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# Expressionism in the Twentieth Century American Drama

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Expressionism in the  
Twentieth Century American Drama

by

Norbert Joseph Hruby

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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### Vita

Norbert Joseph Hruby was born in Cicero, Illinois, on February 4, 1918; he attended and graduated from Riverside Grammar School in June, 1931; he attended and graduated from Riverside-Brookfield High School in June, 1935; he attended and graduated from Loyola University in June, 1939, with a Bachelor of Philosophy degree. He entered the Graduate School in September, 1939. At the present time he is a Graduate Assistant in the Department of English of Loyola University.

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## Expressionism in the Twentieth Century American Drama

### INTRODUCTION: Statement of Purpose

As early as the first decade of the Twentieth century there were evidences of rebellion in the American drama, rebellion against the conventional realistic and sentimental dramas of the late Nineteenth century and the early Twentieth. The aims of this rebellion were poorly defined and even now defy accurate description, but the rebellion, tentative as it was, was real. The old methods of dramaturgy came to be questioned by the younger playwrights, and there was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the peep-hole realism of the prevalent stagecraft. Such plays as Eleanor Gates's The Poor Little Rich Girl (1913), Edward Sheldon's Romance (1912), and George Cram Cook's The Spring (1912) were fumbling attempts to break the hardened shell of serious drama, tempered as it was by the accepted dramaturgy of the French well-made play and the Ibsenesque problem play and the David Belasco realistic-sentimental play. These early attempts were based on no definite program, and, in themselves, they accomplished nothing toward the establishment of a new drama, but they were unmistakable omens of the trend of the revolt to follow. Even Elmer Rice's remarkable experiment in the handling of dramatic material, On Trial (1914), was little more than a skillful adaptation of a cinematic method

by a clever theatrical craftsman.

It was not until Alice Gerstenberg's one-act play, Overtones, was produced by the Washington Square Players in 1915 that some definite indication of the trend of American experimental drama was given. In this play there were distinguishable marks of a new influence, a foreign influence, on the American drama. The vague stirrings which troubled the American drama of these days had been paralleled at a much earlier date in Europe, as early as the time of Strindberg's fantastic dramas in the 1880s. Following Strindberg in a new anti-realistic strain were Maeterlinck and Wedekind, but it remained for young German experimentalists of the new Twentieth century to work out a comprehensive program derived from Strindberg but systematized by them. During the second decade of the Twentieth century a well-defined dramatic movement with its roots and branches spreading into kindred arts developed. This German dramatic experimentalism, which has been lumped together under the heading of Expressionism, was the influence which gave definite shape to the American dramatic rebellion. The influence at first was tenuous, but by the end of the decade it was strong enough to become the basis of a phenomenon in the history of the American theatre. Expressionism never rose to the dignity of a clearly defined movement in the American theatre, but it did give us an

interesting body of plays over the course of the subsequent twenty years; more important still, its presence on the American stage had a profound effect on the general trend of American dramaturgy and especially on the development of American stagecraft.

It is the purpose of this thesis, then, to set forth the chief tenets of the European Expressionists, to define Expressionism as it grew, fructified, and went to seed in Europe, to study those American dramas which show evidence of having been born under the star of the European experimentation, to define, if possible, or, at least, to describe, Expressionism in its American development, and to evaluate its effect on the main body of American drama. Ancillary to the whole of this survey will be a study of the development of a new stagecraft, stemming from the dicta of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig. Expressionism's indebtedness to and furthering of this stagecraft will be noted.

## CHAPTER I: The European Background of Dramatic Expressionism

At its very roots Expressionism is a reaction. It is a protest, frequently violent, against the growing naturalism in the arts, which had its foundation in the materialism of the Nineteenth century. Yet it is not a pendular return to the Romanticism of the early years of the century, for it sets itself up in direct opposition to Romanticism and sentimentalism of all kinds. In its negative aspects, then, Expressionism is anti-naturalistic and anti-Romantic.

The adherents of Expressionism found repugnance in the dominant trends of Nineteenth century thought. C. E. W. L. Dahlström, in his doctoral dissertation on Strindberg's dramatic Expressionism, has summed up concisely the chief factors leading to this reaction. He cites the mechanization of western civilization during the Nineteenth century, the materialism of science, politics, and art, the rationalistic study of the Bible, the comparative study of religions, the development of the evolutionary theory, the growth of materialistic psychology, the tremendous advances of chemistry and physics, and the resultant naturalism in art.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to find fault with Dahlström's findings, for one may easily understand the revulsion artistic temperaments

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<sup>1</sup>Vide Carl Enoch William Leonard Dahlström, Strindberg's Dramatic Expressionism (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930), pp. 8-9.

would have toward a civilization which had enthroned Science, Money, and the Machine as its holy trinity. Certainly it is not to be thought that the more sensitive dramatists were alone in this revolt against the dominant philosophy; rather, let us say, they followed the leaders in the other arts. Painting had begun its rebellion twenty-five or more years before, and the vastly significant Symbolist movement in literature, poetry especially, dated from the middle of the century. Impressionism in the arts, antedating Expressionism by at least a score of years, was just as certainly a revolt against the Nineteenth century as was Expressionism.

From the very nature of the two terms, Impressionism and Expressionism, it has been mistakenly deduced that these two movements are opposed to one another. In actuality the looseness with which they were used, and are still used, has led to this misconception. Isaac Goldberg points out the fallacy when he writes,

For all its Expressionism's avowed opposition to Impressionism, it seems fundamentally but a deeper aspect of the same intense subjectivity predicated by the Impressionists. It is complementary rather than antagonistic to Impressionism, and has been termed the male element in art, in distinction to Impressionism, the female element. One might emphasize the difference between them by saying that Impressionism presents the world in terms of personality, while Expressionism presents personality in terms of the world.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Isaac Goldberg, The Drama of Transition (Cincinnati: Stewart Kidd, 1922), pp. 275-276.

The distinction drawn by Goldberg here is significant and certainly provocative, but its amplification will remain for the third chapter, in which we shall seek further after an adequate description of Expressionism.

We have seen, then, that Expressionism is anti-naturalistic and anti-Romantic, that it is a reaction against the scientific materialism, that it complements Impressionism, and that, in the drama, Expressionism is the product of the same positive factors as are parallel movements in other arts. Again we turn to Dahlström for a terse synopsis of the impetus giving rise to the new movement. He writes,

In philosophy Nietzsche's individualism caught the entire youth of Germany. Furthermore, Bergson's intuitive philosophy, Husserl's phenomenology, the Einfühlung theory of Lipps and its expansion by Worringer, the Als-Ob philosophy of Vaihinger, the philosophy of the unconscious by Hartmann, and the scientific studies of the unconscious by Freud, all these have pointed the way to a new concept and a new expression of reality in art.<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, is a clue to the principles underlying Expressionism in the drama; here, too, is an explanation of the fruition of the movement in Germany and its failure of fruition in America. Whereas in Germany the Expressionist dramatists were guided by a positive philosophical program, in America those dramatists who have tried their hands at Expressionism have been content to take merely the method of Expressionism without

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<sup>1</sup>Dahlström, op. cit., p. 8.

subscribing fully to its philosophical basis. Still it is pertinent that we mention Expressionism's philosophy, for without it Expressionism would not have developed as it did, and without that development there would not have been even a dramatic method to be imitated and adapted by American dramatists.

