

# 1 ‘...gathering the divine from the earthly ...’

## Ferdinand Avenarius and his significance for Anton Webern’s early settings of lyric poetry

SUSANNE RODE-BREYMANN

*Translated by Mary Whittall*

Writing to Hildegard Jone in August 1934, Anton Webern told her not to suppose that his choice of text was ‘a matter of indifference’ to him: that he had his ‘whole life long . . . demonstrated quite the opposite.’<sup>1</sup> Just as at that date Webern was steeped in the poetry of Hildegard Jone, so at various times in the past he had immersed himself in that of Richard Dehmel, Stefan George, Rainer Maria Rilke, Karl Kraus and Georg Trakl, and drawn from it the intuition for the stages of his *œuvre* as a vocal composer. At each stage he had taken the verses of the poet in question literally: ‘that is, as a concrete utterance of the human soul’s understanding of itself and the world.’<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Schoenberg dated 4 December 1919 he had summed up his view of the relationship between life and art in the following terms: ‘I want to express only what fulfils me, unceasingly, all the days of my life. I do not want anything else.’<sup>3</sup> In the light of that confession, we must approach the texts set by Webern with appropriate seriousness. Lyric poetry was undoubtedly one of the things that fulfilled Webern, and his preoccupation with the verse of individual poets should not be treated as simplistically as it sometimes is.

<sup>1</sup> Letter of 8 August 1934 in *Webern: Letters to Hildegard Jone and Josef Humplik*, ed. Josef Polnauer, trans. Cornelius Cardew (Bryn Mawr: Theodore Presser, 1967), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Reinhard Gerlach, ‘Die Dehmel-Lieder von Anton Webern. Musik und Sprache im Übergang zur Atonalität’, in *Jahrbuch des Staatlichen Instituts für Musikforschung Preußischer Kulturbesitz 1970* (Berlin, 1971), pp. 45–100 (p. 45).

<sup>3</sup> Typescript in the Stadt- und Landesbibliothek Wien, Musiksammlung.

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Webern scholars were slow in turning their attention to the recurrent themes in Webern's choice of texts, although they are 'the most direct source of information about his compulsion to self-expression'.<sup>4</sup> Once Reinhard Gerlach and Elmar Budde had published their findings about the composer's Dehmel and George 'phases' respectively, in the early 1970s,<sup>5</sup> study of the other poets who were important to him began to gather momentum, yet still his earliest songs were left virtually untouched. In the early 1980s Albrecht Dümmling addressed the question of the choice of themes in Webern's songs in the period 1906–12, but the earliest phase in which Webern displayed a marked affinity for the lyric poetry of one particular poet – the poet, editor and educationalist Ferdinand Avenarius – has received only the most general treatment, with the sole exception of Robert Schollum's study of the stylistic elements of Webern's early songs.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1899 and 1904 Webern set seven poems by Ferdinand Avenarius, all from his collection *Stimmen und Bilder: neue Gedichte*, published in 1897. It was Avenarius's second volume and apart from pieces in ballad style consists mainly of poems concerned with the changing moods of nature – and those of human life to a lesser extent – during the cycle of the year. The following settings date from Webern's days as a schoolboy at the Bundesgymnasium in Klagenfurt:

'Vorfrühling' ('Leise tritt auf . . .')

Klagenfurt, 1899; instrumental accompaniment Klagenfurt,  
 12 January 1900

published posthumously in *Drei Gedichte für Gesang und Klavier*

'Wolkennacht' ('Nacht, dein Zauberschleier . . .')

Klagenfurt, 1900

MS, forty-three bars: complete setting

<sup>4</sup> Albrecht Dümmling, "'Dies ist ein Lied für dich allein.'" Zu einigen Motiven von Weberns Textwahl', in *Musik-Konzepte, Sonderband Anton Webern I* (Munich, 1983), pp. 251–61 (p. 252).

<sup>5</sup> Reinhard Gerlach, 'Die Dehmel-Lieder', and Elmar Budde, *Anton Weberns Lieder op.3: Untersuchungen zur frühen Atonalität bei Webern*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft, Band 9 (Wiesbaden, 1971).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Schollum, 'Stilistische Elemente der frühen Webern-Lieder', in *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Musik, Beiträge 1972/73: Webern-Kongress* (Kassel, 1973), pp. 127–34.

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‘Vorfrühling II’ (‘Doch schwer hinschnaubend ...’)

[1900]

MS, twenty-six bars: incomplete pencil draft

‘Wehmut’ (‘Darf ich einer Blume still ...’)

