spiegelbild der Welt kannst du

nicht sein" ("You cannot be a mirror reflection to the world"), Altenberg tells woman in apparent contradiction to Klimt's *Nuda Veritas*, in which a nude woman holds a blank mirror up to humanity. The first of the *Nuda Veritas* pieces (Fig. 2a), an ink drawing prepared for the inaugural issue of the Secession magazine *Ver Sacrum* (1898), makes a political stand with its inscription by L. Schefer: "Truth is fire and to speak the truth is like shining and burning." Most striking is the visual representation of truth, a seductive young woman stripped of encumbrances, exposing herself in innocent yet erotic beauty. But what image, as Carl E. Schorske asks, will she reflect to her society? "The burning light of truth? Or perhaps a mirror of Narcissus?"<sup>40</sup>

The answer comes in another painting of the same year, *Pallas Athena*, in which we see *Nuda Veritas* rising above Athena's right hand, no longer the black-and-white prepubescent fit for the pages of *Ver Sacrum*, but now "shapely and sexy, with hair, even pubic hair, of flaming red."<sup>41</sup> This post-puberty *Nuda Veritas* was painted separately in 1899 (Fig. 2b); her beauty is much more vividly expressed, but the flowers of hope at her feet are partially obscured and a snake entwines her ankles. The political inscription of the drawing has given way to a new one by Schiller that concerns the artist more directly: "If you cannot please everyone with your art and your actions, you should satisfy a few. Pleasing many is a bad thing."<sup>42</sup> The new *Nuda Veritas* follows the narcissistic path, retreating into the aesthetic world of the artist. Tainted by loss of innocence and threatened by male sexual aggression, she cannot, then, reflect the entire world ("Ein Spiegelbild der Welt kannst du nicht sein!"). Even Altenberg will not accept her new image: the poet's mirror reflects the *Ver Sacrum*.

In Altenberg's world nothing is as it seems: peace becomes possible only to those who experience melancholy, and a restless soul allows for a deeper understanding. "Fräulein Barbara von G." introduces two texts used by Berg, songs IV and III respectively, both of which fuel ambiguity. In the first of these there is endless waiting, infinite longing, but nothing comes to still the soul. Altenberg's quotation marks allow the woman to speak in the first person, but the speaker remains the male poet, now assuming a feminine persona. In the final line two images, vaguely discordant, are juxtaposed: the

<sup>40</sup> Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1981), 217.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Fliedl, *Gustav Klimt*, 64.