Drama, we have said, was not the first art to turn to Expressionism; it was one of many which have been based upon the same philosophic and esthetic principles.

... it was through the other arts that Expressionism made its way to the stage. Much of its theoretical background had already been elaborated in painting, which, reacting against that same photographic realism which prevailed in naturalistic drama, sought a certain neo-primitivism by a return to ancient Egyptian art, to the Grecian vases, to the simple, mystic Gothic forms. Unessential detail was abandoned in favor of stylization; in the words of one of their chief theoreticians, Konrad Lange, "The illusion of reality is not a condition of the artistic." ... The tendency was toward the passional immediacy of music, which, in Schneider's words, alone of the arts can be "purely expressionistic." But was it not Verlaine, heralding the Symbolists, who wrote "de la musique avant toute chose"? Expressionism [i.e., dramatic Expressionism] is a child of many ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

Painting, music, and poetry, then, preceded drama in turning to Expressionism for new life. Here, again, we have provocative material for an attempted description of Expressionism, but description is not the end of this chapter.

Since painting seems to have been the first art to turn to Expressionism, and since painting in many respects is an art

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<sup>1</sup>Goldberg, op. cit., pp. 270-271.

kindred to the drama, we shall turn first to the critics and defenders of Expressionistic painting for an understanding of the aims of the esthetic rebels. Marzynski in his work, Die Methode des Expressionismus, avers that the first step in philosophy is to turn from the view of the universe and self as two entities associated more or less by chance. He sees the ego as the essential part of our world, the very heart of its reality. Dahlström paraphrases Marzynski's thought in this way:

The two are inseparable and an ego without the universe is nothing. Conversely, the universe exists only as a world of projected ego. Subject and object are handy tools for the differentiation of ego and universe, but the two are actually one thing. It is my ego and my world which flow together in the unity of the supersubjective individual.<sup>1</sup>

Subject and object, a duality, remain fast in an inseparable union, though each as a separate concept is necessary for the existence of the other. Formerly, art aligned itself on the side of the object; expressionism, however, belongs to the subject, and its work is the objectification of the subject...

One cannot read far into critical works on expressionism, whether in painting or in literature, without encountering again and again the statement that expressionism is trying to realize in other arts what is so fully accomplished in music, the sublimation of the subject. Marzynski tells us that expressionistic art, at least in its radical form, is a kind of optical counterpoint. The artist attempts to build up a work of art abstractly out of colors and patterns.<sup>2</sup>

The element of distortion accounts for much that occurs in expressionistic art. It is not that the artist arbitrarily

<sup>1</sup>Dahlström, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 14.



decides on distortion; it is not simply mutilation of the object...

In the first place, distortion is the result of the attempt to paint the whole psychic experience; to paint all the associations that the ego may acquire in its relation to an object... Form and color, therefore, are inconsequential and may be distorted, really must be distorted, according to the dictates of the psychic complex.<sup>1</sup>

Marzynski insists that such distortion is unimportant in itself, for all reproductions of objects are distortions inasmuch as the senses are notoriously inaccurate witnesses.

This [the selection of elements expresskonistically] gives rise to the so-called telegram-style where the unity in variety is objectively broken, but is subjectively maintained by the control of the consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

Oskar Pfister, in his Expressionism in Art, Its Psychological and Biological Basis, has these observations to make on the philosophic basis of Expressionism:

[The expressionist] objects to the low level of the photographer's camera, reproducing natural colours; the expressionist wants to reproduce the intrinsic meaning of things, their soul-substance. But this grasping of the intrinsic, i.e., the only genuine reality, is not done through an intellectual study of the external world ... no! the creating mind feels itself as the measure of things, because the world is nothing but self-development of Mind. The subjective idealism of a Berkeley, of a Fichte, of a Schuppe reappears in Expressionism, not as the result of a keen critique of knowledge, but as an immediate artistic experience... The expressionist creates out of the depths of things, because he knows himself to

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

be in those depths. To paint out of himself and to paint himself means to reproduce the intrinsic nature of things, the Absolute. The artist creates, out of his own inner Self, and in his own likeness.<sup>1</sup>

He then paraphrases Fritz Burger, a leading theoretician on the movement, who shows more passion than philosophic objectivity; yet his remarks on the aims of Expressionism are revealing; he writes, according to Pfister,

Expressionism does not want to be any longer the object of an aesthetically educated caste, but the embodiment of that incommensurable world which comprises our Inner Self. It will not deliver from the World but bring about for us the possession of the World's Inner Greatness, the wonderful wealth of variety in form of the Creative Power itself, which is the salvation and the ruin of us all. As a moulding world-view it desires to be a religion freed from the past of history. At the moment that the optical and chemical sciences are able to reproduce the coloured empirical Reality perfectly, a dream of millenia comes true... Art will retire into her holy realm, her very own, and will curse the enjoying eye and the limping wisdom of the aesthete as well as the vulgar joys of the mob, and will conclude an unheard-of alliance with Philosophy already meeting her half-way. Both turn away from the Empirical World mapped out according to the dictates of Natural Sciences, in order to grasp formatively the meaning of life within a world-view often permeated with mystical ideas. With it Art is brought back to its oldest original purpose.<sup>2</sup>

Even after discounting Burger's prophetic ardor, we see from this something of the faith at the basis of the Expressionists' thinking; we can understand, too, something of the cause for their not infrequent excesses.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 20; quoted from Expressionism in Art, Its Psychological and Biological Basis, pp. 189-190.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 21; quoted from Pfister, op. cit., pp. 190-191.

We turn with Dahlström now to the more directly significant pronouncements of the critics on literary Expressionism. He cites the writings of Hermann Bahr on the primitivity already mentioned by Goldberg.<sup>1</sup> Dahlström writes,

Bahr does not point to regression toward the primitive but rather indicates the character of literary primitivity. The artist is not simply a reproducer of primitive art, not simply a modern individual who reverts to primitive man; rather the artist is Le Penseur who dwells in an ur-atmosphere of ur-feeling, or ur-emotions and of ur-activity. He is quite nude, without the clothes of modern civilization, but he is a thinker and not a shrieking or yowling savage... Ur-ishness points to the unattached cosmic spirit that gives man his essential and enduring worth.<sup>2</sup>

Bahr, according to Dahlström, explains away the extreme subjectivism sometimes attributed to Expressionism in this manner:

The literary man cries out for the subject, turns to his own soul, and may even shout wildly for pure unadulterated feeling; but this remains in part only gesture, for literary expressionism never entirely forsakes the object. The cry of distress is for intellect, for Geist, as well as for feeling, for Seele. The literary expressionist does not regress toward the primitive, where unqualified subjectivism would deliver him, but rather he struggles for the expression of what is eternal from the ur-man throughout all succeeding mankind. Furthermore, he seeks for deliverance from the insufferable bonds of an all too materialistic civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Dahlström next turns to Kasimir Edschmid's Über den Expressionismus in der Literatur und die neue Dichtung for

<sup>1</sup>Vide supra, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Dahlström, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

the Expressionists' chief argument against realism and naturalism. He writes,

... no one doubts that apparent reality is after all not essentially real, that observed reality is not the essence of an object. That classified facts are not enough for us, not enough to give us a true picture of the universe and a concept of its essential core. It is in the vision of the artist that we obtain this genuine view, not from the mere form or representation of stuff that the artist gives us, but from the essential reality that the artist wrests from matter. The artist's intuition is the functional element that makes possible the wresting of reality from matter.<sup>1</sup>

He then summarized Edschmid's defense of Expressionistic typification.