Preglhof, 15 July 1901

MS, twenty-three bars: complete setting

and these from his early days at university:

‘Gebet’ (‘Ertrage du’s ...’)

Preglhof, 1903

published posthumously in *3 Lieder nach Gedichten von Ferdinand Avenarius*

‘Freunde’ (‘Schmerzen und Freuden ...’)

[Vienna], 6 January 1904

published posthumously in *3 Lieder nach Gedichten von Ferdinand Avenarius*

‘Gefunden’ (‘Nun wir uns lieben ...’)

[Vienna or Preglhof], 5 April 1904

published posthumously in *3 Lieder nach Gedichten von Ferdinand Avenarius*.

Webern’s matriculation in 1902 must have been a major reason for the interval between the fourth song and the rest, but it did not prevent his continuing to immerse himself in the poetry of Avenarius. He received another volume, *Lebe*, on his birthday in 1901 – ‘von Mitzi zum Geb. 1901’, according to the inscription in his copy.<sup>7</sup> Avenarius’s aim, in *Lebe* (*Live!*, in the imperative mood), was to achieve an overreaching, large-scale verse form by relating the individual poems to each other – that is, by creating an inner drama. On 8 December 1901 Webern commented enthusiastically to his cousin Ernst Diez that the volume was ‘really very beautiful’, and that now he knew ‘all the poems of Avenarius’.

<sup>7</sup> Webern’s copy of this collection resides in the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel. I wish especially to thank the Stiftung for a research stipend in 1989 which made my work on the present subject possible, as well as for their helpfulness and generosity during my stay there.

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Whether he really knew them all or not must remain an open question. But from the library in his Nachlaß, small as it was, and from entries in his notebooks, it is certain that in addition to *Stimmen und Bilder*<sup>8</sup> and *Lebe*<sup>9</sup> he owned copies of *Die Kinder von Wohldorf*<sup>10</sup> and *Wandern und Werden*,<sup>11</sup> and that he was very familiar with the work of Avenarius. Besides the settings, further evidence of this is given by the fact that he copied three poems from *Wandern und Werden* into his notebook at the end of 1899.<sup>12</sup>

**'Waldsee'**

Dich lieb ich, Waldsee,  
 Nachts, wenn ihr Haupt  
 Schlummernd die Weiden neigen,  
 Wenn über dich leise  
 Das Ried herflüstert,  
 Und, grüne Lichtlein,  
 Erglommend, verlöschend,  
 Glühkäfer über dich hinzittern.

Von einer Seele hört ich, die einst  
 Ihr Liebesweh  
 In deiner Tiefe begrub —  
 Im Vollmondscheine  
 Steige sie auf  
 Und lausche traurig  
 Den Stimmen im Schilf.

Doch du, ins Auge  
 Siehst du dem befreundet Himmel,  
 Und seiner Lichter  
 Schwankende Bilder  
 Wiegest du begütigend.

**'Woodland lake'**

I love you, woodland lake,  
 At night, when the willows  
 Bow their heads in slumber,  
 When the rushes whisper  
 Softly across you,  
 And the little green lights —  
 Now glinting, now dark —  
 Of fireflies tremble above you.

I have heard of one who buried  
 Her broken heart  
 In your depths.  
 At full moon, they say,  
 She rises again  
 And listens sorrowfully  
 To the voices in the reeds.

But you look up  
 Into the eyes of your friend, the sky,  
 And rock  
 His lights' wavering images  
 In your kindly cradle.

– from the portion of *Erstes Wandern* with which Avenarius opened his second collection

<sup>8</sup> From *Neue Gedichte* (Florence/Leipzig, 1897).

<sup>9</sup> From *Eine Dichtung* (Leipzig, 1894).

<sup>10</sup> (Dresden, 1886.)

<sup>11</sup> From *Erste Gedichte* (Dresden, 1881).

<sup>12</sup> Diary entries will be identified by the numbers given on the microfilm in the Paul Sacher Stiftung (in this case, PSS 210103–5).

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‘Sonnenuntergang’

Ganz still  
 Sinkt die Sonne dem Ozean zu.  
 Leise vor sich hin  
 Weinen Wellen und Wind,  
 Ganz leise, die Sterbende  
 Nicht zu betrüben durch ihren Schmerz.  
 Vom fern hin dämmernden Küstenland  
 Summen die Glocken.  
 Sie aber, die Königin,  
 In Thränenschönheit lächelt sie  
 Und täuscht in Liebe  
 Weg über den letzten Augenblick . . .  
 Gedankenlos  
 Spielt eine Weile die Welt mit der Gütigen  
 Goldenem Totengeschenk.  
 Langsam erkennt sie, was geschah —  
 Der Wind klagt auf,  
 Der Himmel droben, der verlassene,  
 Weithin flammt er mit Totenleuchten,  
 Und der scheue Erbe Mond  
 Schleicht in das verödete Reich.

