

Introduction

1910, that is indeed the year when all scaffolds began to crack.

—Gottfried Benn

Swollen red eyes, their cavities spreading out through the flesh as if under an order not to sleep. Pupils dilated to the point where they seem to transmit rather than receive perceptions, like a knowing gaze of a fish long dead. The redness of these eyes marks a painful and ghastly emanation out of what seems to have once been a person. This face is being reclaimed, its features giving way to the miasma with which it is stricken. If there is any victory here it is only one of recognition. Arnold Schoenberg: *The Red Gaze* of May 1910.

What is the affliction from which his face suffers? Is it personal or communal in nature? Does it stem from the year 1908, when Schoenberg's wife abandoned him for Richard Gerstl, the expressionist painter, who then took his own life when, at the urging of their friend Anton Webern, Mathilde returned to her husband? Or does it look forward to the collective catastrophe of World War I? Or is it something in its present that it fears and finds all but impossible to bear? Had Schoenberg been able to answer these questions he would not have needed to paint such a painting. Here, as in other canvases of 1910, he expresses something that neither his music nor his writings can convey. Yet we, in front of the painting, still seek words, and in a way that rarely happens before an impressionist or a cubist work. There is something about the rawness, the emotional extremity—the “expressionism”—of its style that calls for an explanation. We want to know the concern of this unsettling art and why it arose at precisely this moment in time.

On May 17, 1910, Halley's comet shatters the peace of Europe's skies. As tends to happen at such moments of cosmic disturbance, the event evokes deep-seated anxieties, articulated in newspaper editorials on doom and degeneration. For each collective concern there are thousands of personal ones. Two weeks before the comet, on May 2, Anna Pulitzer, the close friend of the Triestine writer Scipio Slataper, makes her way home from a botched tryst with her friend and shoots herself in front of the mirror. Apparently she has lost some life-sustaining faith. Two weeks earlier, on April 19, and not far from Anna's own home in Trieste, Sigmund Freud and his Vienna Psychoanalytic Society are so vexed by the rise of suicide among the Austro-Hungarian youth that they hold a conference to determine its motivations. Among Italians, the most remarkable young suicide is not Anna Pulitzer but the student Carlo Michelstaedter. Not in Trieste this time but Gorizia, another city on the outskirts of Austria-Hungary, on October 17, 1910, this twenty-three-year-old artist, philosopher, and poet is so determined to end his life that he shoots himself not once but twice with his revolver. It happens on the birthday and in the home of his mother, following an argument with this, her youngest son (the older one had died a year earlier, allegedly also from suicide).

Is there any "idea" at work in these deaths? Two days after Michelstaedter's gesture Sabina Spielrein, the schizophrenic patient and lover of Carl Jung, jots down in her journal an intuition that now, four years before the Great War, is beginning to assume collective proportions. "Secretly," she notes on October 19, "my new study, 'On the Death Instinct,' is taking shape within me."¹ Her completed study, published by Freud in 1912, expresses a thesis that Freud will sign his own name to eight years later, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—to the effect that love cannot be disengaged from its opposite, or from the impulse toward violence, negation, and destruction. On the same day that Spielrein records her secret, researchers who believe that personal behavior is always a function of larger, communal patterns meet for the First Conference of the German Society for Sociology (October 19–22). Present among the sociologists are Max Weber, Martin Buber, and Georg Simmel.

1. Throughout this study, titles of books and essays are rendered in English regardless of their original language of publication. For original titles (at least where I know of no English translations) please consult the two lists of sources at the end of this book. Citations from non-English texts appear in my own translations or in slightly modified versions of those listed.