He [Edschmid] stresses again the fact that the typical plays an important role in expressionism, furthermore, that the typical carries in it the idea of motion, of becoming, of the dynamic state. What is presented, for instance, is not a thought, but thinking; not an embrace, but embracing. As the individual is representation of something isolated and static, so is the typical a manifestation of movement.<sup>2</sup>

This amplification of the Expressionist doctrine clarifies the status of subjectivity in it; the subjectivity is of the creative artist primarily, not of the character or characters dramatized. Goldberg insists upon this same point when he writes,

They [the expressionists] seek to create a fourth-dimensional technique in which time and space dissolve into the velocity of thought. Artifice is replaced by intuition, even in the acting; ideas, not theses, prevail;

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-31.

feeling, not psychology, is dominant. The materials are to be employed as a composer employs his notes: merging them into the unity of an immediate appeal. The whole, with its preference for symbolic types rather than characterized individuals, is to be infused with, or suffused in, an atmosphere of exaltation...

As a result of the intenser preoccupation with self, the new type of play develops particular forms, which, while they may often be referred to models in the past..., possess a decidedly contemporary significance. This has been termed Ego-drama, and has, almost through necessity, developed into what might be called Alter-ego-drama. No longer does man struggle against a Greek Fate, against other men, but he is at war with his other selves. In himself he is a microcosm, the very scene of all his conflicts. Hence the frequency of dream-representations, the many shiftings of scene, the rapid revue-technique, the telegraphic text. Much of this passion for a new spirituality, indeed, suggests a modernization of the mystery, the auto sacramental, the morality; at times it sinks to a sort of psychoanalytical allegory. Self is often companioned by counter-self..., or by a multitude of changing selves...

The drama, in short, becomes autobiographical, as did the novel before it. Hence these kaleidoscopic soul-adventures.<sup>1</sup>

A point which Goldberg makes implicitly above is that psychology is abandoned in favor of psychoanalysis in Expressionistic literature; this point is not traceable merely to an arbitrary adherence to the teachings of Freud and Jung -- rather it is a complementary aspect of the whole theory of Expressionism. The interdependence of typification and psychoanalysis is made clear by Max Picard, another critic cited by Dahlström, paraphrasing a passage in Picard's Expressionismus:

The expressionist wants to fix pure absolute being. In so doing he turns away from psychology and makes his appeal

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<sup>1</sup>Goldberg, op. cit., pp. 276-278.

to logic. Psychology creates a fertile readiness for nuances, all of which are relative. Expressionism, however, is desirous of preventing further relativization, because it wants to isolate, and to fix one single typical thing...

Thus the expressionist is not a psychologist. He is much more a psychoanalyst, contradictory as that may seem. Yet psychology lets a thousand things come from one thing whereas psychoanalysis unites a thousand into one. It assembles thousands of experiences out of chaos, unites them and fixes them into a single experience.<sup>1</sup>

From the mass of German criticism of Expressionism Dahlström arrives at six control factors for the study of Expressionist drama. These he lists as Ausstrahlungen des Ichs, The Unconscious, Seele, Music, Religion, and The Worth of Man.<sup>2</sup> In order to clarify his terminology we shall treat briefly of each of these control factors.

By Ausstrahlungen des Ichs is meant the unfolding of the ego, the objectification of inner experience. It involves the essential duality of Self and Universe so strongly emphasized by the Expressionists, in which the Self is the center, the predominant element, in the Universe. All matter is important only insofar as it assists in the sublimation of the subject. Subjectivity, then, is at the core of Expressionism, and as a result the drama turns autobiographical. Since psychoanalysis supplants psychology,

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<sup>1</sup>Dahlström, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

<sup>2</sup>Vide ibid., p. 80.

the type-character supplants the individual character of the realistic or naturalistic drama. Certain devices such as the soliloquy and the aside appear as corollaries to the Expressionistic theory of drama, and have actually become conventions of this type of drama. We might use Subjectivity as a term synonymous to Ausstrahlungen des Ichs in the designation of this control factor.

By the Unconscious, Dahlström's second control factor, is meant the Expressionist dramatist's preoccupation with Freudian psychoanalysis as a pattern-creating means of interpreting life. Intuition crowds reason from its position of pre-eminence as a guide to living, and the resultant distortion is the natural produce of so subjective an approach. We may follow Dahlström's explanation here with profit; he writes,

The unconscious plays a definite role in this scheme of things. Intuition cannot be credited alone to consciousness, for then the scientist could immediately fasten upon this faculty and explain it to us. Intuition must be viewed more or less as an experience-permutation, or experience-combination, projecting definitely, if not clearly and fully, into the conscious. We note that in dreams we do not always encounter manifestations of recent objective experience. In fact, it seems that the whole mind has to fasten on an objective experience and brood on it to occasion the appearance in a dream that closely follows the experience itself. Usually, there is a queer combination of past events, things that have slumbered away from consciousness and memory and dropped into the unconscious, secret desires or events lacking conscious vividness, that make up the character of our dreams. So it is with intuition; it arises more or less

as an experience-permutation from the unconscious.<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that the Expressionist should turn to dreams for some of his dramatic material, for there he is liberated from the restrictive demands of the psychologist's rigid sense of reality and causality; he is free to synthesize the welter of sense-experience purely in terms of the central ego of the drama. As we would expect, the dramatized dream with dream-characters, the free use of pantomime, and the telegram-style of dialogue and action becomes the principal theatrical corollary of this control factor.

Dahlström's third control factor, Seele, stems from the Expressionist's predilection for the neo-primitive.<sup>2</sup> It "accounts for the pure untrammelled feeling in man. It is an expression of his yearning for the absolute, his ecstasy in apprehending, if not fully comprehending, the essential reality of our universe."<sup>3</sup> Dahlström distinguishes Seele from Geist by saying that "Seele feels the chaos, whereas Geist thinks the cosmos,"<sup>4</sup> and he is careful to assert their interdependence, so often ignored by the early protagonists of Expressionism. Clearly, Seele, with its complement Geist, is the effect of a neo-primitivity, an

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Dahlström, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 55.



Ur-ishness, which forms one of the important bases of many a modern esthetic theory. We shall call this control factor Primitivity of Feeling, understand by it man as a Rousseauistic Penseur rather than as a howling savage.

