

Nonrealistic American Plays: Ties Between Continental and American Expressionistic Drama

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Abstract: *In order to establish a concrete basis for the frequently mentioned but superficially investigated ties between Continental and American Expressionist drama, this study endeavors not only to examine the expressionistic elements in native plays but also to determine the extent to which American playwrights were inspired by the works of Continental-chieflly German-Expressionists. This study focuses on the nonrealistic dramaturgy of Georg Kaiser, Walter Hasenclever, and other Continental Expressionists, which inspired many American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Elmer Rice, and John Howard Lawson. It shows their attempts to fuse realistic and expressionistic elements into esthetically satisfying dramatic works and how American Expressionism has tended to follow more the examples set by the German Expressionists than that by Strindberg, in whose "dream plays" the author's consciousness reigns supreme. Moreover, most of the American Expressionist plays are tempered with realistic elements in the manner characteristic of Georg Kaiser or Ernst Toller.*

Expressionism began more as an attitude and ideology than as a style. This fact becomes clear when looking at German expressionist literature, where the term became a revolutionary cry for poets and dramatists such as George Kaiser (1878-1945), Ernst Toller (1893-1939), Georg Trakl (1887-1914), Walter Hasenclever (1890-1940), and Gottfried Benn (1886-1956). Produced as a reaction to the insanity of World War I and the realist aesthetic of nineteenth-century naturalism, the poetry of August Stramm (1874-1915) for example, was considered by traditionalists to be the stammering of an insane person, while Kaiser's dramas were perceived to be part and parcel to a generational revolt against the old order.

German Expressionism began as a reaction to the conditions of Wilhelminian Germany, for Germany in the 1914's seemed stable under Kaiser Wilhelm and was a time of massive development and change, industry and military wise. Young intellectuals felt excluded and classless in a complacent, materialistic Germany. Expressionism began as a turn away from industrialization, mechanization, and from patriarchy in the broader sense. The German Expressionists moved towards "primitive art" as a model of abstraction, or non-representational, non-academic, non-bourgeois art of existential immediacy.

A genre with its origins in art, Expressionism is a mode interested in presenting the world as perceived by the artist's inner vision. The expressionist dramatists rejected realistic modes of representation as imitative and sought to create a drama that through its eccentric, nightmarish visions would portray more accurately the individual's tormented relationship with the world. Applied to the theatre, it represented a protest against the existing social order. Initially it was concerned with spirit rather than with matter, and typically it sought to get to the essence of the subject by grossly distorting outward appearance or external reality. "Following Nietzsche, it glorified the individual and idealized the creative personality" (Stylan, 3). Also, the advent of Freudian and Jungian psychology in the first quarter of the century constituted a challenge to the playwright to disclose and reproduce his secret and hidden states of mind. "In its early stages expressionistic drama was a dramatization of the subconscious, a kind of scripted dream, with the consequent loss of character motivation and rational plot development of the well-made play. This loss, however, did not necessarily imply a surrealistic formlessness; a play's true, inner unity could be supplied by the single vision of the dreamer himself" (78). Expressionist theatre did not adhere to the rules of the well-made play. Poetry, prose, and visual art bled into one another in an aesthetically intense effort to attain the 'essence' (Einstein, 43)

Buchner, as the forerunner of Expressionism, inspired Wedekind, Strindberg, Kaiser, and Toller. In 1836, Georg Buchner wrote *Woyzeck*. This tragedy of a common soldier who murders his mistress in a fit of jealousy received its first production in 1913. Instead of presenting a mere story, Buchner attempts to record in this play the struggle within Woyzeck's mind. With the action taking place in twenty-six short and swiftly moving scenes, the work is nervously tense and exclamatory. "Quite frequently, the dialogue becomes highly forceful through Buchner's use of abbreviated, staccato speech, as, for example, in the conversation between Woyzeck and the barmaid Kaethe, after Woyzeck has stabbed his mistress Marie" (Valgema, 4). Buchner's handling of his characters is also an important dramatic device that

foreshadows the many techniques therewith used in expressionistic dramas. Most of his characters represent types rather than individuals. They are simply called Inn keeper, Doctor or Jew.