None of these events can be directly tied to Schoenberg's painting. They occur in widely disparate places, among people whose sexes, nationalities, and cultural formations have little in common. And yet they partake in a strange commonality of atmosphere, a wordless similarity of concern. This concern or mood, this knowledge or perception, is the subject of this book. Called nihilism in philosophy and expressionism in the arts, it comprises a vision of history as nightmare, an obsession with mortality and decay, a sense of human marginalization from the autonomous developments of culture, and the responses they spur. Its protagonists are the student Michelstaedter and a set of his intellectual peers: Georg Trakl, Dino Campana, and Rainer Maria Rilke; Vasily Kandinsky, Egon Schiele, and Oskar Kokoschka; Georg Lukács, Martin Buber, and Georg Simmel; Arnold Schoenberg, Scipio Slataper, and Wilhelm Worringer. Other figures occupy either side of the year in question: Giovanni Gentile, Otto Weininger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Like Michelstaedter, many were Jewish and citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many also died young, sometimes, like Michelstaedter, by their own hand. Nearly all had as precarious a grasp on their intentions as the age on its course.

Michelstaedter's suicide occurs the same day he completes one of the most unusual works of the early twentieth century: a university dissertation called *Persuasion and Rhetoric*. In a sense, however, the real act of completion lies in the suicide itself, for the work on which he had labored so intensely over the course of the year tolerates no breach between theory and practice. Whether the suicide is to be interpreted as an expression or a refutation of the "moral health" described in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, as scholars still hotly debate, it cannot be separated from the thinking that it ends. For one and the same thing is at work in both, something strangely redolent of the voiceless anxiety of Schoenberg's painting.

Nineteen ten is also the date on the most anguished self-portraits of Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka, the younger compatriots of Gustave Klimt. In Germany rather than Austria three occurrences definitively announce the advent of a new and expressionist art: (1) the schism among the artists of the Berlin Secession, giving rise to the New Secession, (2) the transition between the founding of the Munich New Artists' Alliance in 1909 and the inception of *The Blue Rider* almanac in 1911, (3) the inauguration of the most lasting organ of literary expressionism, the weekly periodical *Der Sturm*. In this year—when Freud

makes his first written mention of the Oedipus complex (Freud 1910d) and Carl Schmitt publishes *On Guilt and Types of Guilt*—Georg Simmel supplements his cultural sociology with “The Metaphysics of Death.” The Italian Giovanni Boine counters modernity with religion in the Florentine journal *La Voce*. The young Austrian drug addict Georg Trakl begins to write the most disquieting poetry of the first half of our century. Simultaneously, south of the Alps, his counterpart Dino Campana lays the foundations for his *Orphic Songs*, eventually rewritten from memory and published in 1914. Committed to correctional institutions throughout his life, Campana is permanently confined to an asylum in 1918, at age thirty-three. Trakl, incestuously attached to his younger sister, takes his life before reaching his thirties. Schiele, born three years after Boine, dies a year later, in 1918, at the age of twenty-eight. The first artist ever to be imprisoned in Austria for “offenses against public morality,” he finds the first model for his tormented nudes in his fourteen-year-old sister Gerti.

In 1910 we also witness a resurgence—perhaps the final great resurgence—of the traditional European ideal to liberate human spirit from the pressures of material reality. It is the moment when the leader of the German lodges of the Theosophical Society, Rudolf Steiner, writes his outline of *Occult Science* and discovers the principles of anthroposophy; when Arthur Edward Waite publishes his *Key to the Tarot* and P. D. Ouspensky furnishes “the key to the enigmas of the world” in his *Tertium Organum*. Italian philosophy, at the same time, experiences the more studied idealism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. Most decisively perhaps, the year signals the astonishing revolution of abstraction in art. Three years earlier the art historian Wilhelm Worringer had linked symbolic and non-figurative art to a “spiritual space-phobia” in the cultural psyche. By 1910 he has perceived the phobia in the age at hand, an age described by Vasily Kandinsky in the first and still most philosophical manifesto for abstract art, *On the Spiritual in Art*. What was at stake for Worringer and Kandinsky alike was the relation between soul and form, or between intuited truth and its figurative articulation. The most thorough study of such a relation can be found in a book published that year under the very same title: *Soul and Form* by the twenty-five-year-old Hungarian, Georg Lukács. In a “mood of permanent despair over the state of the world,” as he later characterizes this period of his life in *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács writes yet another essay to include in the book’s German edition of 1911: “The Metaphysics of Tragedy.” Over the course of that year

he sees tragedy as encompassing every effort of the soul not only to reach form but also to act ethically. The good, claims Lukács in "On Poverty of Spirit" (1911), eludes every rule of morality.