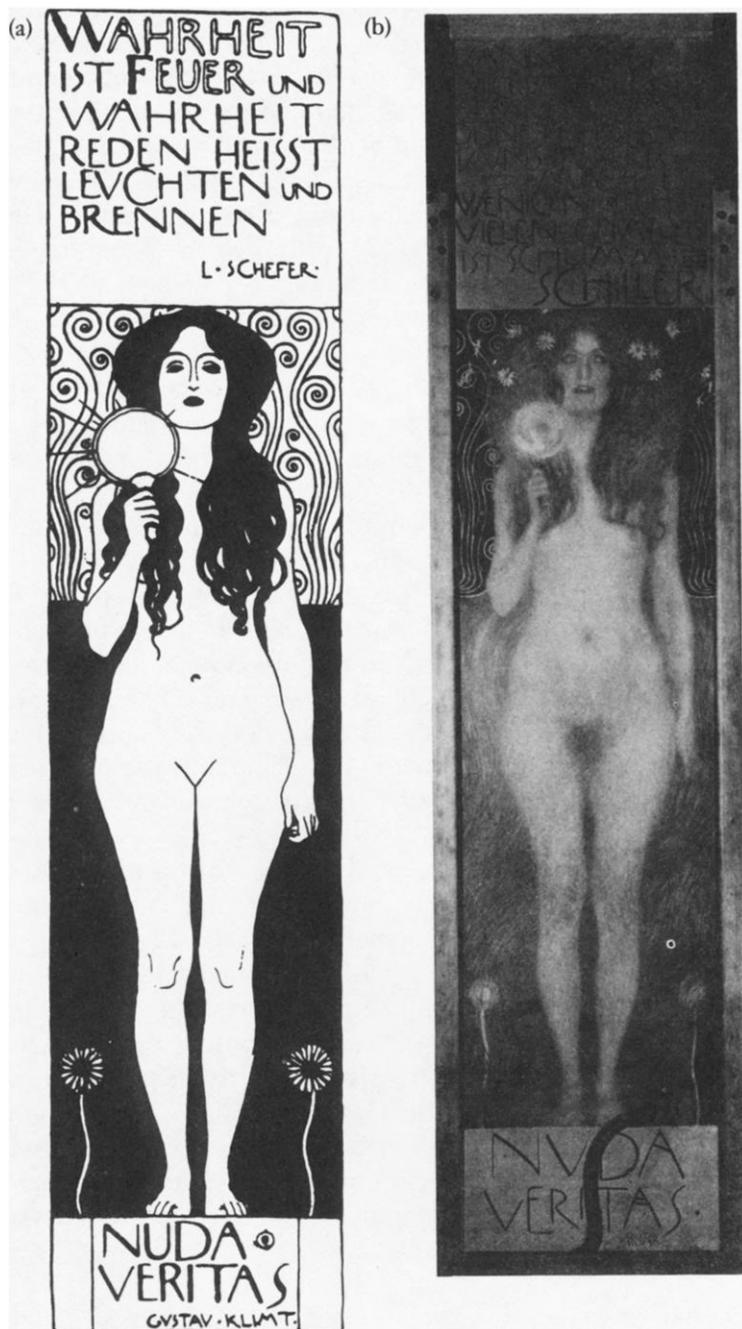


Figure 2. Klimt: (a) Drawing for *Nuda Veritas*. Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna; (b) *Nuda Veritas*. Theatersammlung der Nationalbibliothek Wien, on loan to Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Vienna

“aschblonden seidenen Haare” (“ash-blond, silken hair”), encountered in Altenberg’s description of Helene and in other contexts as well, and a “bleiches Antlitz” (“pale face”). This hair image, an erotic one for Altenberg—a fetish, even, that brings to mind the collection of nude photographs<sup>43</sup>—points to the world of “humanity” to which he fears losing Helene in “Besuch im einsamen Park.” The pale face, however, reflects the inner soul, the face itself capable of transmitting all. Here one recalls the opening lines of “H. N.”: “In deinen Augen lese ich dein Leben – – – mehr brauch ich nicht zu wissen, es ist alles” (“In your eyes I read your life; I do not need to know anything more, this is all”). In contrast to a color such as red, linked with a misplaced confidence in life, paleness stands as an image of inwardness and spirituality.<sup>44</sup> In this case, the sensuous hair flutters around the pale face in vain; Altenberg’s androgynous aesthetic world is protected from encroaching sexuality.

The text which follows, Berg’s third song, also involves a conflict between art and life, now with a more pessimistic tone. Here the woman’s gaze wanders to the edge of the universe, to places far beyond conventional life, and in her musing she can ignore the duties of that life. Trespassing reality and dreams of a normal life interrupt her reverie, and suddenly all comes to an end. The rhetorical repetition of the first line, “Über die Grenzen des All blickst du noch sinnend hinaus – – –” (“Beyond the limits of the universe your gaze wandered musingly”), does, however, leave the outcome open to question.

Between this and the text of Berg’s first song, the opening lines of “Schneesturm,” stands the final paragraph of “Rokoko” (“Nach Jahren kommt eine unaussprechliche Dankbarkeit . . .”). The passage is marked in the Bergs’ copy with a sharp instrument (for whatever reason with neither lead nor ink). The poet expresses thanks for the women that men love unhappily, who can transform a man’s existence from mundane domesticity to sublime isolation—to the poet who can in his melancholy fathom the depths of his soul. The irony is everywhere, for Altenberg had much experience in losing women—women “created” by himself in a spirit of illusion—to men with more corporeal needs.<sup>45</sup> No woman belonging to his coffeehouse circle was

<sup>43</sup> Mattenklott aptly selects a postcard of a nude woman from the Altenberg collection for illustration with this text, in “Keine Ansiedlungen,” 85.

<sup>44</sup> Simpson, *Peter Altenberg*, 328.

<sup>45</sup> Barker, “Peter Altenberg,” 15. Aside from Helene, these included Annie Kalmar (Kraus’s mistress) and Lina Loos (the estranged first wife of Adolf Loos).

prepared to follow his precepts about women and art to their bizarre end, and he was much better off creating feminine illusions that lacked minds and bodies.

“Schneesturm,” the second section of the “Texte auf Ansichtskarten,” begins with the lines used by Berg as his first song. In these bare four lines and twenty-nine words, the poet explores the parallels of the soul and nature, their beauty and volatility. Snow itself becomes a special image, touching the soul through opposing metaphors for serene, pure beauty and the storm beyond human control. Altenberg seeks a link between woman and snow; as he writes later in the set, “Ich suchte eine Frau, die den Schnee wirklich liebte; und ich fand keine” (“I searched for a woman who really loved the snow, and I found none”), part of a larger section marked lightly in red in the Bergs’ copy. Although unable to find a woman who loved snow as he did, he nevertheless argues the similarity of women and nature, observing in “Weg im Winter” that “Natur und Frau sollten in gleicher Weise wirken, uns zu adeligen, all-verstehenden, sanftmütigen Weltgeschöpfen zu transformieren!” (“Nature and woman ought to work in the same way, transforming us to noble, all-understanding, gentle creatures of the world”). This task of ennobling men, he suggests, women do happily: the male soul is endowed with feminine characteristics.