‘Sunset’

Quite silently  
 The sun sinks towards the ocean.  
 Softly, to themselves,  
 The waves and wind weep,  
 Quite softly, So that their pain  
 Does not distress her as she dies.  
 From along the coast, fading  
 distantly in the twilight,  
 Comes the hum of bells.  
 But she, the queen,  
 Smiles in the beauty of tears,  
 And disguises  
 The last moment in love . . .  
 Unthinking,  
 The world plays a while  
 with the benevolent light’s  
 Golden bequest.  
 Slowly it understands what has happened —  
 The wind moans,  
 The widowed sky above  
 Is aflame with funeral torches,  
 And the moon, shy inheritor,  
 Creeps into the desolate kingdom.

— from the second part of the collection, entitled *Blätter Meer*

‘Auf einem Kirchhof’

Auf den ernsten Trauerweiden  
 Weilt des Mondes Gruß,  
 Wie auf stillen Menschenleiden  
 Einer Mutter Kuß.  
  
 Wachend ist im weichen Lenz  
 Blütenduft allein —  
 Können Blumen denn und Kränze  
 Schmerzeszeichen sein?  
  
 Gleite dunkel, Selbstvergessen,  
 Über mein Gemüt,  
 Wie der Schatten der Zypressen  
 Über Gräber zieht!

‘In a churchyard’

The moonlight rests  
 Upon the sombre weeping willows,  
 With a greeting like a mother’s kiss  
 On silent human sorrow.  
  
 Nothing is awake in the soft spring  
 But the scent of blossoms —  
 Can flowers and garlands  
 Be signs of suffering?  
  
 Let self-forgetting glide darkly  
 Over my spirit,  
 As the shadow of the cypresses  
 Steals across the graves!

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– from the third section of the book *Zweites Wandern*

The fact that Webern wrote out his copies of the three texts in the order in which they appear in the printed volume suggests that the act of copying was a kind of record of his experience, made at the moment of reading them, and reflecting his fascination.

Ferdinand Avenarius (1856–1923) was Richard Wagner’s nephew, being the son of his younger half-sister, Cäcilie Geyer-Avenarius. Viewed as a whole, his literary work amounted to rather more than the volumes of his own verse, for he also compiled anthologies of the verse of others. The correspondence between those collections and the poetry set to music by Webern up to 1904 is striking. Apart from Friedrich Nietzsche, all the poets (Hans Böhm, Matthias Claudius, Richard Dehmel, Gustav Falke, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Martin Greif, Detlev von Liliencron, Theodor Storm, Ludwig Uhland, Wilhelm Weigand) are to be found in one, and in some cases both, of Avenarius’s anthologies, the *Hausbuch Deutscher Lyrik*,<sup>13</sup> which groups atmospheric pieces by topics such as human life, times of day and seasons of the year, and the *Balladenbuch*.<sup>14</sup> Webern could even have taken the texts of ‘Hochsommernacht’ (Martin Greif) and ‘Heimgang in der Frühe’ (Detlev von Liliencron) directly from the *Hausbuch*,<sup>15</sup> and ‘Siegfrieds Schwert’ (Ludwig Uhland) is to be found in the *Balladenbuch*.<sup>16</sup> The significance of the coincidence is diminished, admittedly, by the observation that this spectrum of poets occupied the middle ground of popular poetry around 1900, and would have been found in countless other anthologies.

Lyric poetry at the turn of the century was one of the most important of the cultural movements that offered an alternative to Naturalism, and was the product of a society whose traditional values and ways of thought were beginning to disintegrate. Naturalism’s interest in general and social

<sup>13</sup> Collected by Ferdinand Avenarius with drawings by Fritz Philip Schmidt (Munich: Kunstwart, 1903).

<sup>14</sup> (Munich: Kunstwart, 1907.)

<sup>15</sup> These poems are found on pp. 43 and 124 respectively.

<sup>16</sup> On p. 140. [This work is now known not to have been written by Webern, but arranged by him: see Martin Hoyer, ‘Neues zu Anton Weberns frühen Liedern’ (bibliography, p. 338).—Ed.]

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questions was countered by an interest in details, the particular moment and the nuance, and by concern for what was subjective, inward and conditioned by emotion. For all of those things lyric verse was the most suitable literary genre, and in consequence reading poetry was probably more widespread among the middle classes than at any time before or since.