As for the forms at the disposal of this "soul," the years preceding the Great War of 1914 see them successively splintered. In one sense the avant-garde destruction of conventional modes of expression follows quite naturally on the liquidation of the word by such poets as Paul Valéry and Hugo van Hoffmannsthal. But in 1910 still others are bent on distinguishing between meaning and nonsense, especially in that Habsburg empire to which Michelstaedter himself belonged: the philosophers Fritz Mauthner and Adolph Stöhr, the essayist Karl Kraus, and, as early as 1912, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Kraus and Wittgenstein see the expressive content of language as depending less on the conscious intentions of speakers than on the ethics they inherit from their community; and how fallen ethics seem to be at this moment in time can be gauged by a treasured reading of not only Wittgenstein and Kraus but their entire generation: the best-selling *Sex and Character* (1903) by Otto Weininger. He, too, a suicide at age twenty-three, Weininger argued that no woman or Jew had the spiritual constitution necessary for moral behavior. Action in accordance with the noblest possibilities of being was beyond the reach of all but the most gifted of men.

Of course, the fact that Kraus and Wittgenstein were of Jewish origin did not stop them from subscribing to Weininger's views any more than it did Italo Svevo or Arnold Schoenberg. After all, Weininger was himself a Jew and, if we are to believe the thesis of Theodor Lessing, at this moment in history Jewish self-hatred was a matter of pride. The Jewish anti-Semite Max Steiner suggested as much when in 1910 he also took his life. Countless thinkers of the prewar years were all too prepared to assume responsibility for the guilt described by Weininger. His Jew was in essence an ideal type, a spiritual outsider in normative, Christian culture, without firm roots or faith, reluctant to accept any principle of belief before examining each letter of its word. Like Adolf Hitler three decades later (himself an "artist" in 1910, though rejected by the same Vienna Academy of Fine Arts that accepted Egon Schiele) Weininger would have spied such "Judaism" in the guiding ambitions of each figure of this study—to build certainty and ethics *ex nihilo* (Michelstaedter), to articulate singular visions of exceptional individuals (Schiele, Kokoschka, and Trakl), to offer pure representations of soul (Kandinsky, Schoenberg, and the young Lukács), to give systematic order to intuitions one does not consider one's own (Wittgenstein,

by his own admission). To Weininger the work of each of these figures would have smacked of the elucubrations of the Jew in exile, wandering through a desert laid bare by the spiritual diaspora of history.

In truth, a good number of Weininger's themes had already been announced by the cultural critics of the turn of the century: a brooding sense of the "Dusk of the Nations" (Max Nordau, in *Degeneration*), of the utter exhaustion of Western values, of physiological and psychological deterioration that called for the most surgical of operations. Anti-Semitism itself was just a channel for the fear of moral dissolution which such self-styled opponents of decadence as Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Julius Langbehn had inspired in the intellectual classes of Europe. As dozens of sold-out editions of *Sex and Character* convinced them that "being oneself" was far from an innocent matter, an even more notorious thinker was amassing evidence for the spiritual vacuity of the age. His name was Oswald Spengler and his findings were published in 1918 as volume one of *The Decline of the West*.

