

## 1 The Predisposition towards Expressionism

*'The Germans are odd people, all the same! What with their profound thoughts and the ideas they are forever pursuing and introducing all over the place, they really do make life too hard for themselves. Oh, have the courage to yield to your impressions . . . and do not always think that everything that is not some idea or abstract thought must be vain.'*

Goethe: Eckermann's  
*Conversations*, 1827.

The years immediately following the First World War were strange ones in Germany. The German mind had difficulty in adjusting itself to the collapse of the imperial dream; and in the early years of its short life the Weimar Republic had the troublesome task of meeting outside demands (the onerous terms imposed on Germany at Versailles) while at the same time maintaining equilibrium internally (the Spartacist revolt of 1919, the unsuccessful Kapp Putsch of 1920). In 1923, after Germany had failed to pay the war reparations laid down at Versailles, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr, and inflation, which had always been a serious danger, could not be stopped. The material conditions which resulted led to a general decline of values, and the inner disquiet of the nation took on truly gigantic proportions.

Mysticism and magic, the dark forces to which Germans have always been more than willing to commit themselves, had flourished in the face of death on the battlefields. The hecatombs of young men fallen in the flower of their youth seemed to nourish the grim nostalgia of the survivors. And the ghosts which had haunted the German Romantics revived, like the shades of Hades after draughts of blood. A new stimulus was thus given to the eternal attraction towards all that is obscure and undetermined, towards the kind of brooding speculative reflection called *Grübeleien* which culminated in the apocalyptic doctrine of Expressionism. Poverty and constant insecurity help to explain the enthusiasm with which German artists embraced this movement

which, as early as 1910, had tended to sweep aside all the principles which had formed the basis of art until then.

Rather than give an account of Expressionism in terms of sculpture or painting, we need, in order to analyse the phenomenon in all its complexity and ambiguity, to follow its track through the literature of the period. This may appear paradoxical; the reason is that, for the Germans, that 'race of thinkers and poets', every manifestation in art is immediately transformed into dogma: the systematic ideology of their *Weltanschauung* is wedded to a didactic interpretation of art.

But finding one's way through the tangled phraseology of the German Expressionists is not an easy task. At first sight, their telegraphic style, exploding in short phrases and exclamations, seems to have simplified the labyrinthine syntax of classical German; but this apparent clarity is misleading. Expressionist phraseology is ruled by a desire to amplify the 'metaphysical' meaning of words. Its exponents juggle with vague expressions, strings of words which have little orthodox relationship to each other, and invent mystical allegories which amount to little once we attempt to translate them. This language of symbols and metaphors is intentionally obscure, designed to be intelligible only to the initiated.

As an example let us listen to the dithyramb intoned in 1919 by a fervent theorist of this style, Kasimir Edschmid, in his *Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur*. Here we may detect, more clearly than anywhere else, the keystone of the Expressionist conception.

Expressionism, Edschmid declared, is a reaction against the atom-splitting of Impressionism, which reflects the iridescent ambiguities, disquieting diversity, and ephemeral hues of nature. At the same time Expressionism sets itself against Naturalism with its mania for recording mere facts, and its paltry aim of photographing nature or daily life. The world is there for all to see; it would be absurd to reproduce it purely and simply as it is. The Expressionists also oppose the effeminacy of neo-Romanticism.

The Expressionist does not see, he has 'visions'. According to Edschmid, 'the chain of facts: factories, houses, illness, prostitutes, screams, hunger' does not

exist; only the interior vision they provoke exists. Facts and objects are nothing in themselves: we need to study their essence rather than their momentary and accidental forms. It is the hand of the artist which 'through them grasps what is behind them' and allows us to know their real form, freed from the stifling constraint of a 'false reality'. The Expressionist artist, not merely receptive but a true creator, seeks, instead of a momentary, accidental, form, the *eternal, permanent meaning* of facts and objects.

We must detach ourselves from nature, say the Expressionists, and strive to isolate an object's 'most expressive expression'. These rather confused stipulations were explained by Béla Balázs in his book *Der Sichtbare Mensch* (1923); an object can be stylized by the accentuation of (in Balázs's words) its 'latent physiognomy'. This will permit the penetration of its visible aura.

Edschmid proclaimed that human life, transcending the individual, participates in the life of the universe; our hearts beat with the rhythm of the world itself and are linked with everything that happens; the cosmos is our lung. Man has ceased to be an individual tied to concepts of duty, morality, family and society; the Expressionist's life breaks the bounds of petty logic and causality. Free from all bourgeois remorse, admitting nothing but the prodigious barometer of his sensibility, he commits himself to his impulses. The 'world-image' is reflected in him in its primitive purity; reality is created by him and the 'world-image' exists solely in him. This intense longing to lose all individuality in a total extravasation of self, to feel pervaded by the destiny of the universe, is a characteristic common to many German intellectuals towards the end of the First World War. Most were beginning to cry out against the absurd slaughter taking place; soon German poets, wishing like Schiller before them to embrace the whole of humanity, were 'to write, as Werfel had already written in 1910: 'My only happiness, O Man, is to feel myself your brother.'

The contrasts and contradictions in all this will be readily apparent. On the one hand Expressionism represents an extreme form of subjectivism; on the other

hand this assertion of an absolute totalitarian self creating the universe is linked with a dogma entailing the complete abstraction of the individual.