The fourth control factor is the immensely important one of music. No other part has the "passional immediacy", to use Goldberg's words, of music; and for this reason it is only natural to expect a parallel between music and the Expressionistic dramatic technique. Expressionistic drama attempts to objectify inner experience by the same general means employed by music -- and appeal directly to the emotions, not, however, merely through the auditory sense, but through the visual as well. The critics and defenders of Expressionism make a great deal of "optical counterpoint" in developing the analogy between music and theatrical decor and direction. They hold, too, for lyricism in the drama, and defend verse as the most natural medium of speech for the actors. Expressionistic drama, its defenders insist, should be symphonic or at least rhapsodic in structure, for only thus can the dramatist achieve the unity and emotionality of appeal required by the underlying philosophy of the theory.

Dahlström sets up religion as the fifth control factor. Expressionism and contemporary esthetic theories arose in reaction against the materialism of the Nineteenth century;

positively, they sought to spiritualize the subject matter of art, and so, although they do not turn to institutional religion, they are earnest in their search for God. Expressionism, in application, may not always find a personal God, but it always seeks beyond the mere matter of the physical and biological scientists; in it, too, there is always a suggestion of the supernatural and of an awareness of things inexplicable in terms of science alone.

The worth of man, Dahlström's sixth control factor, is a logical consequence of the first factor, Subjectivity. Man, to the Expressionist, has an essential individuality and dignity. Dahlström writes,

Stress on mankind, on human values, surges through expressionistic drama and is an important element... "The World begins in Man!" ... Away, then, with all these things that tend to rob man of his opportunity to realize himself! Away with the materialistic notions that enslave man to machines and machine-made concepts! ... For expressionism, there is no problem of the individual and the group to be solved mechanically and captioned Anarchism, Republicanism, Democracy, Socialism, Communism, or any other -ism. Again, expressionism would point out that the individual on the one hand and the group on the other are anti-poles; the heart of reality lies somewhere between the two. This heart of reality lies in the spiritual brotherhood of man, and can only be attained by a reevaluation of the meaning of human. Expressionism points to essential human values rather than to the product of man's hands or intellect.<sup>1</sup>

Too often Expressionism is misconceived as a kind of theatrical Communism. This misconception probably arises from two factors,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-59.

one esthetic and the other historical. It is valid, perhaps, but scarcely true, to draw an analogy between extremism in art and extremism in politics and economics -- still, such an analogy has frequently been taken as proof rather than as merely an indication of kinship. Historically it has been true that Expressionism has found more supporters among Left Wing dramatists than elsewhere, but in itself this fact does not indicate a link between Communism and Expressionism any more than the presence of the Spanish Inquistadors indicates a link between the Church and persecution. According to Dahlström's synthesis of critical opinion on Expressionism, it is above political and economic and religious creeds; it is an esthetic theory based upon an idealistic philosophy -- beyond that it is nothing but a dramatic technique.

To summarize then we find that the control factors of European Expressionistic drama are the following:

1. Subjectivity.
2. The Unconscious.
3. Primitivity of Feeling.
4. Music.
5. Religion.
6. The Worth of Man.

## CHAPTER II: The Basis of Expressionistic Stagecraft

Any discussion of Expressionism which neglects a study of its stagecraft tells but a part of the story. Just as Expressionistic dramas have taken many forms, so too has their stagecraft been widely varied; but underlying this diversity is a unity of theory. Expressionistic stagecraft is based ultimately on the dicta of Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig. The stagecraft developed in their imaginations was not devised for the Expressionistic playwrights, but their theories are so perfect adaptable to the dramatic visions of the playwrights that they became virtually corollaries of the Expressionistic theory of drama. A study of the doctrines of Appia and Craig will reveal the fundamental compatibility of their stagecraft and dramatic Expressionism.

The names of Appia and Craig are so often mentioned together that it may sometimes be supposed that they worked in conjunction; quite the contrary is true. They worked on and arrived at, independently, conclusions concerning stagecraft which are in part analogous and in part complementary. Synthesized, their theories form the basis of Expressionistic stagecraft, but since the work of each was independent of the other's, we shall approach them singly.

Adolphe Appia, an Italian Swiss, dreaming over the music dramas of his beloved Richard Wagner, came to some startling conclusions regarding theatrical technique during

the closing years of the Nineteenth century. He states, as the basis of his theory, the following:

When a playwright has completed his play, what is the element essential to its performance? The actor, unquestionably. Without the actor there can be no action, hence no performance, hence no play -- except on our bookshelves. The first stage in externalization is the actor. In space -- space "without form and void" -- the actor represents three dimensions; he is plastic and occupies accordingly a fragment of space upon which he imposes his form. But the actor is not a statue; being plastic, he is also alive, and his life is expressed by movement; he occupies space not only by his volume, but also by his movement. His body, isolated in an unlimited space, measures that space by its gestures and evolutions; or, more precisely, he appropriates a portion of that space, he limits and conditions it. Remove him, and space reverts to its infinity and eludes us. In this sense, the body creates space. What we need is to master Time, in a similar way.<sup>1</sup>

Even without further explanation we can see a basic congeniality between Appia's emphasis of the actor and the Expressionists' norm of subjectivity.

Beyond a doubt, Appia's preoccupation with Wagnerian music drama led him to assert the necessity of music in theatrical production. His conception of the role of music in the drama is singularly close to that of the Expressionists.<sup>2</sup> He sees it as the means of mastering Time.<sup>3</sup> Jean Mercier writes,

The idea of time is supplied by music, that of space by

<sup>1</sup>Adolphe Appia, "The Future of Production" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XVI (August 1932), p. 649.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, pp. 7, 8, 17.

<sup>3</sup>Vide last sentence of Appia's statement, quoted above.

the body of the actor and the acting area...

Music, which, even more than the text, controls the gestures and the movements of the actors, also creates the space where the dramatic action develops and, in consequence, directs the conception of the scenery... According to Appia the mounting of a play must follow the music. This duty is, in turn, a right: to modify the proportions of space as music modifies those of time. It is therefore possible to take the same liberties, to introduce the same changes within that given space which is the stage of the theatre, as music does within the given duration of time represented by the score. As music modifies the relation of time to life, so scenery will modify the relation of life to space.<sup>1</sup>

Mercier illustrates Appia's conception in this manner:

As the lovers [Romeo and Juliet] pass, their souls meet in a glance. The music, occupied only with inner meanings, seizes this moment and magnifies it, abolishing, for the lovers and for the audience, the ordinary measure of time; it introduces a new duration of time in which nothing but this glance exists.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, then, music is more than just appropriate accompaniment or pleasant gap-filling; it is at the very core of the drama itself. Appia writes,

The play without music will yet survive a long time, maybe forever, and its staging, tainted with dead tradition, will find new life at the touch of a less specialized art; it will adopt and distort these new elements. But the art of staging can be an art only if it derives from music. This does not mean that a spoken play may not be excellently performed at times; but this measure of excellence will always be fortuitous.