By 1910 the nihilistic visions of Europe begin to worry observers as distant as America:

Every reader of the French and German newspapers knows that not a day passes without producing some uneasy discussion of supposed social decrepitude; falling off of the birthrate;—decline of rural population,—lowering of army standards;—multiplication of suicides;—increase of insanity or idiocy;—of cancer;—of tuberculosis;—signs of nervous exhaustion,—of enfeebled vitality,—‘habits’ of alcoholism and drugs,—failure of eyesight in the young,—and so on, without end.

The words belong to Henry Adams, addressed to historians in February 1910. Indeed, it is historians who are most alarmed, for at the moment of which Adams speaks, events that might otherwise appear incidental take on the dimensions of portentous omens: Military Plan 19 of Czarist Russia, to open hostilities on two simultaneous fronts against Austria and Germany; the total solar eclipse; the "calculated insult" to the Austrian monarchy of the Adolf Loos House, constructed across the square from the Habsburg palace in Vienna. In 1910 these occurrences are read as revelations, as warnings, as a call to arms.

The true call to arms, four years later, had been anticipated in the dramatic account of a German attack on Western Europe called *The Invasion of 1910* (1906). If the English novelist William Le Queux was "prescient" in staging his war in 1910, it is because this moment best formulates a dialectic that was to inform so many decisions of the belligerent powers of 1914–1918. It was a dialectic that rooted all cre-

ation in destruction, all knowledge in blindness, all hope in despair, and attributed value to situations that appeared utterly futile. In the prewar work of Michelstaedter, Kandinsky, Lukács, and Buber, the dialectic is still a luminous one, thinking through its own principle of reversal. By 1914 it has grown darkly literal, fueling the unstudied conviction that conflagration is a means of cauterization, and that razing all life to the ground will purge it of its infections. Did thinkers of 1910 suspect that their own dialectic would fall prey to the negativity it strove to overcome? There is little reason to say yes, and yet something brought Michelstaedter and Trakl to suicide and Campana and others to madness. Nor can we dismiss the fact that unprecedented numbers of young men went mad or took their own lives in the years immediately preceding the First World War—that is, before being able to be conscripted into service. We do not possess a sufficiently sophisticated cognitive science to investigate such an issue, but the syndrome returns, especially before World War II. Nineteen ten is the spiritual prefiguration of an unspeakably tragic fatality, heard in the tones of the audacious and the anguished, the deviant and the desperate, in the art of a youth grown precociously old, awaiting a war it had long suffered in spirit.

Here prescience can be felt in the suffering itself. To those who mistrusted all political leaders, and all practical responses to things not intellectually digested, a belligerent reaction such as war to vague fears of dissolution could only be the disease masquerading as cure. This is not to say that intellectuals rallied to oppose the war; most, in fact, did not. Here the testimony of Rainer Maria Rilke is only one among many: “In the first days of August,” he reports in a letter of November 6, 1914, “the spectacle of the war, of the war-god, seized me.” Disaster and affliction, he reflects, are not presently more widespread than ever before; they are simply more tangible, more active, more apparent:

For the affliction in which mankind has daily lived from the very beginning can't be really increased no matter what the circumstances. Insight into man's unspeakable misery does increase however, and perhaps this is what everything is leading to today; so great a downfall—as though new risings were seeking clearance and room for launching!

The thinking and art of 1910 sought precisely such clearance for risings and launchings—but in the context of so *articulate* a misery, so philosophical and metaphysical a sense of bereavement, that it could

hardly be redressed by political solutions. In fact, if what strikes us most today is precisely the nihilism of the prewar period—the gruesomeness of so much of its painting, music, and writing—it is because in it we perceive an alarm reaching beyond every local concern.

