

## CHAPTER 1

### *Introduction*

#### *I Formal Features of Expressionist Drama*

**H**OWEVER disparate the views on Expressionism may be, it is generally true that an Expressionist play will tend to be different from a Neo-Romantic or Naturalistic play, no matter how extensive their common roots. Perhaps, the most striking formal feature of Expressionist drama is abstraction. Essentially this means that the Expressionist dramatist is not concerned with projecting an illusion of reality on the stage; instead he gives something abstracted from reality, that is, either something taken from the real world but reduced to the bare minimum, or something totally abstracted from reality in the sense that the norms of time and place and individuation have been completely abandoned. Hence in Expressionism there is constant stress on giving the essence—the heart of the matter—deeper images instead of “mere” surface appearances. Not surprisingly, actions and plots are also pared down to the important outlines and only crucial situations are presented, while all “unnecessary” detail is eliminated. This same tendency is noticeable in the treatment of the dramatic figures, which show no characteristic features of particular individuals but tend to embody principles which the author holds to be important. As such, they bear no names and instead are often simply designated as Father, Mother, Husband, or Wife. Other dramatic figures can similarly represent states of mind, social positions, official functions, etc.; hence they are introduced merely as Cashier, Officer, and the like. The intention is clearly to move away from the specific and the conditioned to a more general sphere of reference and significance.

Abstraction of this kind is, needless to say, by no means



restricted to Expressionist drama; indeed, it is a feature of Expressionist art in general. All in all, this is in line with the Expressionists' reaction against the materialistic philosophy of the Naturalists, who tended to show the force of milieu, race, class, and social circumstance as factors conditioning the character of the individual. The Expressionists were not interested in character in this sense and did not attempt to create dramatic characters in their plays. Character for them meant a limitation of scope. They were more concerned with the soul, that which is common to all men. Instead of creating an impression of real people in real situations, the Expressionist dramatists will therefore strive with religious longing for something beyond the merely material, for eternal and transcendental values.

While this is the essential nature of Expressionistic abstraction, the rejection of the principle of mimesis was given various explanations. Kasimir Edschmid, for example, said in a speech on literary Expressionism: "The world is there. It would be senseless to repeat it." But whatever the reasons offered, time and place were ignored by the Expressionist dramatist so that he could feel free to create his own subjective universe. The dream, with its associations apparently lacking in cause or logic, was substituted for normal reality. For this practice there was a model to hand in Strindberg, though there had been forerunners within the German dramatic tradition, among whom Kleist attracted most attention. Thus, from Sörge's *Der Bettler* (The Beggar) to Kaiser's *Gas II*, one constantly encounters dream-like sequences and figures.

After the dream, the most outstanding formal element in the Expressionist drama is the monologue. This is perhaps not surprising considering its function as the main vehicle for expressing the subjective developments within the soul of the lyrical-dramatic protagonists. The use of the monologue demonstrates yet another contrast with the Naturalists, who had argued that in real life people were supposed to converse and not soliloquize. No sooner had the monologue been banished, however, than it made its way back into the drama with even greater force than before, not least through the monologue dramas of Neo-Romantic dramatists like Hofmannsthal. The revival of the monologue was propitious for the Expressionist

dramatist, who did not see life in terms of communication and sociability. Even his very explosions of longing for brotherhood and *Gemeinschaft* express an awareness of the fundamental isolation of man. Thus, egocentricity and solipsism become another hallmark of his works, expressed in formal terms by the long soliloquies of the one central figure, about whom all the other figures cluster like satellites around a major planet. The protagonist expresses *himself* alone; he does not speak for others, however much he may apostrophize mankind in general.

This solipsistic character of the Expressionist drama explains another feature, namely the scream. The Expressionist-dramatist is not concerned to show normal life lived at a normal level or tempo. Instead, he strives for the exceptional and extreme situation, in which the protagonist simply explodes. In this way, once again he breaks through the restricting bonds of normalcy and is beside or beyond himself. At its best this means arriving at a state of ecstasy, which is the aim of the fundamental religious striving of the Expressionists. Ecstasy means experiencing the Divine immediately and absolutely, and not merely attempting to grasp it logically or rationally. At the same time, rhetorical and ecstatic monologues are not merely an expression of the thoughts and feelings of the isolated protagonists; they have a powerful effect on each member of the audience who is there to be stirred up out of his bourgeois mediocrity by powerful utterance. Clearly, such monologues can be as unwieldy as similar speeches in a Baroque drama by Andreas Gryphius or Daniel Casper von Lohenstein; but the effect, once the improbability is accepted, can be equally overwhelming.