“Weg im Winter,” the longest section of the set, includes two of Berg’s texts. The snow-covered way, with its sadness and ability to point inward, is preferred to the colorful spring that the mindless hoards so eagerly await. A patch of grass, exposed by melting snow, is more beautiful than all the flowers, since it retains some of the ambiguity and melancholy of winter. This ambiguity remains central to the text of Berg’s fifth song, in which peace can be experienced only in the context of tears, sorrow, and the absence of human presence. The gentle falling of snow into pools of water suggests an ultimate merging of the soul and nature.

The section ends with the text of Berg’s second song, again involving a storm and the beauty that comes after it. Woman, like nature, needs thundershowers to rejuvenate, perhaps to experience tears and emotional upset in order ultimately to find peace. The final passage gives the Leitmotiv of the poet’s life: “Nie über einen Graben springen, eine Hürde, wenn man nicht ganz gesichert ist, hinüberzugelangen mit leichter Anmut!” (“Never leap over a ditch, a hurdle, if one is not entirely certain of getting across with light gracefulness”).

*Berg's Adaptation of Altenberg's Texts*

"And the Altenberg songs were after all written for you,"<sup>46</sup> Berg reminded Helene in 1914, two years after the *Fünf Orchesterlieder* was written. While all the early pieces from Opp. 1 to 5 were dedicated to her, this work was much more than a dedication since its texts, through association with Altenberg's Helene poems, indirectly embrace her as a subject and define the world that Berg believed he shared with her. The existence of this world, with all its similarities to Altenberg's otherworldliness, is corroborated by Berg in a number of ways. Aside from his letters, his literary quotations, and the markings in his personal books, other evidence of his dynamic belief in this approach to art and life can be found, not the least of which is his arrangement of the Altenberg texts. In removing them from the context of the "Texte auf Ansichtskarten," and in extracting five specific texts and rearranging their order, Berg made them his own, imbued them with meaning for himself, and to some extent gave them significance beyond what they possessed in their original presentation.<sup>47</sup>

Berg's attitude toward women and the role played by Helene in his artistic world were central to his understanding and arrangement of the Altenberg texts. Attempts to redefine the role and position of women were rampant among male writers at the turn of the century, including Strindberg, Kraus, Weininger, and Wedekind; Berg was well aware of all of them. While he too was interested in the new social role for women, his primary concern was more individual, addressing the role that women should play in his own artistic world, and the extent to which his personal and artistic aspirations could take on feminine characteristics. The misogynist element in this body of writing on women was of little interest to Berg, and seldom does he let slip a misogynist comment.<sup>48</sup> Much more to the point is his relationship with Helene during the period leading up to their marriage in 1911 and the setting of Altenberg's texts in 1912.

While Altenberg was the least misogynist of the various writers in question, an element of misogyny remained in his writing, in part

<sup>46</sup> Berg, *Letters to His Wife*, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Mattenklott expresses his annoyance at Berg's rearrangement, in "Keine Ansiedlungen," 84.

<sup>48</sup> An exception is his excoriating remarks to Schoenberg on Alma Mahler's capriciousness, in which he goes so far as to invoke Weininger's theory of women's amorality. See *The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, ed. Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey, and Donald Harris (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1987), 243.

because of his inability to see woman having a role separate from her function as the redeemer of man. Like his literary compatriots he was repulsed by the conventional role of *Frau* as bearer of children, keeper of the house, and social ornament to her husband. In Altenberg's scheme of things, however, she does not gain independence; instead her role is changed from one of satisfying physical, material, and social needs to one of providing spiritual support. That she could be an artist in her own right remains inconceivable: her place is not to create but to be a muse to the male creator. With this transference of duties, she also becomes a different moral and social creature, not bound by moral convention (here Altenberg fully agrees with Kraus) and possessing a free and intuitive spirit. Women will constantly engage in a struggle between an unencumbered existence and the conventional world, and even his ideal woman, such as Helene in his poetic representation, will always be at risk of succumbing to convention.

His model for the ideal woman is Anita, a purely literary creation (although she may have had a real-life counterpart), who appears first in the "See-Ufer" series of his first book, *Wie ich es sehe*, and also in the "Texte auf Ansichtskarten." Ironically placed in a position of traditional male authority, as "Frau Bankdirektor von H" (changed in the fourth edition to Frau Fabrikdirektor von H), she nevertheless represents his "Leitbild seelenvoller Weiblichkeit" ("model of soulful femininity"), his true image of *Innerlichkeit*.<sup>49</sup> Material cares are irrelevant to her, and she can enter into full communion with nature. She is, as Josephine Simpson notes, "associated with water and is depicted in the characteristic attitude used by Altenberg to denote a dreamy, romantic temperament, deep spirituality and otherworldliness."<sup>50</sup> She passively drinks in nature and possesses an artistic temperament that allows her to "create harmony in her surroundings and in the relationships of those around her." This includes her husband, who must praise a woman with her qualities. She becomes an admired object of *Frauenkult*, but not for her ability to think. Feelings are her domain, but Altenberg believes it is desirable for men also to abandon their traditional realm of thought and rise to the feminine level of emotion and irrationality.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Peter Wagner, "Peter Altenbergs Prosadichtung: Untersuchung zur Thematik und Struktur des Frühwerks" (Ph.D. diss., Westfälische-Wilhelmsuniversität, Münster, 1965), 39.