In 1910 the first decade of the last century of a dying millennium comes to a close. In the seven years to either side of it we see some of the most startling changes in modern history: drastic reshufflings of nations, economies, societies, and psyches; artistic, scientific, and political revolutions; the aggressive platforms of Georges Sorel and rebelling minorities throughout the continent. Nothing, in 1910, is definitively over and nothing definitively begun. Every attempted beginning is also an end, every end a hidden beginning. The “degeneracy” and “decadence” once identified in its present and its past name phenomena that would inevitably inherit its future. The prewar years were a workshop of *futurisme* and *passéisme* alike, testing every concern of a simultaneously old and new Europe: the borders of its personal, sexual and social identities, the solidity of its moral and theoretical foundations, the effects of technology and urbanization, the value and methods of its human sciences (reflected in the rise of phenomenology, psychology, sociology, and language-philosophy, not to mention theosophy, anthroposophy, and other, less tangible pursuits). Ten years into the century both a death and a birth seemed to have taken too long in coming.

Can we distinguish any “determining marks” in such a complex, transitional era? To a large extent the distinctions are already made in the very process of research. One chooses, for one reason or another, to investigate a particular series of texts and then notes the questions they raise. One forms a preliminary hunch and goes on to test other documents in its light. One refines and revises the hunch, finally becoming convinced that one has laid hold of something solid. My own method has not been different. I began to conceive of the possibility of this study when I was certain that in the year 1910 a particular set of problems was addressed more singlemindedly than ever before.

My selection of problems was also facilitated by the central role that Carlo Michelstaedter has played in this study from the start. Research into the contexts in which he lived and thought—to illuminate a study of him alone—soon yielded the realization that he was not alone at all: that his nihilistic idealism was an outcome of a quite traditional quest; that his most radical intuitions found support in other,



Fig. 2. Carlo Michelstaedter in the Boboli Garden, Florence, 1907.
Courtesy Gorizia Civic Library, Gorizia.

contemporaneous thinkers; that his drawings and paintings belonged solidly to a family of art in that part of the world we call *Mittel-europa*; that countless perplexing patterns in prewar art and behavior made sense within the framework of a thinking he made explicit.



Fig. 3. Carlo Michelstaedter, *Demon*, possibly 1903, watercolor and pencil. Courtesy Gorizia Civic Library, Gorizia.

What has ultimately resulted, then, is not a study of Michelstaedter so much as a symptomatology of the age to which he belonged, traced in a cross section of intellectual, artistic, and historical events. And this means that it is not a story of what *happened* in 1910 so much as of what some of these happenings expressed, an account preserving its own individual slant, perhaps in the manner of an expressionist portrait, which does not offer the objective characteristics of a face so much as an imaginative reinscription. Its concern is not “history,” but a history of symbols. Yet a history of symbols is history as it is traditionally read, constructed out of such critical years as 1492 or 1776, great transoceanic voyages, world-changing technological inventions, revolutionary events like the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many real cities besides Berlin have been forcibly divided between two states without joining the annals of history, or turning into symbols. One is Michelstaedter’s hometown of Gorizia, now split between Italy and the Republic of Slovenia, split before that with Yugoslavia, and in Austrian hands before 1918 (see figs. 4 and 5). And in this city, as in countless others, people and thoughts have come and gone without leaving any trace in memory. For things are historical not merely by happening, but by finding a home in consciousness, in the manner of an Ottoman tower in Bosnia or the flag of Macedonia. This study intends precisely to create such a space in consciousness—for products of a moment

which never became symbolic, even though they crystallized developments in the making for centuries. Accompanying this moment are also places—Trieste, Budapest, and Munich, overshadowed by strong memories of contemporary Paris and Moscow. Accompanying the places are a host of “secondary” cultural figures, overshadowed by the more towering icons of Picasso, Einstein, Freud, and Lenin.