The Germans, themselves steeped in contradictions, felt the need for a compromise. Thus the art critic Paul Fechter, in a work called *Der Expressionismus* (1919), distinguished between: (i) an 'intensive Expressionism' characterized by extreme individualism, such as that of the painter Kandinsky who, at the apogee of feeling, deliberately ignores the exterior world and, remote from logic and causality, strives for transcendentality and the chaos of form and colour; and (ii) the 'extensive Expressionism' of a Pechstein, whose creative impulse flows from a cosmic feeling which his will fashions and transforms. On the other hand the Expressionists distinguished between two opposing tendencies. As early as 1910 one of the two groups which had gathered around two literary reviews had taken the name *Aktion*. This group, led by Franz Pfemfert in opposition to the purist ecstatic Expressionists, pursued anti-bourgeois social and political aims while claiming absolute intellectualism with the catchword *Gehirnlichkeit* (cerebrality). The other group had taken the name *Sturm* (storm). Its programme was more artistically inclined than that of *Aktion*, and promulgated the Expressionist doctrine of ecstatic creation based on visions. The leader of *Sturm*, Herwart Walden, wrote in a pamphlet *Die neue Malerei* (1919): 'Expressionism is neither a fad nor a movement; it is a *Weltanschauung*.'

Nature is not alone in being proscribed. Psychology, the handmaiden of Naturalism, is also condemned, along with the laws and concepts of conformist society and the tragedies provoked by petty social ambitions. Edschmid proclaimed the *dictatorship of Mind*. Mind has the mission of giving form to matter. He also exalted the *attitude of constructive Will*, and called for a total revision of the whole of human behaviour. The same stereotyped vocabulary crops up time and again in German Expressionist literature: words and phrases such as 'interior tension', 'force of expansion', 'immense accumulation of creative concentration' or 'metaphysical interplay of intensities and energies'; much is also made of expressions such as 'dynamism', 'density' and above

all of the word *Ballung*, a well-nigh untranslatable concept which might be rendered as 'intensive crystallization of form'.

A few words are needed here about the 'abstraction' so frequently referred to by the theorists of Expressionism. In his doctorate thesis *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, published in 1921, Wilhelm Worringer anticipated many of the Expressionists' precepts, proving how close to the German *Weltanschauung* these aesthetic axioms were.

Abstraction, Worringer declared, stems from the great anxiety which man experiences when terrorized by the phenomena he perceives around him, the relationships and mysterious polarities of which he is unable to decipher. This primordial anguish which man feels when confronted with unlimited space makes him want to detach the objects of the exterior world from their natural context, or better still, to free the individual object from its ties with other objects, to make it 'absolute'.

Nordic man, Worringer continued, is constantly aware of the presence of a 'veil between himself and nature'; this is why he aspires after abstraction in art. Inwardly discordant, always striving for the unattainable, he needs that spiritual unrest which is an incentive to the 'animation of the inorganic'. Mediterranean man, so perfectly harmonious, can never know this ecstasy of 'expressive abstraction'. Such was the paradoxical formula which the troubled mysticism of Expressionism preached.

According to Worringer, Nordic man's desire for abstraction reaches its climax in the living abstraction of Gothic art, in the 'extensive dynamism of energies', and in that intensity of expression which leads him, 'beatified and quivering with spasmodic ecstasy, enthralled by a vertiginous intoxication, towards the heavens opened up for him by a thundering orchestration of mechanical forces'.

To come back to Edschmid, we find him stipulating that everything must remain 'sketchy' and quiver with immanent tension; a perpetual effervescence and excitation must be carefully maintained.

From the *élan* of Gothic art to the Expressionist ecstasy is not such a far cry as might be thought. According to Wolfhart Gotthold Klee (in *Die charakteristischen*



Reinhard Sorge's *Der Bettler*: lithograph by Ernst Stern

*Motive der expressionistischen Erzähllitteratur*, 1934), Gothic, Baroque, *Sturm und Drang*,\* Romanticism and Expressionism are interrelated: they are periods of the *Werden* (becoming) and not, like the Renaissance for example, periods of the *Sein* (being). Nietzsche maintained that the German *is* not, he *becomes*, he is forever in the process of evolving.

The Expressionists, who liked to call themselves 'apocalyptic adolescents', display an almost childlike love of youth; they abhor old people, those representatives of a chilly conformism which reproves their unbounded high spirits. Two generations separated by an unbridgable gulf bear a mortal hatred for each other: poignant examples are Werfel's poem *Vater und Sohn*, Kafka's novellas *Metamorphosis* and *The Judgment*, and the plays *Der Sohn* by Hasenclever and *Vatermord* by Bronnen.

The paroxysm that the Germans take for dynamism is found in all the drama of this period, which has since been called† the *O Mensch Periode* (the 'O Man period'). Of *Der Bettler* by Reinhard Sorge, a play written in 1912 and a prototype of the genre, it has been said – and the remark holds good for all the artistic activity of this period – that the world has become so 'permeable' that, at any one moment, Mind, Spirit, Vision and Ghosts seem to gush forth, exterior facts are continually being transformed into interior elements and psychic events are exteriorized. Is this not precisely the atmosphere we find in the classic films of the German cinema?

\* It was surely not a coincidence when the group of Expressionist artists pledged to 'ecstasy' and 'vision' took the name *Sturm*. At times they do indeed recall the period of the *Sturm und Drang* of the young Goethe and his companions Klinger and Lenz, in their short, chopped phrases, exclamations, associations of ideas, and violent imagery.

† After Werfel, quoted on page 11.