<sup>50</sup> Simpson, *Peter Altenberg*, 98.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–101.

These attributes are evident in the “Ansichtskarten” texts used by Berg, and through Altenberg’s projection of Helene as an ideal woman Berg appears to have carried this image through in the songs. While Helene may for a time have found the Altenberg image of the ideal woman appealing, her view of it was very much modified by the time of her relationship with Berg. Certain aspects of it—her immersion in nature, for one—she retained fiercely.<sup>52</sup> While her notion of the soul corresponded with his, she initially resisted the role of muse, not wishing to close her soul to those things that fueled her own spiritual life.<sup>53</sup> Although Berg tried to be sensitive, he nevertheless maintained that she had a function in relation to him: “I abandon every power over you: that I consider partnership more valuable than domination or authority of one over the other. And surely you are yourself created for such partnership—for walking hand in hand towards the highest goals,”<sup>54</sup> goals which of course were to be realized in his works. By the day before they were married, she appeared to have accepted the role: “Tomorrow is our wedding day. I am setting out with you into ‘the land of marriage’ full of confidence and high purpose. I will always be a prop and support to you, a faithful and loving companion, both here and over there ‘in the other world’. . . . I quench my own flame, and shall only exist for and through you.”<sup>55</sup>

While Helene apparently found it possible to reconcile herself to Berg’s expectation that she serve as muse, the same was not true for the belief he shared with Altenberg in the intuitive, free-spirited, amoral side of women. In choosing Berg over the Altenberg circle, Helene had made a break with the decadent world of the *femme fatale*, and she reacted with abhorrence when he spoke fondly to her of that type of woman, as he did periodically in 1910. On these occasions he found it necessary to engage in some fairly skillful backpedaling in order to clarify that he neither subscribed to prostitution in its basest sense nor meant to compare her with such women, referring specifically to Altenberg’s Anita.<sup>56</sup> Altenberg, like Karl Kraus, held prostitutes in high esteem, revealing in “Die Primitive” (his term for prostitute) his belief that in contrast to bourgeois women, who are bound by social conventions, these women are free, capable of discovering the inner world, and, untouched by the hypocrisy of

<sup>52</sup> Berg, *Letters to His Wife*, 68.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 102–3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–65.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 101–2; and Berg, *Briefe an seine Frau*, 182–83.

modern civilization, stand closer to nature. In his defense of Anita and his subsequent portrayal of this feminine model in the songs as well as in later works, despite resistance from Helene, Berg saw this model as part of his own being and part of his role as keeper and defender of the feminine soul.

In rearranging the Altenberg texts to suit his own artistic needs, Berg was inaugurating an approach that would be evident later in his career, most notably in *Wozzeck* and *Der Wein*. In *Wozzeck* he took a fragmented text and gave it a highly defined structure, removing, for example, certain ambiguities about its conclusion. The parallel of the Altenberg texts with *Der Wein* is much closer, since in the latter the rearrangement of three poems extracted from a larger cycle serves a similar structural purpose. The poem chosen for the center of *Der Wein* has palindromic implications, making it the appropriate locus for a work that contains a striking musical palindrome.<sup>57</sup> The similarities of these two works appear even greater if one remembers that the poet of *Der Wein* ("Le Vin") is Baudelaire, the writer with the single strongest bearing not only on Altenberg's prose-poem style, but also on his world of the soul, of decadence, and on his portrayal of women.<sup>58</sup>

The placement of "Über die Grenzen des All" at the center of the Altenberg songs, the arch form of its text provoked by the repetition of the first line at the end, is only the most obvious manifestation of a larger symmetry permeating Berg's arrangement.<sup>59</sup> Berg in fact ordered the texts to allow for an overall thematic-poetic symmetry, providing them with a formal significance as well as accommodating a narrative flow from beginning to end. The first and fifth texts provide the foundations of a large thematic arch; both treat the images of the soul, snow, melancholy/sorrow, and peace. Woman is not included overtly in either of these texts, but by implication she is very much present. Nature is central to the first text, and through the association with water, one of Altenberg's most potent nature images, it positions itself in the fifth text as well. The third text, the apex of the thematic arch, takes the image of the soul to a new height, but at the same time it engenders an element of conflict. The conflict, apparent in the third

<sup>57</sup> Schroeder, "Berg, Strindberg, and D Minor," 82–87.

<sup>58</sup> Barbara Z. Schoenberg, "The Influence of the French Prose Poem on Peter Altenberg," *Modern Austrian Literature* 22, nos. 3/4 (1989): 15–32.