Influenced by Buchner, whom he greatly admired, Wedekind wrote highly controversial works that are characterized by grotesque situations, heightened speech, symbolism, and characters that often become mere caricatures. His first important play, *Spring's Awakening*, portrays the sexual awakening of three adolescents. In the last act, Wedekind distorts reality by having a dead man with his head under his arm and a masked gentleman represent the inner struggle between suicidal thoughts and the life instinct of a character. "Other proto-Expressionist elements in the play include the terse language, the typing of characters, and the rapid change of numerous short scenes" (Bigsby, 112).

Another playwright strongly influenced by Buchner was August Strindberg. He perceived that the truth lies beneath the surface reality and believed that "the higher fantasy has a greater reality than this actuality and that banal accidents of existence are not essential life" (Bentley, 181). Furthermore, his *To Damascus* trilogy turned to higher fantasy. In this seemingly formless play, where scene follows scene without any pretense at recording "real" incidents, Strindberg gives dramatic form to the protagonist's thoughts and conflicting selves. Also, his *A Dream Play* comes nearest to his ideals of the essential life, for the dramatic action of this play is patterned after discontinuous dream formations. Strindberg himself states about this play "time and space do not exist; on a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities and improvisations. The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter and converge, but a single consciousness holds sway over them all-that of the dreamer" (Strindberg, 193).

Some of the earliest German playwrights began to rebel against the dehumanizing spirit of Imperial Germany and turned against militarism. They started to question the values of the militaristic spirit that became common in their country. They embraced notions of violence and upheaval, and clung to the idea of 'a new man.' Hence, Georg Kaiser, being previously influenced by Buchner and his disciples, expressed protest against the enslaving power of the machine and this topic became the theme of a number of his works. His works were plays of ideas more than of characters; dialectical progressions rather than well-made plays. Kaiser was the most prolific of the German dramatists who wrote during the Expressionist period. He started writing bourgeois philistinism and then went on to write plays of different styles and topics. His plays follow a definite, almost mathematically precise, formal pattern. Of Kaiser's early expressionistic plays, the best known is *From Morn to Midnight*. In telling the story of the gradual disillusionment of a bank clerk who tries to buy pleasure with embezzled funds, Kaiser makes use of lengthy monologues and other devices to objectify the protagonist's unconscious fears. A tree in a snowy field on which the Cashier has been sitting suddenly turns into the form of a grinning skeleton. We see the same grinning form in the chandelier just before the Cashier commits suicide at the end of the play. "Georg Kaiser has been particularly successful in his diction, which is a real work of art; he lashes his words along at such a pace that his lean, galloping phrases gain warmth, or at any rate fire, as they rush through the air. Speech becomes electrified and throws off crackling sparks (Eloesser, 148). Kaiser also had a longing to create a New Man who will establish a new and improved society where all men are brothers, therefore he wrote the *Gas* trilogy. The first part of the trilogy, *The Coral*, fuses the themes of the father-son conflict, the opposition to a machine civilization, and the regeneration of man with the concept of dual identities. The play was optimistically ideal but unfortunately this feeling of idealism did not last long for Germany went through civil chaos and suffered innumerable economic disasters, and the high hopes for a New Age turned into frustration. Therefore, *Gas II* appeared and shows how the hope for the New Man was defeated in a nightmare world of automatons. The industrial complex, now under the control of the State, is producing "gas" for military purposes. The New Man becomes extinct in the total annihilation of mankind. "Reflected in Kaiser's works is the disillusionment of Weimer Germany, especially on those plays written between 1917-23. The sets were symbolic, with bleak, harsh lighting and raw, metallic construction" (Furness, 312).

Ernest Toller is another Expressionist dramatists who was violently opposed to war and who embraced the concept of the New Man. He started as an enthusiastic volunteer at the outbreak of the War but then lost his nationalistic fervor after experiencing combat in the front lines and being wounded. He became disillusioned and took up pacifistic activities. His first play *Transformation* was written in a military prison. He made use of all the dramatic devices of Expressionism in this play for the characters are types, the dialogue is ecstatic, and realistic scenes alternate with Strindbergian dream scenes. The hero's subconscious mind project the horrors of war. "Studying dreams to unearth what they tell us about the physical world is not the same as entering the dream world to unearth the interactive experiences of consciousness as a phenomenological reality unto itself" (Demastes, 47).

Toller is also well-known for the play *Man and the Masses*. This play has established itself as a landmark of Expressionist stagecraft. A bare stage, black curtains, platforms, and steps, brilliant use of masks, colored shafts of light, chants and rattles, and finally grotesquely distorted stage properties. "The play traces the passion and the martyrdom of

the New Man in the hands of the brutal capitalistic society and the equally bloodthirsty revolutionary mob" (Valgema, 22).

