

MODERN DRAMATISTS

GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST DRAMA Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser

Renate Benson



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Editors' Preface

The *Macmillan Modern Dramatists* is an international series of introductions to major and significant nineteenth- and twentieth-century dramatists, movements and new forms of drama in Europe, Great Britain, America and new nations such as Nigeria and Trinidad. Besides new studies of great and influential dramatists of the past, the series includes volumes on contemporary authors, recent trends in the theatre and on many dramatists, such as writers of farce, who have created theatre 'classics' while being neglected by literary criticism. The volumes in the series devoted to individual dramatists include a biography, a survey of the plays, and detailed analysis of the most significant plays, along with discussion, where relevant, of the political, social, historical and theatrical context. The authors of the volumes, who are involved with theatre as playwrights, directors, actors, teachers and critics, are concerned with the plays as theatre and discuss such matters as performance, character interpretation and staging, along with themes and contexts.

BRUCE KING
ADELE KING

Abbreviations and Conventions

For references to *Seven Plays by Ernst Toller*, E. Toller, H. Kesten and M. Baker Eddy (eds) (London: The Bodley Head, 1935), the abbreviation S.P. has been used. For references to *Ernst Toller, Gesammelte Werke/Kommentar und Materialien*, vols 1–6, John M. Spalek and W. Frühwald (eds) (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1978–79), the abbreviation T. plus volume and page number has been used. (The translations from this edition are my own.)

For references to *Five Plays, Georg Kaiser*, trans. B. J. Kenworthy, R. Last and J. M. Ritchie (London: Calder and Boyars, 1971) the abbreviation F.P. has been used. For references to *Georg Kaiser, Werke*, vols 1–6, W. Huder (ed.) (Frankfurt/M.: Propyläen Verlag, 1970–72), the abbreviation K. plus volume and page number has been used. (The translations from this edition are my own.)

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1

Expressionism

They did not look.

They saw.

They did not photograph.

They had visions.¹

While critics still are not certain when the term 'expressionism' was first used, there is a general consensus that the movement known as Expressionism first manifested itself in Fine Art. A convenient date to mark the birth of Expressionism is 1905 for in that year a Paris exhibition brought together such painters as Matisse, Dufy, Derain and Rouault who were at once labelled *Les Fauves* ('The Wild Beasts') by the dismayed public and critics alike, because of the new and unconventional ways in which these artists used colour and form. In the same year in Dresden, Germany, a group of painters founded *Die Brücke* (The Bridge); among them were Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff and Heckel. These artists saw themselves, like the Fauvists, as enemies of conventional bourgeois art, and as prophets and

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creators of new values. They sought not mimesis but expression of a new vitalist feeling, the *élan vital*, and of their personal vision of the world. While Impressionism may be said to represent a subjective rendering of the visible world, Expressionism is basically the subjective expression of an inner world (vision); in representing his personal reality the artist has to free himself from all academic rules and traditional aesthetic concepts (especially traditional norms of beauty). The experience of the reality must be 'immediate' and 'genuine'; consequently the artist's *Ego* becomes a primary element in his work. While Expressionism manifested itself in many countries, it has come to be associated most closely with German art, literature, music (Schönberg), architecture (Gropius and the Bauhaus) and film (Wiene's *Das kabinett des Dr. Caligari*; Murnau's *Nosferatu*; Lang's *Metropolis*).

In 1911 *Die Brücke* moved to Berlin which by then had begun to supplant Paris as the capital of art. In their paintings the *Brücke* artists expressed ecstatically (through the use of bright, contrasting colours and new shapes) their vision of nature (animals, flowers, the sea) and the basic primitive joys of human nature associated especially with dance, music and eroticism. Their many religious paintings sprung from an inherent belief in the goodness of human nature, and the Christ figure became its ideal representative. But, as can be seen in Kirchner's *Strassen* ('Street Scenes'), 1913–23, they also reflected in their work a progressively sinister vision of a dehumanised and self-destructive world.

A second Expressionist group, *Der Blaue Reiter* ('The Blue Rider'), was founded in Munich in 1911 by Kandinsky, Marc, Macke, Klee and Jawlensky. Their aim was to revitalise art by tapping its primitive origins and in doing so they emphasised abstractionism (Kandinsky created his

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first abstract work in 1910); they also stressed the role of the artist as creator bound only by an inner imperative, and they insisted on the necessity of relating the arts to each other in a common synaesthesia. Kandinsky, who outlines these ideas in his influential treatise *Über das Geistige in der Kunst (On the Spiritual in Art)*, 1912, was a close friend of Schönberg, and many of Kandinsky's paintings were called *Improvisation* or *Komposition* to draw attention to the fact that he wished to express musical dynamics through colours. Like *Die Brücke*, *Der Blaue Reiter* ceased to exist when the war broke out.