It must be admitted, however, that a potential source of weakness in Expressionist drama is the almost exclusive focus on one central protagonist, while all the other figures in the drama are reduced to mere reflections of his central position. However, it is possible to overstress the dangers of the single-perspective play. The same kind of technique was, after all, employed by Kafka in his fixed-perspective narratives to very powerful effect. At its best, as for example in Kaiser's *Von morgens bis mitternachts* (From Morn till Midnight), the solipsistic drama could be extremely successful in the way



all other characters in the play mirror and reflect the problems of the cashier. Less successful is a more lyrical drama like Sorge's *The Beggar*, where even the hero's mother, father, and girlfriend seem to have been introduced simply in order to illuminate significant aspects of the young hero's soul.

As far as the actual structure of an Expressionist drama is concerned, dynamism has been singled out as the one significantly new element. By this is meant not only the forceful nature of the language employed, but also the principle whereby the protagonist is shown following a certain path through life. Hence, the drama becomes a *Stationendrama*, following the ancient religious model of the stations of the cross. This means, in effect, a sequence of scenes which follow rapidly one upon the other, often with no obvious link between them. Here again there were models in the German dramatic canon, notably in the theater of Storm and Stress, though nearer to hand were the examples of Strindberg and Wedekind. Essentially, the dynamic, episodic structure mirrored the inner turmoil and awareness of chaos in the soul of the central figure, who, following the religious model, often goes through a total transformation. Such a *Wandlung* (the title of one of Toller's plays) is most clearly apparent in the case of Kaiser's cashier who is a mere machine-man in a bank and is electrically switched on by the touch of an exotic Italian lady. Through her his transformation becomes possible; he becomes aware of "life" and tries to realize his full potential as a human being. So from being a robot he is awakened to the possibility of human existence and sets off on his quest for fulfillment, being totally transformed from one second to the next. The religious parallels to his *Aufbruch* (new start) and his pilgrimage are made symbolically clear throughout.

Even on the printed page, one major difference between an Expressionist drama and its predecessors is immediately obvious by reason of the frequent alternation between verse and prose. Here again the Expressionist sees no reason to be arbitrarily limited to the single register of natural speech and is prepared to be unnatural and poetic; not that the verse is generally poetic in the normal melodic sense: instead, the Expressionistic dramatist preferred free verse which he could move into and

out of quite easily, depending on the level of speech in the particular moment of the action. In verse he was able to leave the rational, logical world behind and penetrate to the deeper levels to express the stirrings of the soul. Here the poetic utterance conforms to the ecstatic state and the elevated manner. That here the Expressionist was yet again laying himself wide open to attack from hostile critics is readily apparent. Such attacks were not slow to come and have never stopped. Yet such pathos was not a simple sign of artistic impotence; on the contrary, it was a deliberately chosen style of the large gesture and the grand manner. The scream could end in stammering incoherence; pathos could result in Baroque-like effusion; but at its best the drama could be deeply stirring in its combination of rational control and surging emotion. Here once again extreme opposites seem to be the mark of the Expressionist style, which could be extremely dense, concentrated, compressed on the one hand, while on the other this shortness, sharpness, and eruptive spontaneity could overflow into seemingly endless monologues.

It is generally easy to identify the Expressionist style on the page not merely by the alternation of verse and prose but also by the proliferation of exclamation marks, dashes, and question marks, sometimes in clusters, while even the longest speech generally breaks down into shorter units, characterized by missing articles, eliminated particles, and condensed verbal forms in order to create the lapidary style of *Ballung*. Yet while such a style is, or can be, extremely aggressive and disturbing, another feature needs to be mentioned, namely its hymnic quality. Here Sorge's *The Beggar* and Hasenclever's *Der Sohn* (The Son) offer excellent examples of the manner in which the dramatists can soar higher and higher in tone, in the manner of a musical crescendo.

And yet it must not be thought that the Expressionist always operates at such a high level; indeed, it could be argued that the most striking weapon in the Expressionist armory was the ready exploitation of the grotesque, a technique deliberately designed to effect a break from a high level of tension and plunge down to the banal. The possibilities of the grotesque had been amply demonstrated by Wedekind in *Fritillings*



*Erwachen* (Spring's Awakening) and elsewhere, and the Expressionist playwrights were not slow to follow his example. Hence, in the excitement of the Six Day Race in *From Morn till Midnight* the cashier sees five people squeezed together like five heads on one pair of shoulders till a bowler hat falls from one head onto the bosom of a lady in the audience below, to be imprinted on her bosom forever after. The bowler hat is followed by the middle man of the five, who plunges to his doom below as Kaiser puts it, like someone just "dropping" in! Such a use of the grotesque can be screamingly funny, but also screamingly terrifying. The mark of the grotesque is the distortion and exaggeration of the normal, the exploitation of caricature and distortion for effect.