What emerges from this twining of texts and strands of texts is a story of notes in the margins of better-known tales in the history of politics, economics, and psychology. It is an admittedly dissonant narrative: at moments jumping rapidly from one unit of coherence to another, at others plodding slowly through the subtleties of a single theoretical point. It sketches only a thumbnail of a complex cultural body, not the hand or the arm or the heart—a blossom, not the branch or the root. And as for the “trunk” that we sometimes believe underlies such a blossom—as if it were some fundamental, historical condition of which thinking and art are offshoots—it is no less symbolic an entity than what it might seem to produce, both constructed out of numberless processes, not one of which can be fully described, even where the blossom one attempts to understand is a single person or a single line of poetry. There is simply too much to synthesize to describe such a “trunk,” too much to coerce into intellectual order without adequate means, with no explanation for why *just this* blossom proved necessary or took the shape that it did. Here, thirst for the Why? is better slaked by the What?—or by patient observation of evidence. Recognition of connections, crossings, and analogies in the What may be the only means we have of approaching the Why.

The “blossoms” in this study are works of philosophy, sociology, painting, music, and poetry, as well as existential and ethical gestures like suicide and madness. If Michelstaedter remains the “proper noun” for this flourishing it is because—as philosopher, poet, painter, and moralist—he contains the greatest number of its features. Its common noun is expressionism.

Expressionism is typically conceived of as an artistic current that begins with the banding together of a group of Dresden painters in 1905 to form the *Brücke* (Bridge) and ends around 1924 or 1925. In 1910–1911 a more decisive wave of expressionism is set into motion by Vasily Kandinsky and his associates in Munich. Still a third gets under way at the same moment in Berlin, centered around the journals *Der*

Sturm and *Die Aktion*. These journals draw Austrians as well into the expressionist fold, particularly Oskar Kokoschka, Arnold Schoenberg, and Egon Schiele, who had been operating independently in Vienna. A confluence of developments in painting, theater, and poetry, expressionism is thus traditionally considered indigenous to Germanic culture. Rarely is it said to have practitioners in Italy, England, or France.

There is another critical line, however, which maintains that expressionism is not a style of its own, but merely a label for the Germanic chapter of avant-garde art, whose innovations receive names such as fauvism, cubism, futurism, orphism, and vorticism elsewhere. Still others claim quite the contrary, to the effect that expressionistic art has clear and distinct features, but that ultimately they overreach geographic, generic, and temporal boundaries, encompassing disciplines as different as philosophy, politics, and dance as well as artists as distant in time as Rabelais and Lucan. This, the most dominant direction in criticism today, is also the one that I will follow, seeking the tones of expressionism in a dissonant, international chorus—in Italy as well as Germany, in sociology as well as painting, in the logic of actions as well as arguments. Radical though it may sound to speak of Georg Simmel, the “impressionistic sociologist,” or of Georg Lukács, the “anti-modernist,” in the context of expressionism, the provocation disappears the moment we ask what they were trying to achieve in the pre-war years. What exactly were the concerns of their work? And how different were these concerns from those of the poets and artists? Was it not Freud who spoke of psychoanalysis as aiming to unveil the “most intimate” of a person’s secrets (in 1910 and again in 1912)? As based on the recognition of “psychic conflict”? As viewing civilization as the implacable enemy of the individual? When we inquire into such issues of intention and method, intersections between paths so different in direction become rather more clear.

We need not broaden the definition of expressionism to trace these points of convergence. On the contrary, we can narrow it down to a few salient traits. The expressionism at stake in 1910 is more theoretical than artistic in character. Concerned though it is with art, it thrusts its roots even more deeply into metaphysics, sociology, and ethics. As the term itself suggests, expressionism is interested in the nature, the function, and the credibility of human expression. Artistic procedures always furnish some answer to these “other” types of issues: the conditions at work in the creative process, what kind of person pursues it,

on behalf of what and with what probability of success. As I see it, expressionism is a paradoxical undertaking: It manifests both absolute faith and absolute disbelief in the most venerable preconceptions fueling the very project of artistic expression, including beauty, order, understanding, and truth. In intellectual history it signals the end of a Western, humanistic tradition, the termination, as it were, of its guiding objective. Indeed, in one reading, this simultaneous culmination and negation of a project to give form to universally comprehensible knowledge is precisely what enables so many of the theoretical and artistic changes that succeed this radical juncture: the formal license of avant-garde art, no longer held to common standards; the new objectivist literature of the twenties, returning from the world of potential to that of things; abstract expressionism; the historicizing ontology of Martin Heidegger; the turn of intellectuals in the postwar years toward political and social engagement.