... music has not yet been recognized as what it is, the basic governing element unique of its kind and peerless in its power.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Jean Mercier, "Adolphe Appia; the Re-birth of Dramatic Art" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XVI (August 1932), pp. 618-619.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 619.

<sup>3</sup>Appia, op. cit., pp. 657, 666.

We may feel that Appia is a bit over-enthusiastic in this pronouncement, but at least he does succeed in making his point.

Two principles of Appia's theory, then, are the actor's role of "creating space" and music's role of "creating time", both of which are in close accord with two of the control factors of dramatic Expressionism. A third principle, and probably that one which has had the most profound effect upon the modern theatre, is his conception of lighting. Years before the electric light had been developed Appia foretold the whole of modern stage-lighting; it remained only for the inventor and the engineer to catch up with the workings of his imagination to give us the highly effective stage-lighting of the present day.

As Lee Simonson points out, Appia conceived scenic design as composed of four plastic elements, perpendicular painted scenery, the horizontal floor, the moving actor, and the lighted space in which they are confined.<sup>1</sup> Simonson continues his exposition by writing,

... in promulgating his theory of a [plastic] stage setting he completed its unification by insisting on the plasticity of light itself, which no one before him had conceived. He demonstrated in detail, both as a theorist and as a draftsman, how stage lighting could be used and controlled so as to establish a completely unified three-dimensional world on the stage. Appia distinguishes carefully between light that is empty, diffuse radiance, a medium in which things become visible, as fish do in a

<sup>1</sup>vide Lee Simonson, "Appia's Contribution to the Modern Stage" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XVI (August 1932), p. 632.

bowl of water, and concentrated light striking an object in a way that defines its essential form. Diffused light produces blank visibility, in which we recognize objects without emotion. But the light that is blocked by an object and casts shadows has a sculpturesque quality that by the vehemence of its definition, by the balance of light and shade, can carve an object before our eyes. It is capable of arousing us emotionally because it can so emphasize and accent forms as to give them new force and meaning. In Appia's theories, as well as in his drawings, the light which in paintings has already been called dramatic was for the first time brought into the theatre, where its dramatic values could be utilized.

Chiaroscuro, so controlled as to reveal essential or significant form, with which painters had been preoccupied for three centuries, became, as Appia described it, an expressive medium for the scene designer. The light that is important in the theatre, Appia declares, is the light that casts shadows. It alone defines and reveals. The unifying power of light creates the desired fusion that can make stage floor, scenery, and actor one.<sup>1</sup>

Appia himself writes that "The poet-musician paints his picture with light."<sup>2</sup> This more than just fine rhetoric; this is the kernel of the Appian theory.

Simonson proceeds to show the interrelationship of the lighting and the musical score of a play; he writes,

Light controlled and directed was the counterpart of a musical score; its flexibility, fluidity, and shifting emphasis provided the same opportunity for evoking the emotional values of a performance rather than the factual ones. As music released the mood of a scene, projecting the deepest emotional meaning of an event as well as its apparent action, so the fluctuating intensities of light could transfigure an object and clothe it with all its emotional implications.<sup>3</sup>

Appia's supreme intuition was his recognition that

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 636.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., quoted on p. 637.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 638.



light can play as directly upon our emotions as music does.<sup>1</sup>

All of this discussion of direct play upon the emotions is in perfect keeping with the Expressionists' third control factor, primitivity of feeling, which includes under it purity of feeling and emotion.<sup>2</sup> Appia strives to give lighting the same "passional immediacy" characteristic of music, and, further, to fuse the two, lighting and music, with the actor, scenery, and floor into a single, effective theatrical unit. Again we find a parallel desire for unity existing in Appia and the Expressionists.

In his treatment of light Appia was not all visionary artist; potentially, at least, he was a practical man of the theatre. He suggests a device to aid the producer of a play which has now become a commonplace in the modern production -- the light-plot. This light-plot, in reality, is nothing but a carefully worked-out set of notations governing the kinds of light to be used at each moment during a play; it is very much like a conductor's score of a symphony, for as Simonson says, "Conducting a light-rehearsal [from a light-plot] is very like conducting an orchestra. Every lamp is a separate instrument carrying its own thread of symphonic effect, now carrying a theme, now supporting it."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 639.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Simonson, op. cit., p. 641.

Now, as to Appia's use of stage-lighting, Simonson writes as follows:

The amazingly concrete quality of Appia's vision is again made apparent by the fact that he predicted the present technical set-up of our stage lighting systems. With nothing more to guide him than the rudimentary systems of his day he understood their inadequacy. He divided light-sources on the stage into two systems -- diffused or general light, which merely flooded the stage with an even radiance, called flood-lighting today, and focussed, mobile light, now known as spot-lighting. It was this almost neglected source of light which Appia pointed to as the important one.<sup>1</sup>

A certain proportion of ... lamps are directed at scenery, part are concentrated on actors' faces. Appia insisted that the "plastic power of light" was as important for the actor as for the set. He inveighed against the flattening effect of footlights on actors' faces and ascribes the over-loading of make-up to the fact that an even brilliance from below wiped out all expression from human features whereas focussed light could model actors' and carve expression into them like a sculptor. "But," he adds, "light will not be used merely to strengthen or to weaken by modelling of a face; rather it will serve to unite it or to isolate it from the scenic background, in a natural way, depending on whether the role of a particular actor dominates a scene or is subordinate to it."<sup>2</sup>

"Light can be coloured, either by its own quality or by coloured glass slides; it can project pictures,<sup>3</sup> or every degree of intensity, varying from the faintest blurred tonalities to the sharpest definition. Although both diffused and concentrated (plastic) light need an object to focus on, they do not change its character; the former makes it more or less perceptible, the latter

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 640.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 641.

<sup>3</sup>Vide subter, Chapter V (Section D); the projection of still and motion pictures on parts of the stage in the Federal Theatre Project Living Newspapers during the last four or five years has been a literal adaptation of Appia's suggestion.

more or less expressive. Coloured light in itself changes the colour of pigments that reflect it, and by means of projected pictures or combinations of coloured light can create a milieu on the stage or even actual things that before the light was projected did not exist."<sup>1</sup>

Appia's vision was full-blown; it has only been a matter of time for its complete realization.

Emphasis of the actor, preoccupation with music, and the reform of stage-lighting are not the whole of Appia's contribution to the theatre. He revolutionized the use of scenery. Simonson's analysis of Appia's approach to the stages of his day bears careful reading; he writes,

The aesthetic problem of scenic design, as Appia made plain, is a plastic one. The designer's task is to relate forms in space, some of which are static, some of which are mobile. The stage itself is an enclosed space. Organization must be actually three-dimensional. The painted illusion of the third dimension, valid in the painted picture where it can evoke both space and mass, is immediately negated when it is set on a stage, where the third dimension is real.