<sup>59</sup> The arch form is noted by Mark DeVoto in "Some Notes on the Unknown Altenberg Lieder," *Perspectives of New Music* 5 (1966): 39.

line (“Leben und Traum vom Leben plötzlich ist alles aus”), a phrase crucial to the narrative, is framed by the repeated first and fourth lines (“Über die Grenzen des All blicktest du sinnend hinaus”), which in turn reach out to the first and fifth texts. “Über die Grenzen” stands as a heightened image of the soul as otherworldly state beyond the borders of the physical, known universe. In spite of the apparent breakdown in the third line, the ultimate effect of the third text is to draw the poet deeper within his own soul.

The tears that flow in the fifth text, the ability to cry, and the release of unfathomable, measureless sorrow, are the voice of the poet, the final goal for Berg of the narrative process. From the first to the second text, snowstorms become rain, beauty and peace triumph, and woman is introduced. She toys with the soul in the third text, but rejects it in favor of life. In life, however, she finds a void, the “nothing” of the fourth text; the male poet experiences this with her, sharing the agony of her conflict, accepting what he can of her feminine soul. In the fifth text he finds peace, a peace that is possible because sorrow has been experienced. In the act of releasing sorrow he is most alone, secluded from all humanity, but at the same time he has found the deepest recesses of his soul and union with nature. In this symmetrical yet narrative arrangement Berg has made the texts his own. In his dual presentation the soul becomes the “significant season,” beyond temporal (and hence earthly) association, engendered in symmetrical form. He reaches his goal, however, through the experience of pain—the brushing with reality—a temporal, formless process.

### *The Fünf Orchesterlieder*

Berg’s *Altenberg Lieder*, unquestionably the most important of his early works, is constructed with a highly elaborate thematic scheme that determines the organization of individual songs as well as the integration of the cycle as a whole. Certain themes or chords are used in more than one song, and five of these, all earlier identified by Mark DeVoto,<sup>60</sup> are isolated here for consideration (A–E in Ex. 1). A sixth “theme” identified by both DeVoto and Douglas Jarman,<sup>61</sup> based on a rapidly repeated single note, is also included (designated “X” in Ex. 1). Not only does the recurrence of themes in Example 1 evince a

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 40. DeVoto’s Greek symbols are replaced here by the letters A to E.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–55; and Douglas Jarman, *The Music of Alban Berg* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 149.

## Example 1

Berg, *Altenberg Lieder*, op. 4

A songs I, II, V

B songs I, (III), IV, V

C songs I, V

D songs I, V

E songs III, V

X songs I, II

remarkable sense of symmetry, but there is a strong correlation with the distribution of poetic themes as well (see Fig. 3). The primary symmetry involves the two outer songs; themes A, B, C, and D appear in these two songs, as do the soul, snow, melancholy/sorrow, and peace in the texts. Two of the themes, C and D, are present in these two songs only, while two others, A and B, embrace much more of the cycle. Nature appears most prominently in songs I, II, and V, and this could correlate to theme A, which occurs in the same three songs.

The image of the soul—the feminine soul of which Altenberg saw himself as protector—pervades the whole cycle, as does theme B. Just as the soul moves through certain transformations, partly in relation to a feminine influence, theme B undergoes different permutations and establishes itself in song V as the predominant theme. These permutations can be based exactly on the prototype, as in the variant appearing in the last vocal line of song I,<sup>62</sup> or they can be similar but

<sup>62</sup> In Example 2, a and b are given in Nicholas Chadwick, “Thematic Integration in Berg’s Altenberg Songs,” *The Music Review* 29 (1968): 301.





Voto points out, seems much more genuinely harmonic than the others,<sup>66</sup> becoming almost choralelike in the measures immediately following the final vocal phrase. Here Berg uses theme B (Ex. 2d) as the chorale melody in a presentation similar to both the final vocal phrase of song I (Ex. 2b) and the distorted version from song III, although it lacks its final E (Ex. 2c). The harmony in this song, while not subscribing to any traditional scheme, serves a purpose similar to Altenberg's Anita, who creates poetic harmony in her surroundings.

In the first song the solo voice does not project above the orchestral texture as a predominant force, but instead emerges quietly as though it were another orchestral instrument, without text, before the first word "Seele" (Ex. 3). By preceding the introduction of the feminine

### Example 3

Berg, *Altenberg Lieder*, op. 4, song I, mm. 20–22



\*) Gesungener Stimmton mit leicht geschlossenen Lippen (ppp!)

\*\*) Gesungener Stimmton mit offenem Mund (pp!)

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soul in this manner, Berg appears to be advancing another aspect of feminization or gender blending, one which had a precedent in a literary source well known to him. Goethe was an early favorite among writers admired by Berg. In describing music making in his works, Goethe gives the piano accompaniment role to women but associates the solo voice and solo instruments such as flute or violin with men. But he reverses these roles in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, for example, where soloists are regarded as accompaniment to the primary feminine piano part.<sup>67</sup> In the literary conception of songwriting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this reversal would allow another level of gender mixture to be added to that

<sup>66</sup> DeVoto, "Some Notes on the Unknown *Altenberg Lieder*," 61.