This was the world in which Webern grew up, wrote down in his notebooks the texts of songs which had made an impression on him (such as Eduard Mörike’s poems ‘Auf das Grab von Schillers Mutter’, ‘Neue Liebe’, ‘Gesang Weylas’ and ‘Verborgenheit’) and copied out poems with which he identified. In October 1901 he copied three poems by Hermann Ubell,<sup>17</sup> who was born in Graz in 1876.

‘Jenseits allen Harms’

Weiß durch weiße Schleier  
 Blickt der Wintertag.  
 Die Pappeln um den Weiher  
 Stehn in tiefem Schlaf.

Stille mich umfängt  
 Und wiegt mich, weichen Arms  
 Meine Seele hängt  
 Jenseits allen Harms.

‘Beyond the reach of harm’

White, the winter’s day  
 Peers through a white veil.  
 The poplars stand around the pond,  
 Sunk in sleep.

Stillness embraces me  
 And cradles me in soft arms.  
 My soul rests  
 Beyond the reach of harm.

‘Die Fahrt der Todten’

Es fuhr ein kalter Wind in meinen Garten,  
 Der seine Blumen fromm zur  
 Sonne wandte:  
 Ein blauer Schatten fiel in meinen Garten,  
 Und früher war doch unbewegte  
 Klarheit . . .

Zum hohen Erker steig ich müd’ empor  
 Und lausche in die dunkle, weiche  
 Dämmerung,  
 Die zögernd niedergleitet; schläfrig tickt  
 Die Stutzuhr am Kaminsims;  
 freundlich lädt  
 Der alte Lehnstuhl in die weiten Arme . . .

‘Voyage of the Dead’

A cold wind has blown across my garden,  
 Which had turned its flowers  
 piously to face the sun:  
 A blue shadow has fallen across my garden,  
 Yet earlier all was clear and still . . .

Wearily I climb up to my high oriel  
 And listen out into the dark, soft  
 twilight  
 Stealing hesitantly down; the clock  
 on the mantelpiece  
 Ticks sleepily; the old chair  
 holds out its arms in welcome . . .

<sup>17</sup> PSS 210045–7.

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... Und langsam schifft sich meine Seele ein, Und segelt – o der stillen weißen Segel – über	... And slowly my soul embarks And sails – oh, the still, white sail – over
Das sonnenhelle, hohe Meer der Träume. Lieblich	The sunbright, high seas of dreams. The lovely
Blinken die vielen Wellen ... Mich umkreist Ein Kranz von süßen Stimmen, die so zärtlich Wie Perlen und wie dünnes Silber klingen ...	Wink of countless waves ... A garland of sweet voices Circles round me, As delicate as pearls and tinkling like thin silver ...
Im blauen Fernen dämmern Palmeninseln, Von denen uns die Brise warme Düfte Herüberathmet ... Schmale grüne Reiher Ziehn uns zu Häupten ihre lichten Kreise ...	Palm islands down in the distance, Sending us the breath of warm aromas On the breeze ... Slender green herons Draw their light circles above our heads ...
Selig, mit leisem Singen, landen wir Im ruhevollen Port der sanften Dinge ...	Blessed, and singing softly, we land In the peaceful haven of gentle things ...

### 'Jugend'

Nimm dein Geschick auf dich und sei dein eigener Stern  
Schreite den Pfad deiner Wahl durch das Dickicht der Nacht.  
Halte die Brut der Gespenster gebärenden Stille dir fern  
Bis aus den Wipfeln der blauende Morgen dir lacht!

O dann hülle den Leib in den strahlenden Panzer des Tags,  
Sonnenumflossen, ein Sieger vom Scheitel bis zum Zeh,  
Lausche der sehrenden Geige des Fauns am Raine des Hags,  
Schmiege den Arm um den Elfenbeinrücken der Nymphen im See ...

### 'Youth'

Take your fate upon yourself and be your own star.  
Walk the path of your choice through the thicket of night.  
Banish the brood of the ghost-bearing silence  
Till from out the treetops the breaking day laughs at you!



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‘ . . . GATHERING THE DIVINE FROM THE EARTHLY . . . ’

Then, oh then clothe your limbs in day’s glowing armour,  
 Bathed in sunlight, a victor from head to foot,  
 List to the yearning violin of the faun at the grove’s edge,  
 Wreathe your arms round the ivory backs of the nymphs in the lake . . .