Nineteen ten belongs squarely to the first of the two or three phases into which the expressionist current is typically divided. In this period, its theories and techniques are still fully in process of formation—more tentative than doctrinaire, more daring than programmatic. Art is still considered to be a vehicle for ethical and metaphysical research, not a proven methodology or style. With sympathies more anarchic than socialistic, expressionist thought has not yet assumed stable ideological direction. The prophets of the “New Man” have yet to finish mourning the old one. Agony, at this moment, is stronger than hope, and subjective isolation makes the “brotherhood of man” a still dubious notion. More particularly, in 1910 four expressionist characteristics come clearly into view.

The first is a battle between adversaries that seem incapable of resolving their differences: order and chaos, vitality and death, ecstasy and despair, individuality and solidarity. Whether in concept or form, each arises only in the presence of the other, and struggles in vain to break free. Expressionist art does not offer the centripetal visions of naturalistic or impressionistic works, not even the coherent compositions of cubism or futurism. It heeds no written or unwritten rules about what it should represent or how to go about it. Instead it thrives on what Schoenberg calls the emancipation of dissonance: a willful disruption of harmonic order. Of course this is not to say that expressionist works are not instantly recognizable. They are, but as the scene of a racked vision, of an articulated turmoil unprecedented in the

history of art. Matter, in expressionist painting, comes to exude an explosive and brutal power, cohesive and destructive at once, binding as well as loosening all natural relations. Human surroundings undergo sudden and stunning convulsions, bursting with menacing, apocalyptic power. Obvious examples lie in Ludwig Meidner's *Apocalyptic Landscapes* of 1912–1913, more subtle ones in the paintings of Kandinsky and Franz Marc. In fact, it is partially the mad and transcendent animation of this cosmic condition that makes it “ex-expressionistic,” as though the outside world willfully encroached on the space of all interpreting subjects, storming humanity with illegible intent. And this is probably what Marc had in mind when he spoke of the “space and soul-shattering” intent of his paintings. In expressionism a dynamic and conflictual universe addresses a consternated subject, including the subject observing the work. Here spirit and object, essence and appearance, and many other metaphysical oppositions enter into such irresolvable contradictions that they signal the need for a radical revision of the understanding.

The second expressionistic characteristic involves virtual despair over the “negative” element in the contending pair: sickness rather than health, estrangement rather than solidarity, disintegration rather than wholeness. In fact, in a certain perspective the battle of opposites appears to represent disintegration pure and simple, especially in the light of the political realities to which artists find themselves responding. Recognizable in their lurid depiction of the nullifying dimensions of human existence, expressionist works do have their own subject after all: the psychological and metaphysical drama of mere dwelling in the world. And this dwelling is indelibly marked by the ecstasy and suffering of the body. Indeed, to find artists confronting the pressures of the flesh with such intensity one must return to the Gothic. In 1910 the classical, humanist harmony between body and soul has been all but broken. The body itself has become irremediably duplicitous. The only true locus of soul—or of Henri Bergson's *élan vital*—it is also the cata-tonic, irrational form with which that soul contends.

To the subjects of early twentieth-century monarchy the moral and economic structures of everyday life are as materiality to the inner life that it traps: namely, agents of oppression, forces to assail and destroy. No art of the time, including futurism, performs this assault more radically than expressionism. Moreover, its attack on these forces of cultural “rhetoric” is hardly an experiment in form. Rather, it is an

anguished *critique* of form, of form as minister of deformation. The investigation of mortality and disintegration, the resistance to social conventions, and the rebellion against the inadequacies of formal expression—these three reactions to a perceived negativity of being—all lead to the third expressionist move, the envisioned “solution” to this soulless, dehumanizing deficiency, identified with the discovery and liberation of subjective vitality.