<sup>67</sup> Steven R. Huff, "Lotte's Klavier: A Resounding Symbol in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*," *The Germanic Review* 59, no. 2 (1984): 43–48.

## Example 4

Berg, *Altenberg Lieder*, op. 4, song V, mm. 51–55

Ganz langsam 55

The musical score consists of the following parts and markings:

- 1. Solo:** Starts with *mit Dpf.* and *p > ppp*. Ends with *pppp*.
- VI. I:** Starts with *mit Dpf.* and *p > ppp*. Ends with *pppp*.
- d. übr. (Violins):** Rests.
- VI. II:** Starts with *(pizz.)* and *pp mit Dpf.*
- 1. Solo (Bass):** Starts with *p* and *mit Dpf.*. Ends with *pppp*.
- Br. 2. Solo (Bass):** Starts with *p* and *mit Dpf.*. Ends with *pppp*.
- d. übr. (Basses):** Rests.
- Vcl. div. 1.:** Melodic line with dynamics *p* and *pppp*.
- Vcl. div. 2.:** Melodic line with dynamics *p* and *pppp*.
- Vcl. div. 3.:** Melodic line with dynamics *p* and *pppp*.
- Vcl. div. 4.:** Melodic line with dynamics *p* and *pppp*.
- Vcl. div. 5.:** Melodic line with *Solo m. Dpf.* and dynamics *p* and *pppp*.

*Fine*

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already implicit in many texts.<sup>68</sup> The feminine role of the accompaniment was heightened through its harmonizing and unifying function, and by extension (as Mahler in particular realized) the sensuality of the accompaniment could be enhanced through orchestration.

The instrument-like voice part does not enter until measure 20, allowing the work to be contextualized by a tone of rich orchestration. For Berg, orchestral depth and color as well as *Klangfarbenmelodie* may very well have been comparable to Klimt's color and decorative design. Orchestral color could provide an aural sensuality bordering on the erotic, a profusion of detail, stretching the ear as Klimt's designs enlarge the eye, making possible the fusion of different images (or themes) in a complex of simultaneity. The visual counterpart of this technique can be found in Klimt's *The Kiss* (1907/8), in which the garments of the embracing pair seem to blend together but nevertheless remain distinct through the rectangular design used in the man's clothes and the circles used in the woman's. The two of them are engulfed in a third design that favors the feminine shape and suggests a fusion that leans toward femininity. In the complex density of the instrumental introduction to song I, with its four primary themes and underlying chords in the piano, Berg seems to achieve a similar end.

The blurring of the distinction between solo and orchestra or melody and harmony in measures 20–22 of song I (Ex. 3) becomes a primary image elsewhere in the work. The presentation of theme B in a harmonic context in measures 47–49 of song V (Ex. 2d) anticipates its more striking treatment as the final chord of the song, which enters in solo violin 1 (G), solo violin 2 (A<sup>b</sup>), solo viola 1 (B<sup>b</sup>), solo viola 2 (D<sup>b</sup>) and solo cello (E), and is held to the end of the piece (Ex. 4). Symmetry in song V is achieved by the placement of theme B at both the beginning and the end. In the final statement of this theme, the most persistent of the entire work, now integrated into the harmonic fabric, there lies the fulfillment of a distinctly romantic image. Berg's engendering of theme into harmony at the end of the work, also evident in the final six measures of song III, travels a step further in the transference of feminine characteristics into the poetic/musical process, and fuses the ultimate goal of the music with that of the text.

Dalhousie University

<sup>68</sup> See chapter 3, "The Feminine as the Crux of Value," in Michael G. Cooke, *Acts of Inclusion: Studies Bearing on an Elementary Theory of Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 121–83.

APPENDIX A  
 Texte auf Ansichtskarten

Rokoko

In dieser Zeit lebten Menschen, die vom Leben nicht wußten, wie es wirklich und einfach ist!

Sie lebten in einem "falschen Märchenlande" --.

Denn das "echte Märchenland" ist die Romantik des Kartoffelfeldes in einer wirklichen Mondnacht! Solange die menschlich-kindischen Herzen noch nicht reif sind für die ernste "Romantik der Natur selbst", schaffen sie sich "kindische Spielereien"! Aber diese "Verirrten" waren wenigstens "Wege-Sucher", die sich nur kindisch verirrtten! Das wollen wir ihnen also zugute halten!

Frau E . . . R . . . . .

Schaffst du denn Symphonien, weibliches Beethoven-Antlitz?!?

Du bist ein Weib, kannst dich nicht austönen!

Nicht dich erlösen!

Ein Spiegelbild der Welt kannst du nicht sein!

Zur Tagestat zu groß, zur ewigen zu klein!

So bleibst du Weib und kannst's dennoch nicht sein!!

Fräulein Barbara von G.

"Nichts ist gekommen, nichts wird kommen für meine Seele ---.

Ich habe gewartet, gewartet, oh, gewartet --.