In German literature van Hoddiss' 1910 poem 'Weltende' ('End of the World') is one of the earliest examples of Expressionism:

The bourgeois' hat flies off his pointed head,
the air re-echoes with a screaming sound.
Tilers plunge from roofs and hit the ground,
and seas are rising round the coasts (you read).

The storm is here, crushed dams no longer hold,
the savage seas come inland with a hop.
The greater part of people have a cold.
Off bridges everywhere the railroads drop.²

The poem combines two features of early literary Expressionism: its form is dominated by a series of seemingly unconnected and random images and, secondly, it is apocalyptic in its denunciation of the bourgeoisie and in its prophecy of imminent doom. Many of the new generation of German artists shared this apocalypticism which arose out of what Kandinsky called *Existentielle Angst* (Existential Fear); the world had become transparent, man was naked with nothing to cling to for support except his own *Ego*. The

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influence of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Darwin and Freud can be traced in nearly all these writers.

Heym's poems 'Umbra Vitae', 'Die Dämonen der Städte' ('The Demons of the Cities'), 'Morgue', 'Und die Hörner des Sommers verstummten' ('And the horns of the summer fell silent'), Werfel's 'Fremde sind wir auf Erden alle' ('We are all strangers on earth'), Trakl's 'De profundis', 'Ruh und Schweigen' ('Quiet and Silence'), Benn's 'Ikarus', Otten's story *Der Sturz aus dem Fenster* (*The Fall from the Window*) and many others reveal a clear vision of man's alienation and his existential fear. This feeling of imminent disaster was reinforced by the fact that the newly industrialised Germany was dominated by a military caste. Heym's 'Der Krieg' ('The War') and 'Der Gott der Stadt' ('The God of the City') are among the best examples of poems which speak prophetically of the outbreak of war and of a society corrupted by technology.

But despite their fears, these writers were also rebels who proclaimed ecstatically that a better society was to come. 'Aus Vision wird Mensch mündig' (Vision creates Man) wrote Kaiser, and it was this vision of a new world which dominated the first and 'ecstatic' phase of German literary Expressionism. Pinthus called his 1919 anthology of Expressionist poems *Menschheitsdämmerung* (*The Twilight of Humanity*) because the poets 'felt early how man was sinking into the twilight . . . sinking into the night of obliteration . . . but he would emerge again in the clearing dawn of a new day'. Their ecstatic *Schrei* (Scream) is for 'kindness, justice, comradeship, love of man for man . . .' because 'the world begins in man and God is discovered as a brother'.³ *Aufbruch* (Departure) became the catch-word for the Expressionists' desire for transfiguration or moral regeneration. The names of many Expressionist journals similarly reflect this wish for a new

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beginning: *Der Sturm*, *Revolution*, *Die Aktion*, *Die weissen Blätter* (*The White Leaves*) and also Hiller's 1912 anthology, *Der Kondor* (*The Condor*). Typically, these writers, led by an overwhelming desire to destroy tradition, rejected the values of the previous generation. The generation conflict, especially between father and son, as depicted in Expressionist literature is unparalleled in German writing. Hasenclever's *Der Sohn*, 1914, Sorge's *Der Bettler* (*The Beggar*), 1912, and von Unruh's *Ein Geschlecht* (*A Family*), 1915–16, are prime examples of how the young writers viewed the father figure as a symbol of tyrannical authority and constraint; the murder of the father is a recurrent motif expressing symbolically their desire to liberate themselves from a stifling past. Wedekind explored this topic as early as 1891 in his *Frühling's Erwachen* (*Spring's Awakening*).

A major influence on the language of German Expressionism was exercised by the Futurist Marinetti who in an influential manifesto, *Technisches Manifest*, published in *Der Sturm* in 1912, laid down a number of rules designed to purify the language of bourgeois clichés. Marinetti argued that sentences should depend as far as possible on nouns and verbs and especially on the infinitive which conveyed a sense of the elasticity of experience; adjectives and adverbs were weak and should be avoided; analogies and images – especially those which were striking and unusual – should be used to relate nouns in a meaningful pattern; punctuation might be omitted and capital letters must be used much more extensively.⁴ Stramm was so impressed by Marinetti's ideas on language that he destroyed his poems written between 1902 and 1913 and began again. His Expressionist writing, although slight – two cycles of poems, five short dramas (he died in the war in 1915) – is the most abstract of the early Expressionist phase. In his plays he no longer

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creates characters but types – Man, Woman – who express their feelings ‘only in sound sequences within the rhythm of their actions’.⁵ Language used this way comes to be known as *Telegrammstil* and may be illustrated by one of Stramm’s poems:

Melancholy

Striding striving
living longs
shuddering standing
glances look for
dying grows
the coming
screams!
Deeply
we
dumb.⁶

Unlike Expressionist painters and composers – the latter influenced by Schönberg’s *Harmonielehre* (*Theory of Harmony*) – Expressionist writers did not have a clearly defined programme. In fact many of the writers of the first phase did not associate themselves with Expressionism although they were agreed on common aims: the necessity to break with tradition, the need for a new language, the renewal of mankind. Furthermore, many of these writers had no chance to develop their art. Heym, Trakl, Stadler, Stramm, Lichtenstein – now considered among the greatest poets of Expressionism – were dead before 1920, most of them killed in the war.