The plastic elements involved in scenic design, as Appia analyzed them, are four: perpendicular painted scenery, the horizontal floor, the moving actor, and the lighted space in which they are confined. The aesthetic problem, as he pointed out, is a single one: How are these four elements to be combined so as to produce an indubitable unity? For ... he was aware that the plastic elements of a production remained irretrievably at odds if left to themselves. Looking at the stages about him he saw that the scene-painter of his day merely snipped his original picture into so many pieces which he stood about the stage, and then expected the actor to find his way among them as best he could. The painted backdrop was the only part of an ensemble of painted scenery that was not a ludicrous compromise.

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<sup>1</sup>Simonson, op. cit., p. 641.

Naturally the scene-painter was interested, being a painter, in presenting as many sketches of unbroken canvas as possible. Their centre of interest was about midway between the top of the stage and the stage floor at a point where according to the line of sight of most of the audience, they attained their maximum pictorial effect. But the actor works on the stage floor at a point where painted decorations are least effective as painting. So long as the emphasis of stage setting is on painted decoration, the inanimate picture is no more than a coloured illustration into which the text, animated by the actor, is brought. The two collide, they never meet nor establish any interaction of the slightest dramatic value, whereas, in Appia's phrase, they should be fused...

To Appia the actor was massgebend -- the unit of measurement. Unity could be created only by relating every part of a setting to him. He was three-dimensional, therefore the entire setting would have to be made consistently three-dimensional. The stage could have no true aesthetic organization unless it was coherently plastic throughout...

One began to set a stage not in mid-air on hanging backdrops, but on the stage floor where the actor moved and worked. It should be broken up into levels, hummocks, slopes, and planes that supported and enhanced his movements. And these were again not to be isolated -- a wooden platform draped with canvas here, a block of rock there, planted on a bare board floor, a "chaise-longue made of grass mats." The stage floor was to be a completely fused plastic unit. Appia in this connection thinks in terms of sculpture. In order to make a model of a stage floor he described one would have to use clay. He considered the entire space occupied by a stage setting as a sculpturesque unit. The solidity achieved by setting wings at right angles to each other to imitate the corner of a building seemed to him feebly mechanical. He conceived much freer stage compositions where the entire area could be modelled as a balance of asymmetrical, spatial forms, a composition in three dimensions, that merged imperceptibly with the confining planes that bounded the setting as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is the theory of stagecraft proposed by Appia;

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 632-635.

finding its inspiration in music, it strives to transcend mere analogy and actually to use musical means of arousing emotion.

As an artist Appia found release in music because its emphasis was emotional rather than factual and so supplied a norm which an artist could approximate until his settings were equally expressive. Stage pictures were to be freed from the necessity of reproducing backgrounds of action; they were to be transfigured until every element in them embodied the emotions that it was to arouse as an integral part of its form, its colour, and its total design.

Ausdrucks kraft -- the force of expression, expressiveness -- was one of Appia's favourite terms, and became the cornerstone on which most of the later doctrines of theatrical expressionism were reared. "Music finds its ultimate justification in our hearts," he wrote, using that traditional term to summarize the emotional core of our being, "and this occurs so directly, that its expression is thereby impalpably hallowed. When stage pictures take on spatial forms dictated by the rhythms of music they are not arbitrarily by on the contrary have the quality of being inevitable."<sup>1</sup>

There remains but one thing to be said directly upon Appia's theory of stagecraft. Credit for first insisting upon the autocracy of the dramatic director has frequently been mistakenly given to Gordon Craig. Craig, an incomparably more articulate theorist than Appia, made much of the director's autocracy, as we shall see, but Appia's pronouncement on the subject preceded his by at least a decade -- this is not to say that Craig was merely paraphrasing Appia's teaching; in all probability he arrived at his conclusion independently of Appia, but still it was Appia who first insisted on the

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<sup>1</sup>Simonson, The Stage Is Set (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1932), pp. 351-352.

dominant importance of the director controlling every element of a theatrical production. Appia's meaning is unmistakable; he writes,

To be an artist means, after all, to conceive and to execute a work of art. If this involves a division of labor, the division is only apparent, not real; the artist will and must be, always and in everything, the master; the work he offers the audience is his own work, otherwise it has no place in the realm of art.<sup>1</sup>

Gordon Craig is a phenomenon of the modern revolt in drama. It was he who stormed against the unshakably realistic theatre of his native England during the early years of the Twentieth century. Perhaps there has never been a more voluble nor a more enthusiastic nor a more indefatigable polemist for a set of esthetic notions than he. Craig stands at the opposite pole from Appia who was shy to the point of reticence; we need look no further than Craig's own writings and drawings to discern the whole of his argument.

Craig, like Appia, takes music as his point of departure. He writes,

... what of that infinite and beautiful thing dwelling in space called Movement? From sound has been drawn that wonder of wonders called music.

And as like one sphere to another, so is Movement like Music. I like to remember that all things spring from movement, even music; and I like to think that it is to be our supreme honour to be the ministers to the supreme force -- movement. For you see where the theatre (even the poor distracted and desolate theatre) is connected with this service. The theatres of all lands, east and west, have developed (if a degenerate development) from

<sup>1</sup>Appia, op. cit., pp. 652-653.

movement, the movement of the human forms. We know so much, for it is on record: and before the human being assumed the grave responsibility of using his own person as an instrument through which this beauty should pass, there was another and a wiser race, who used other instruments.<sup>1</sup>

It is movement, then, the counterpart of music, which is at the root of drama. Springing as it does from a single principle, Craig reasons, the drama must have unity if it is to be more than a bastard art. The autocracy of the director ("stage manager" in Craig's vocabulary) is the means of achieving that unity. Before looking at his conception of the ideal director, we will do well to understand the art of which this man is to be the master -- the "art of the theatre", in Craig's words. Craig defines the art of the theatre in this manner:

... the Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which the very essence of dance.<sup>2</sup>

In these words is implicitly contained the basis for a new unity in the theatre; it is a conception of the drama, not as a loose mixture of several arts, but as a thoroughly synthesized compound composed of many elements which lose

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre (London: William Heinemann, 1911), pp. 47-48.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

their essential individualities in the new individuality of a unified art.

How is this to be done? Craig's answer is his stage manager. He writes,

... let us ask any regisseur in Europe or America, if he can imagine and invent that which is to be presented to the audience; that is to say, the piece, the play, the idea, or whatever you may call it. Let us ask him whether he can design the scenes and costumes for that piece, and whether he can superintend their construction -- that is to say, whether he knows the secrets of line and colour and their manipulation. Let us ask him whether he can direct without the aid of experts the different workmen who are employed on account of their utility, not on account of their imagination. And if there is one such man in Europe or America who can reply "Yes" to all these questions, he is the man to whom control of the stages of Europe and America should be offered; such a man would be able to acquire the same capacities as himself, for he would know what was necessary...

And so it is that unity, as I have said, is absent from the Art of the Theatre.<sup>1</sup>

These words, of course, are merely an amplification of Appia's insistence on the director's autocracy,<sup>2</sup> but they are important, for they indicate that more than one serious dramatic theorist at this time was concerned with the search for unity, so characteristic of the Expressionistic critics and playwrights.