Die Tage werden dahinschleichen --.

Und umsonst wehen meine aschblonden seidenen Haare um mein bleiches Antlitz  
 ---."

Über die Grenzen des All blicktest du sinnend hinaus;

Hattest nie Sorge um Hof und Haus!

Leben und Traum vom Leben --- plötzlich ist alles aus ---.

Über die Grenzen des All blickst du noch sinnend hinaus --!

Nach Jahren kommt eine unaussprechliche Dankbarkeit in uns für die Frau, die wir "unglücklich liebten" ---. Aus Bürgern des strengen Tages machte sie uns nämlich zu weltentrückten Poeten, erschloß uns unseres eigenen Herzens Tiefen, erhöhte uns zu "inneren tragischen Helden"! Unsere Tränen gab sie uns, bannte das leere Lächeln! Sie sei also bedankt und gepriesen!

Schneesturm

Seele, wie bist du schöner, tiefer, nach Schneestürmen ---.

Auch du hast sie, gleich der Natur ---.

Und über beiden liegt noch ein trüber Hauch, wenn das Gewölk sich schon verzog!

Bloß ein Feld voll Zwiebeln ---.

Stillt es die Not dessen, der es bebaut,

Stimmt es andächtig den, der es nur als Künstler beschaut!

Gräber von berühmten Toten sollen uns streng ermahnen, den Tag und die Stunde wertvoll zu gestalten, da wir noch sind --!

Helle Wolken und schwarze Bäume!  
Für Kinder zum Schrecken, Gespenster!  
Für Dichter zum Weinen!

Und der gewöhnliche Mensch geht dran gelassen vorüber, sagt: "Das wäre etwas für Kinder zum Schrecken, und für Dichter zum Weinen!["]

### Wald im Winter

Ein kleines Mädel sagte: "Onkel, aber, nicht wahr, hinten ist die böse Hexe, die die Kinder stiehlt?!" – Ich sagte: "Natürlich"; und bat den friedevollen Wald um Entschuldigung – – –. Gewisse Menschen wollen eben keinen Frieden – – –. Sie suchen selbst im Wald die böse Hexe, die die Kinder stiehlt – – –. Sonst hat er für sie gar keinen Reiz!

### Weg im Winter

Geliebter verträumter verschneiter Weg! Ging ich hier mit Anita?!? Oder träumte ich nur, daß ich hier mit ihr gehen möchte?! Fußspuren im Schnee, ihr paßt nicht zu Anitas geliebten Schuhen –.

Hie und da rauschen Schneeklumpen zur Erde. Wie wenn der Frühling es versuchte, den Winter bereits abzuschütteln!

"Das Betreten der Kulturen ist strengstens untersagt" – – –; man wird es dennoch ewig tun! Betreten, zertreten! –

Zaun, wie machst du die Landschaft melancholisch! Im Grenzenlosen etwas Abgegrenztes!

Hier ist Friede – – –. Hier weine ich mich aus über alles. Hier löst sich mein unermeßliches unfaßbares Leid, das meine Seele verbrennt. Siehe, hier sind keine Menschen, keine Ansiedlungen. Hier tropft Schnee leise in Wasserlachen – – –.

Hier suchte sie die ersten Blüten, und fand nichts. Und ich sagte zu ihr: "Diese gelbgrünen feuchten Rasenflecke, die der zerrinnende Schnee bloßlegt, sind schöner als Blumen – – –." Da sah sie hin und erkannte!

Hier bleibe stehen mit deiner geliebtesten Freundin, und belausche ihr Antlitz – – –! Fühlt sie dasselbe wie du, dann kannst du beruhigt mit ihr weiterschreiten, in die Gelände des Lebens!

Ich suchte eine Frau, die den Schnee wirklich liebte; und ich fand keine! Sie benützten nur den Schnee, für ihre Sheerns! –

Junge Ochsen auf der Weide. Einst im Sonnenbrande, ziehend am allzu schweren Gespanne, könnt ihr euch nicht mehr der kühlen Weide erinnern. Aber in eurem traurig-dummen Auge spiegelt sich alles, und kein Gram geht verloren in der gramvollen Welt – – –.

Margeritten im hohen Grase. Alles blüht und atmet Frieden! Auf dem Boden leben aber und sterben lautlos hunderttausend Insekten. Nur der Mensch erhebt seine Stimme und beklagt sein Schicksal. Kann er es ändern?! Ja. Er kann wenigstens weinen und schreien. Und falls er es nicht kann, tun es für ihn liebevoll die Dichter!

Manche Frauen würden nicht elende "Treubrecherinnen", "Ehebrecherinnen" werden, wenn sie stets imstande wären, an den Schätzen der friedevollen mysteriösen Natur ihre zerfahrenen Seelen wieder und immer wieder aufzurichten!

Natur und Frau sollten in gleicher Weise wirken, uns zu adeligen, all-verstehenden, sanftmütigen Weltgeschöpfen zu transformieren! Einer Frau diese geniale Aufgabe als süße Pflicht beibringen, heißt: sie glücklich machen!