Walter Hasenclever was also an Expressionistic dramatist whose work is a protest against bourgeois materialism and the work-making state. Hasenclever's first play *The Son* is about a youth who becomes a political revolutionary and brings about the death of his own father. This play became a manifesto for the German post-World War I generation. It was followed by two anti-war plays, *The Saviour* and *Antigone*. His best-known work, *Humanity*, is what made him famous as an Expressionistic playwright for in this play Hasenclever uses expressionistic techniques to the extreme. The characters are symbolic types, speech is reduced to staccato monosyllables, and meaning is conveyed by pantomime and stylized overacting.

The German Expressionists also wrote about the conflict within the self. They objectified the alter-ego of certain characters and probed into the multiple personalities of others. Subjective higher reality for the Expressionists was revealed through the distorted-yet essentially real-dream world of the unconscious mind, in which objects were no longer viewed photographically but were seen symbolically; dialogue stripped of all but the essential words, of which the shriek was often the most meaningful; through sound effects and music, the most subjective of the arts; through the symbolic use of color; and through a rapid sequence of scenes, shifting with cinematic speed, which focused only for a moment and then moved on with little or no attention to detail. These distortions for the sake of objectifying inner truths freed the drama from the rigid conventions of Realism and encouraged playwrights to turn to a more imaginative handling of their subject matter. Philip Moeller observes that "if expressionism is objective seeing, as all observation must be, it is subjective projection...all the yearnings and unknown suppressions of the mind are exposed...just as an X-ray exposes the inner structure of a thing as against its outer, more obvious and seeming form" (ix).

Expressionism continued to play a significant role in the early works of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht himself was very much influenced by Wedekind and Buchner and considered them his chief influences. He experimented with Dada and Expressionism in his earlier works such as *Baal* and *Drums in the Night*. Moreover, Brechtian drama or Epic theatre would not have been possible without Expressionism because from Expressionism he developed a style more suited to his own unique vision. From Germany, a wave of expressionistic productions spread to almost every part of Europe. Furthermore, this wave moved onwards to America and the development of modern American drama owes much to the German Expressionists, for a number of the new American plays of the 1920's were written in a mode greatly indebted to Continental Expressionism and did not appear until shortly after several non-realistic Continental plays had been staged in New York.

Eugene O'Neill was deeply impressed by *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and therefore was encouraged to learn German to be able to read the German plays in the original. He discussed the German Expressionists with the Provincetown Players and hence went on to write *The Hairy Ape*. John Howard Lawson and John Dos Passos kept going back to the Paris theatre where they had seen one of H.R. Lenormand's expressionistic plays, and George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly drew upon a German dream play for their *Beggar on Horseback*. At about the time that Paul Green returned from Germany with new ideas for a nonrealistic dramaturgy, Christopher Isherwood joined W. H. Auden in Berlin, where both men became enthralled by the early works of Bertolt Brecht. Thornton Wilder was also collecting the plays of Oskar Kokoschka, and several years later, Arthur Miller discovered the German Expressionists.

The wide interest that these and other American playwrights displayed in Continental Expressionism is reflected in their work. In the early 1920's, Eugene O'Neill, Howard Lawson, and Elmer Rice domesticated the subjective form in such plays as *The Emperor Jones*, *Roger Bloomer*, and *The Adding Machine*, and elements of expressionistic dramaturgy have been a part of American drama ever since. In addition to O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *The Ancient Mariner*, *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and *The Great God Brown*, the Provincetown Players produced Edmund Wilson's *The Crime in the Whistler Room* and E. E. Cumming's *Him* and made plans to stage Paul Green's *Tread the Green Grass*. Other Greenwich Village experiments with the new mode included Dos Passos' *The Garbage Man*, Francis E. Faragoh's *Pinwheel*, and the productions of the New Playwright's theatre. Broadway also received its share of native Expressionism with Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* and *The Subway*, Kaufman and Connelly's *Beggar on Horseback*, Lawson's *Processional*, Channing Pollock's *Mr. Moneypenny*, Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, and Eugene O'Neill's *Dynamo*. There were several plays that incorporated expressionistic techniques to liven some social protest plays. Examples of these plays are Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead*, Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson*, and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Of other playwrights who have made use of expressionistic devices, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is the most widely known. The play is not only a condemnation of materialistic values but also a skillful probing into the tragic implications of illusory life. It contains many nonrealistic elements. Imaginary wall lines are traversed whenever the action shifts from the realistic present to the remembered past. The house is hemmed in by "towering, angular" (11) apartment buildings, which are replaced by green foliage whenever the exhausted salesman