The second stage of German Expressionism (1917–23) is associated primarily with drama, which is probably its most coherent genre. Its theme, the possibility of man’s regeneration, is developed more fully than had been done

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in Expressionist prose and poetry. Expressionist drama can be traced back to Wedekind (the *Lulu* dramas), Sternheim (*Die Hose*), and especially to Strindberg. His *To Damascus*, 1898, structurally and thematically anticipates many features of German Expressionist drama: the *Stationentechnik* (a non-traditional dramatic technique presenting the various stages of the protagonist's development), the transfiguration motif and the introduction of types instead of individual characters. Because this drama is based on autobiographical events it belongs to the category of the *Ich*, or *Bekenntnisdrama* (the I, or Confession drama). Sorge's *Der Bettler* follows Strindberg closely. The theme is the development of a youth (Sorge himself) into a man and his transfiguration into a better self; like Strindberg in *To Damascus* Sorge employs dream scenes in order to reflect inner experiences (the murder of the father, the death of the mother, a love-relationship with a woman whose child is from another man). Strindberg's Wanderer eventually leaves the world behind to enter a monastery; Sorge's protagonist, through his transfiguration, also turns into an outsider who in finding his *totales Ich* (the total I) feels released from all societal bonds and responsibility. The Wanderer and the Beggar are forerunners of *Der Neue Mensch* (the New Man), the ideal type of German Expressionist drama, especially that of Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser.

Because German Expressionist drama was different in its conception of man and in the language with which it treated its themes, it also evolved a distinctive Expressionist style of performance which one critic has subdivided into three general styles: (1) the *Geist* (Spirit) *performance*; (2) the *Schrei* (scream or ecstatic) *performance*; (3) the *Ich performance*. The *Geist performance*, the most abstract, may be seen 'as an ultimate vision of pure expression

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without the conventional intervention of dramatic characters or intricate plot'. Stramm's plays were most suited for this kind of performance. The *Schrei performance* can be compared 'to an actual, if hazy, intense dream-state, where movement, exteriors, language, motivation, and inner logic were uniformly and bizarrely warped'. The *Ich performance* resembles the *Schrei performance* but differed in that it focused upon a central character.⁷ Performances of Toller's *Die Wandlung* (*Transfiguration*) and *Masse Mensch* (*Masses and Man*) demonstrated these two styles most purely. Actors often used exaggerated gestures, masks, or mask-like make-up, to portray human types, and 'ecstatic' or dynamic speech to convey a renewed or 'extraordinary' state of being.

New stage techniques were also developed for Expressionist drama. The main influence came from Appia and Craig whose theoretical works *La musique et la mise en scène* (1899) and *The Art of the Theatre* (1905) were immediately published in German. Both advocated abstract stage design with emphasis on geometrical forms and 'dramatic' lighting. In a 1913 production of part of Gluck's *Orpheus und Euridike* at Hellerau, Appia designed the set which 'consisted solely of steps, ramps, platform and directional lighting'.⁸ The dance sequences choreographed by Jacques-Dalcroze anticipated the stylised movement which was to become an integral part of German Expressionist staging, especially in crowd scenes. Germany's most famous director, Max Reinhardt, used directional lighting in his 1917 production of Sorge's *Der Bettler*. Another influence came from Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* and the German *Stilbühne* which stressed simplicity in staging and dispensed as much as possible with props. But it was the younger generation – some of them pupils of Reinhardt – who fully developed Expressionist stage techniques. The

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most noteworthy among them were Falckenberg, Hellmer, Fehling, Martin and Leopold Jessner. Jessner became famous for the use he made of Appia's steps; they became known as *Jessnertreppen* – a 'single flight of steps raked back from the front of the stage' (as in his 1920 production of *Richard III*). But they were more than just steps, writes a contemporary, Kenneth Macgowan: 'Jessner fills his stage with steps. He seems unable to get along without them. He must have platforms, levels, walls, terraces. They are to him what screens, towering shapes, great curtains are to Gordon Craig'.⁸

When the Nazis came to power in 1933 they regarded Expressionism as degenerate and set about destroying all evidence of it (no prompt book for any major Expressionist drama production exists). It is a tragic irony, as Pinthus notes, that young German audiences after 1945 only became acquainted with Expressionism through the works of foreign writers like T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder and Tennessee Williams who themselves had been influenced so powerfully by German Expressionists.¹⁰ In the field of drama the most important influence was exercised by Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser; their work is central to the development of Expressionism on stage.