Sahst du nach dem Gewitterregen den Wald?!?  
Alles rastet, blinkt und ist schöner als zuvor – –.  
Siehe, Frau, auch du brauchst Gewitterregen!

Portrait d'une jeune femme

“Je suis venue pour donner – – – prenez, prenez, prenez!!”

Cléo de Mérode

Unzerstörbares Antlitz; Zeit und Erlebnis versuchen es vergebens, in deinem edlen Erz sich einzugraben – – –!

Prinzessin Ruprecht von Bayern

“Und dein Antlitz ist die ‘Materie gewordene’ Seele selbst!!”

Kronprinzessin

Geboren, einem Kaiser Kinder zu gebären und zu Fürstlichkeiten zu erziehen im Leben! Aber der Dichter erschaut in dir dennoch nur die einfache Vollkommenheit ohne Zweck und Ziel!

Kronprinzessin Maria von Rumänien Glockenblumen

Umringt bist du von deinen Lieblingsblumen, hehre Frau! Aber du blickst und stehst nicht in Frühlingsfroheit, sondern ermüdet und enttäuscht. Vier allerherrlichsten Kindern gabst du das Leben, deine eigenen Kräfte, behieltest dennoch deine heilige Mädchengestalt bei! Das Altern hat dich nicht verändern können; deshalb blickst du erstaunt und wehmütig!!! Du gabst und gabst und kannst noch immer geben und um Dich herum altert die alltägliche Welt – – –!

Kaiserin Elisabeth von Österreich, Königin von Ungarn

Wohin, träumerische Frau, wandertest du, rastlos?!?

– “Weg von der Lüge!”

Kaiserin Elisabeth

Gott erschuf dich in Seiner tiefsten künstlerischen Liebe: zuerst, in der Jugend, wie man sich auszudrücken pflegt, ein wildes Füllen in Berg und Tal, mit wirren Locken; und späterhin alle Leiden tragend von enttäuschten Dichtern; das innere ewige Klagen, und das Erschauen, daß Gottes Reich noch nicht gekommen sei für Seinesgleichen.

Kaiserin-Elisabeth-Denkmal

Ich hätte dich umringt mit dunklen Legföhren, Rhododendronbüschen, Edelweiß, Speik, und allen Blüten der Bergalmen!

Ich hätte die Tiere der freien Berglüfte in silbernen Käfigen um dich herum gestellt – – –. Bergdohle und Murmeltier.

Aber man stelle dich in einen Garten, gepflegt und gehegt, und wider die freie heilige Natur!!!

Manöver: Feld-Telephon und Fernrohr

“Fern von der Schlacht, und dennoch mitten drinnen! So wie die Dichter!”

## Mein Lebensleitmotiv:

“Nie über einen Graben springen, eine Hürde, wenn man nicht ganz gesichert ist, hinüberzugelangen mit leichter Anmut!”

## APPENDIX B

## Berg's Arrangement of the Texts

- I. Seele, wie bist du schöner, tiefer, nach Schneestürmen.  
Auch du hast sie, gleich der Natur.  
Und über beiden liegt noch ein trüber Hauch, eh' das Gewölk sich verzog!
- II. Sahst du nach dem Gewitterregen den Wald?  
Alles rastet, blinkt und ist schöner als zuvor.  
Siehe, Fraue, auch du brauchst Gewitterregen!
- III. Über die Grenzen des All blicktest du sinnend hinaus;  
Hattest nie Sorge um Hof und Haus!  
Leben und Traum vom Leben plötzlich ist alles aus.  
Über die Grenzen des All blickst du noch sinnend hinaus!
- IV. Nichts ist gekommen, nichts wird kommen für meine Seele.  
Ich habe gewartet, gewartet, oh, gewartet!  
Die Tage werden dahinschleichen, und umsonst wehen meine aschblonden,  
seidenen Haare um mein bleiches Antlitz!
- V. Hier ist Friede. Hier weine ich mich aus über alles!  
Hier löst sich mein unfaßbares, unermößliches Leid, das mir die Seele  
verbrennt. . .  
Siehe, hier sind keine Menschen, keine Ansiedlungen.  
Hier ist Friede! Hier tropft Schnee leise in Wasserlachen.

## ABSTRACT

The importance of literature to Berg in the creation of his artistic world has generally been underestimated. Peter Altenberg was especially influential on the young Berg through their friendship, Berg's reading of Altenberg's works, and the relationship of Berg's future wife with both men. Not only is a full understanding of the Altenberg *Picture Postcard Texts* crucial to the interpretation of Berg's *Altenberg Lieder*, but Altenberg's peculiar approaches to literary autobiography and vision of the role of women provided a model for Berg for this and subsequent works. Berg extracted five short texts from Altenberg's full texts and rearranged them in a way that had special aesthetic and personal significance for himself. Important aspects of Berg's musical setting relate directly to his treatment of the texts.