thinks of the past. In these recollected scenes the characters on stage assume the shape they have acquired in Willy's imagination: his wife radiates youthful energy and his sons look like Adonises. Miller's Expressionism also accounts for his nonrealistic use of musical leitmotifs, and more unrealistic are the appearances of Willy's dead brother Ben, who speaks in short and cryptic sentences and The Woman whom Willy has slept with in Boston. The former symbolizes Willy's dream of easy wealth and the latter his guilt. Arthur Miller has on several occasions acknowledged his indebtedness to German Expressionist drama. He declares in a published article that he "read the Greeks and the German Expressionists at the same time and quite by accident. I was struck by the similarity of their dramatic means in one respect—they are designed to present the hidden forces, not the characteristics of the human beings playing out those forces on the stage" (Harper's Magazine, 37).

The expressionistic plays of the depression decade attacked a number of social evils, including unemployment, inadequate housing, diseases, war and fascism. Tennessee Williams was one such playwright who attacked social issues and preferred a nonrealistic dramatic mode in showing these evils. His first expressionistic play, *Stairs to the Roof*, contains a number of grotesque distortions, for the play is an allegorical account of a dreamer's rebellion against his materialistic surroundings. *The Glass Menagerie* is also a very well-known expressionistic play. It is William's remembrance of things past, for the action on stage is a projection of the autobiographical narrator's memories of his sister and his mother. Williams emphasizes the non-real quality of the play in his initial stage directions: "The scene is memory and is therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic" (5). Although Williams avoids in *The Glass Menagerie* the grotesque distortions frequently found in expressionistic plays, nevertheless his use of the structural pattern of a memory play and of symbolism that effectively illuminates the essential action of the play suggests an affinity with the Expressionists, especially since he employs a number of other non-realistic conventions in this play. Examples of these conventions are the short scenes, musical leitmotifs, unrealistic lighting that changes with the mood, and the projected screen images and titles that anticipate the action on stage. Though several playwrights have made use of expressionistic devices, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have been the most successful in their attempts to fuse realistic and expressionistic techniques into esthetically satisfying dramatic works.

In the American drama, Expressionism has tended to follow more the examples set by the German Expressionists than that by Strindberg, in whose "dream plays" the author's consciousness reigns supreme. The subjective episodes in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, on the other hand, dramatize the state of mind of the protagonist, as they do in Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*. Similarly, O'Neill's *The Great God Brown*, which is modeled in part on Kaiser's *The Coral*, lacks the total subjectivity of Strindberg's *To Damascus* or *A Dream Play*. Furthermore, most American Expressionist plays are tempered with realistic elements in the manner characteristic of the work of Georg Kaiser or Ernst Toller. As the former were interested in the New Man, Eugene O'Neill, in many instances, was less concerned with society than with the individual man. *The Emperor Jones* dramatizes the regression of a primitive mind to savagery through fear. *The Hairy Ape* records the disintegration of a man who has lost his sense of "belonging." And finally, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* depicts the breakdown of a sensitive human being whose inner tensions have reached a breaking point. "The downfall of the protagonists of these plays is caused not so much by external-i.e., social pressures as by subconscious forces within the individual, which are O'Neill's substitute for Greek fate and the supernatural element in Elizabethan drama" (Valgamea, 200).

In conclusion, one cannot deny the great influence that the German Expressionists had over the creation and development of American Expressionistic drama. They paved the way to one of the most striking forms of dramatic expression in literature. But whether German, American or European, Expressionism is a dramatic mode that has succeeded in making drama unique and attention-drawing. Joseph Goebbels, a member of the Nazi party, had originally been a supporter of Expressionism and states this point clearly when he declared "We are all Expressionists today; people who want to shape the world from within themselves. Expressionism is building a new world inside itself. Its power and its secret lie in its passion" (Willett, 79). The objectives and the attitudes of the Expressionists are similar. Expressionism helped in objectifying the subjective and becoming a medium to express didactic literature. Kasimir Edschmid may have best summarized the attitude of the expressionist artist when he wrote: "He doesn't describe, he experiences. He doesn't reproduce, he shapes. He doesn't take, he searches..."(17).

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