“In or about December, 1910,” claims Virginia Woolf, “human character changed.” In truth, however, what changed was not character itself but the way it was viewed. At the end of King Edward’s reign, as Woolf argues in this essay from the twenties, people suddenly became conscious of needs they never knew that they had. Up until 1910, artists had considered the needs of human nature to be adequately reflected by the material and historical conditions in which it was rooted. But at the end of the first decade external situations appeared to have lost their revelatory power, their complicity, as it were, with inner intention. Scientists and philosophers began to wonder whether the most well-established truths were nothing more than matters of impression and mood, of perspective and judgment. Positivism, realism, and naturalism appeared to have forsaken the subject they first intended to serve, but of which they had never really spoken: the human subject, the psyche, self, or however one wished to call it—the innermost truth of subjective experience—which was improperly reflected by historical events.

“When religion, science, and morality are shaken,” writes Kandinsky at the time Woolf describes, “and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself.” Painters and thinkers focus their efforts on freeing Michelstaedter’s “persuasion” from “rhetoric,” subjective necessity from contingent, objective externals. In one way or another, all expressionists seek to ferret out a naked human essence from under its lifeless qualities. They strive to give voice to what history has not endowed with words: the broad passions and aspirations of this hidden “essence.”

The portraits of Schiele and Kokoschka, the atonal music of Schoenberg, the idealism of Michelstaedter and Lukács take the inward turn more sharply than even Woolf imagined, questioning not only the improperly reflected self, but its entire set of operational procedures. Here all efforts are geared to the liberation of “soul,” as though it were the seat of all living experience. And thus surface new

visions of the artist-seer, the idea of a messianic restoration of the true nature of life through the redemptive power of the courageous social exception. But more often than not, the project results in the “savior’s” own self-immolation, and the savior ends up discovering that what is ostensibly “authentic” and “true” and “inner” never lies *within* the realm of the speakable, and may ultimately be just as rhetorical a construct as all it opposes.

This ethical stance represents the fourth expressionist trait, bringing a romantic project to its final culmination and dissolution. At the moment in time when artists make the most exasperated call for the inward turn, they also discover its dire and inevitable consequence: the obliteration, in the attack on rhetoric, of the basis for even those interiorized narratives that Woolf imagined. Indeed, the commitment to subjective experience in 1910 marks more of an end than a beginning of a tradition, which reaches an impasse at the very moment that it becomes most extreme, giving rise to the suspicion that all seemingly self-expressive persons are silenced by the idioms they use. While collective group history may offer no counterimages for interiority, interiority is also forced to admit that this history still governs everything it can do and say. Subjectivity has no voice but that which speaks by contorting the same terms it wishes to escape. The avant-garde arts of France and England do not explicitly face up to this problem. They sidestep the project of individual “persuasion” and celebrate instead the incoherent and aleatory rule of rhetoric, as though in it the subject might discover a means of deeper self-certainty. The Italian, Germanic, and Slavic expressionists, by contrast, still cling to the project and its accompanying problem, reassessing persuasion to be at best an intermediate condition between the transcendence of “soul” and its historical oppression. Such a condition is as visible in Emil Nolde’s paintings anticipating the emaciated victims of wars that have not yet occurred as in the outright rejection of material reality by Kandinsky. These artists of an era where human nature changes by recognizing that it is already and *inevitably* changed by living discover that if “expression of self” is not to degenerate into a nostalgic fantasy it must consist of an immanent transformation of the constrictions to which it is destined. Here the resolution of Rilke’s protagonist in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*—“to be the heavy heart of all that is indistinguishable”—remains the only true ethos of art: an art of the greatest subjective pathos on the one hand, and of the most brutalizing objectivity on the other. And thus the project of self-realization is thrown back on