While the poems by Mörike that Webern copied can be said to be typical of the taste of the time, as also reflected by Avenarius’s anthologies, Ubell was far from popular or well known, and it is somewhat surprising to find his poems in Webern’s notebooks. How did Webern come across them? The question is quite easily answered: the trail leads straight to his closest boyhood friend, his cousin Ernst Diez (1876–1961), seven years his senior.

Diez was to become a distinguished scholar in the field of Oriental art, but he was still a student of art history in Graz during Webern’s last years at school in Klagenfurt. The cousins corresponded, and also saw each other during the summer holidays at the Preglhof or at the opera in Graz (where, for example, they saw Wagner’s *Tristan* at Easter in 1901). Hans Moldenhauer describes their correspondence aptly as ‘a constant exchange of their ideas in the cultural sphere’.<sup>18</sup> The picture Moldenhauer paints<sup>19</sup> does not include every facet of the exchange, however: in all likelihood Webern owed his acquaintance with the lyric poetry of Ubell to Diez, whose diary, begun in 1899,<sup>20</sup> contains poems by Ubell which are of a slightly earlier date than those copied by Webern. Just as this particular interest of Webern’s appears to have been inspired by Diez, so there seem to have been many other – non-musical – instances in their exchange of ideas where the initiative was taken by Diez. In musical matters, in particular their shared enthusiasm for Wagner, Webern was his cousin’s equal, in spite of the difference in their ages, but elsewhere he was the beneficiary in a variety of ways.

There can, for example, be no doubt that it was Diez who drew Nietzsche to his cousin’s attention, as a result of which Webern set Nietzsche’s poem ‘Heiter’ (‘Mein Herz ist wie ein See . . .’) in 1904. Diez filled a good ten pages of his diary in the summer of 1900 with quotations from Nietzsche, taken, interestingly enough, from a secondary source,

<sup>18</sup> Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer, *Anton von Webern: a Chronicle of his Life and Work* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1978), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38ff.

<sup>20</sup> The diary of Ernst Diez is also owned by the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel.

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Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's biography of her brother.<sup>21</sup> Not much later, in September 1901, quotations from *Also sprach Zarathustra* appear, with an entry in their midst recording the end of "Toni"'s visit. Diez would have told him about his interest in Nietzsche's conception of genius (which the quotations reflect), Nietzsche's attitude towards scientific attention to detail, Nietzsche's preference for a 'certain poetic recreation of spirits, events, characters'.<sup>22</sup> Last but not least, Nietzsche's opinions of Wagner's music and the Bayreuth Festival, to which Diez gave a lot of space, would have been one of the topics on which the cousins exchanged views.

The proof that Diez led the way and Webern followed is more concrete in the case of reading Nietzsche than in their appreciation of painting, but the pattern is likely to have been similar, and once again Hermann Ubell crops up. Ubell, custodian and director of the Ober-österreichischen Landesmuseum in Linz from 1903 until 1937, had played an important role in Graz during the years of Diez's art history study there, as founder of the Kunsthistorische Gesellschaft Graz and co-editor of the *Grazer Kunst*, which Webern indicated as the source for the three poems by Ubell that he copied into his notebook.<sup>23</sup>

Ubell lectured on a variety of subjects to the Kunsthistorische Gesellschaft Graz: for example, a talk on Hans Marées on 6 March 1900 and another on Benvenuto Cellini on 31 October of the same year were announced in the *Grazer Tagespost*.<sup>24</sup> The latter was given as part of the proceedings at the society's Annual General Meeting, and the *Grazer Tagespost* carried a report on 2 November 1900, including the following: 'Lectures on the history of art in more recent times were given by ... Herr Dr H. Ubell on ... Benvenuto Cellini and Böcklin (posthumous), [and] by Herr Curator E. Diez on Velasquez.'<sup>25</sup>

- <sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, *Das Leben Friedrich Nietzsches* (Leipzig, 1897). Concerning Webern's introduction to Nietzsche, see Susanne Rode, "'Wagner und die Folgen.'" Zur Nietzsche-Wagner-Rezeption bei Alban Berg und Anton von Webern', in *Der Fall Wagner. Ursprünge und Folgen von Nietzsches Wagner-Kritik*, Band 11 of the Thurnauer Schriften zum Musiktheater (Laaber: Thomas Steiert, 1991), pp. 265–92.
- <sup>22</sup> From Ernst Diez's diary.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Jenseits allen Harms' and 'Die Fahrt der Todten' were also published in Ubell's collection *Der Stundenreigen* (Vienna, 1903), on pp. 40 and 4 respectively.
- <sup>24</sup> *Grazer Tagespost* (1900), nos. 64 and 279 respectively.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 294.