It is in the matter of stage design that Craig has made his great contribution to modern stagecraft. It may well be that no play as planned by Craig will ever be produced, but his vividly imaginative arguments aroused serious thinkers in

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-102.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, p. 30.



the theatre to the realization that there was more to drama than drawing-room comedies set in photographically realistic interiors. Although Craig's ideas may not even now be practicable in the theatre, they suggest a method of stagecraft never even dreamed of before Appia and never made popular knowledge before his own time. Craig outlines this method thus:

... he [the stage manager] first of all chooses certain colours which seem to him to be in harmony with the spirit of the play, rejecting other colours as out of tune. He then weaves into a pattern certain objects -- an arch, a fountain, a balcony, a bed -- using the chosen object as the centre of his design. Then he adds to this all the objects which are mentioned in the play, and which are necessary to be seen. To these he adds, one by one, each character which appears in the play, and gradually each movement of each character, and each costume.<sup>1</sup>

... He [then] clears the stage of all but the one, two, or more characters who are to commence the play, and he begins the scheme of lighting these figures and the scene.<sup>2</sup>

... The only thing to do is to remove all the footlights out of all the theatres as quickly as possible and say nothing about it.<sup>3</sup>

... [the leading actor and the leading actress] must ... be the very first to follow the direction of the stage-manager, so often do they become the very centre of the pattern -- the very heart of the emotional design.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas Appia begins with the actor in his conception of stage-

<sup>1</sup>Craig, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 160. Vide supra, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 162. Vide supra, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 166.

craft, Craig begins with a dominant color or dominant colors. Regardless of their respective springboards, however, both Appia and Craig have the same end in view: the creation of a milieu which will have a direct appeal to the emotions to be evoked by the play.

Perhaps no project for the production of a play is more famous than Craig's for Macbeth,<sup>1</sup> but lack of space forbids inclusion of this highly evocative application of his method, outlined on the previous page. The concluding statement of this passage, however, bears quotation; he writes, "Actuality, accuracy of detail, is useless upon the stage."<sup>2</sup> These must have come as shockingly radical words in his own day, for realism was regarded then as the greatest achievement of modern drama in most circles. It was a bold, rebellious statement and stemmed from the same roots which were at the base of the Expressionistic revolt against Nineteenth century materialism and naturalism. And the statement, too, indicates clearly the influence of a man of Craig's stature, but it required courage, too, to fly in the face of tradition. He was bound to make a profound impression on the dramatic rebels of his own and subsequent times.

It would be foolish to assert that all Expressionistic

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<sup>1</sup>Vide ibid., pp. 22-27.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

stagecraft is purely in the tradition of Appia and Craig; yet fundamentally these two men suggested the means of putting the new drama on the stage. The Expressionists were rebels, and as such, they were naturally averse to accepting in toto the doctrines of any single theorist; each production was, in a sense, a fresh experiment, but the variations in technique which each employed may be seen to be no more than variations on the theme first enunciated by Appia and Craig.

The settings of the Expressionist-Realists, who were influenced partly by the Cubists, partly by such painters as Van Gogh and Kokoschka and partly by Appia and Fuchs, were seen for the first time in Germany. Their settings and costumes were composed of such forms as could "wake up the emotions," giving the play partly realistic and partly symbolic significance. In most cases they consist of fragments of architecture or a single object (a large bed, for instance).<sup>1</sup> These do not occupy the whole stage, but are set in space and picked out by lights.<sup>2</sup> Even when the whole stage is in use, the same principle of spotting the area of action is applied. Following Appia, they give preference to three-dimensional sets, but, unlike Appia, use paint as well as lighting for colour. Sometimes the colour has symbolic and even allegorical significance.<sup>3</sup>

From this brief summary of European Expressionistic stagecraft we can arrive at some notion of the diversity of influences working on the producers of Expressionistic dramas, but over them all two figures tower -- Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig.

<sup>1</sup>Vide supra, p. 33: Craig's outline of method.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, pp. 23, 26: Appia's conceptions of space and light.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Komisarjsevsky and Lee Simonson, Settings and Costumes of the Modern Stage (London: The Studio, Ltd., 1933), p. 13.

### CHAPTER III: Descriptions of Dramatic Expressionism Based upon European Experimentation

In view of the determination of the control factors of dramatic Expressionism it may be wondered that a separate chapter is devoted to a description of the theory. The reason is apparent when it is remembered that the norms set up by Dahlström are based upon German critical writings, the mass of which antedates any extensive application of the theory. The norms, then, in a sense, are objectives rather than deductions; they establish the goals, but they do not necessarily establish the evolutionary form of Expressionistic drama from which the American Expressionistic drama developed. That evolutionary form we can see best through the eyes of observers who witnessed it upon the stage and who, in their subsequent writings, attempted to extract the essence of dramatic Expressionism from it.

Instead of turning directly to attempted definitions and descriptions of European dramatic Expressionism, we shall look first at a more general definition, that of Expressionism taken merely as an esthetic theory, not a dramatic theory. Sheldon Cheney, an American critic and long-time defender of Expressionism, puts forth this definition:

Primarily Expressionism is pre-occupation with the emotion evoked by an object, or purely creatively out of the artist's consciousness, and the conveying of that emotion by aesthetic form, as against pre-occupation with the outward aspect and appearance of the object and technical display in imitating it... That approach of Expressionism finds its direction from the conception

of art as primarily expression instead of representation... The Expressionist says that it makes absolutely no difference whether an artist's completed work is like or unlike anything in nature, so long as he conveys that aesthetic emotion which he has experienced (possibly out of nature, possibly out of nothing tangible or seeable); and he further claims that in the struggle for technical finish, the desire for smoothed-down, facile and sweet surface execution, certain more important elements have been lost or obscured; native vigor, emotion, that something indefinable called form. He distorts nature oftener than not, he sometimes abandons recognizable objects entirely in favor of abstract arrangements, he strikes through to the essentials of emotion and form without regard to the niceties of surface technique.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, this descriptive definition agrees with the control factors of Dahlström and provides us with a basic idea to which we may refer other attempts for comparison.

Several writers have attempted general definitions of dramatic Expressionism without any special reference to time or place. Glenn Hughes's essentially negative definition is accurate, chiefly because of its negativity; Graham Sutton's over-simplified definition does no more than mention one important characteristic of dramatic Expressionism. Each of these definitions is typical of one or the other of the two kinds of general definition: the negative is fundamentally correct because its looseness allows for interpretation; the over-simplified fails because it tells only a part of the story. The latter, therefore, is unsatisfactory while the former also falls short of success because it leaves too

<sup>1</sup>Sheldon Cheney, "German Expressionism in Wood" in International Studio, Vol. 75 (June 1922), p. 252.

much unsaid. Hughes's definition follows:

This [Expressionism] is a word which one hesitates to use, for its implications are many, and its abuses many. It is not an exclusive term: in fact, it might correctly be applied to certain productions mounted in any one of the four previously mentioned non-realistic manners [formal stage, relief stage, circus, and marionette]. It does not depend on the nature of the stage, the lack or presence of a curtain, the nature of the actor, the dimensional value of settings, or upon any other physical condition. It is strictly a point of view. Expressionism, in brief, is a name for any method of theatrical production which is opposed to representation for its own sake. In other words, whether the materials of production (actors, scenery, properties, et cetera) are real or artificial, recognizable imitations of natural objects, or abstract symbols of mood and feeling, does not matter. They are expressionistic if they are used to convey a significance other than that of mere representation. For example, a common chair and a table will signify, in the typical realistic production, nothing more than their obvious qualities of "chairness" and "tableness." But in the hands of an expressionist they will be so placed or so related to their surroundings that they will carry, in addition to their obvious qualities, a subtle, but appreciable emotional significance. They will, theoretically at least, contribute actively to the drama in the same sense that the actor contributes to it.<sup>1</sup>

This definition is so loose and open to interpretation that it might be mistaken for a definition of Symbolism. The fault with Sutton's definition is even more obvious; he writes, "Roughly it [Expressionism] aims at the subjective presentation of character; folk seen through their own eyes -- that is, through the eyes of their emotional nature."<sup>2</sup> Even his use

<sup>1</sup>Glenn Hughes, The Story of the Theatre (New York: Samuel French, 1928), p. 290.

<sup>2</sup>Graham Sutton, "The Theatre of Experiment" in The Bookman (London; April 1928), p. 68.

of the word "roughly" does not supply an extenuating circumstance in Sutton's case, for his definition takes only a single one of Dahlström's control factors -- that of subjectivity -- and makes of it the whole of the theory. Perhaps it is unjust to criticize Hughes and Sutton harshly, for the difficulties confronting them and all others who attempt to define Expressionism are great. Expressionism, although a plant with discernible unified roots, has grown chaotically; new ideas, not to mention the extensive modifications of the original notions, have been grafted to it; and its original meaning has been scandalously abused. Critics have been exceedingly negligent in their employment of the term, and the resulting chaos has rendered anything more precise than a description practically impossible.

The very difficulty of definition, then, suggests that we approach the problem descriptively. Sheldon Cheney's description of the typical German Expressionistic play somehow tells us more about Expressionism in practice than even a good definition; he writes,

Plays rushed through swiftly, almost recklessly, in rapidly succeeding short scenes -- short as compared to the "regular" three-to-five act drama, but gratefully long compared to the tiring snapshot scenes of the movies. Plays that distort life, intensifying emotional crises, driving characterization to the point of caricature, backgrounds lost, detail forgotten, naked humanity exhibited, hideous or beautiful, life in the rude and life at its sublimest moments -- only never the normal middle-class life that glorifies the even and colorless way, and hides its human

moments, Plays lose in technique, neglectful of, or more likely defying, all the "conventions" of playwriting, all the formulas of plot, complication, climax and conclusion so painfully constructed by nineteenth century playwrights and professors -- plays, rather, in which the only rule of technique seems to be to leap into violent action at the first bound, and then jump from peak to peak of emotion, compressing a lifetime into every moment, packing every speech with a torrent of ideas, laying bare life in the raw. In short, plays not always smooth and intelligible and certainly not pretty, but plays that act on you like emotional sledgehammers, that move you and purge your soul like the old Greek dramas... Plays that shock you and stir your finest emotions, that outrage you and yet leave you with a sense of spiritual exaltation.<sup>1</sup>

More thorough, if somewhat less rhapsodic, than Cheney is Edward Haubh, who describes German Expressionistic dramas as follows:

In the dramas of the expressionists elaborate characterization gives way to the incarnation of the compelling demonic essence of the ego. States and processes of mind and of emotion, complexes of the ego, become corporeal and literally articulate. Facts, not merely incidental persons with incidental names, talk in embodied form. Forces that war within the ego assume visible shape, and the stage becomes the progressively changing state of mind. A whole play may be the incarnation of the essence, the mind-an-sich, of a mystic personality...

Freytagian structural formulas, apparently still well-beloved by academic commentators, are discarded, thank goodness, by these younger writers. Their tempo is rapid; their language is charged, not infrequently overcharged, with an aggressive feverish vitality... To the expressionists belongs a large share of the credit, or the blame, of having restored the word to its rights and its abuses in the drama, the word, not as a petrified symbol, but as a living organism...

We see in the expressionists a willed return to poetry, to exalted, poetic, dynamic use of language. Verisimilitude in dialogue goes by the board, metrical poetry alternates with poetic prose, explosive ejaculations with long

<sup>1</sup>Cheney, "'Expressionism' in German Theatre and Our Own" in New York Times Book Review and Magazine (April 30, 1922), p. 5.



soliloquies; you may even find an aside here and there. The concentration is everywhere directly upon the state of mind, not upon the externals of form and finish. If the quickening of the vision into the flesh and blood of life can be accomplished most effectively through violence, the expressionist is little concerned as to what he violates, even if it is good taste...

The most elemental forces of the ego, ordinarily inarticulate, rising only vaguely, if at all, into consciousness, these he harries from their hiding-places, liberates, and gives a voice. It is his concern to reveal with brutal directness the very things not ordinarily heard or seen... Overpowered by the vision, carried away by the rhetoric, we overlook the rhapsodic trickery, or accept it as we accept the highly artificial conventionality of the music in opera...

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In the drama, stage and audience must be made one in emotion and in action. We must be made to lose our accustomed selves completely in the state of being enacted before us, we must be made to identify ourselves completely with it in the spirit. The spectacle must alone be seen, it must be lived, erlebt.<sup>1</sup>

These two descriptions show the European Expressionistic drama to be remarkably close to Dahlström's control factors; the first four of these, subjectivity, the unconscious, primitivity of feeling, and music, are clearly at work in the typical German Expressionistic drama -- the working of the fifth, religion, is less certain; the sixth, the worth of man, since it is deducible from the first, subjectivity, may be inferred to be effective.

Both Cheney and Hauch go beyond their descriptions to definitions; they meet the same difficulties here that Hughes

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<sup>1</sup>Edward F. Hauch, "Expressionism in Recent German Drama" in Drama, Vol. XVI (January 1926), p. 126.

and Sutton do. Still, their definitions are helpful in that they add another notion or two to our mass of data on the nature of Expressionism. Cheney writes,

"Expressionism," in any event is a blanket term that has come into wide use in Europe as designating all those tendencies of modern art that subordinate objective imitation to emotional expressiveness; that seeks to fix and intensify the artist's feeling, with only secondary regard for its sources in nature or its truth to outward aspects.<sup>1</sup>

It is apparent that Cheney's definition is no more than an expansion of Dahlström's first control factor, subjectivity.

Hauch's definition is phrased in terms of the Expressionists' social and psychological purpose; he writes,

What have these dramas in common with one another or individually that sets them apart from what goes before and what runs along beside them as continuations of older traditions? Let us consider first of all their passionate dynamic intention: not merely to hold the mirror up to nature, or to turn a pleasing phrase, but to jolt mankind willy-nilly out of its accustomed rut of traditional emotion and secondhand thinking into a more fundamentally human sphere of feeling and of action...

... It is the function of the poet, especially if he is an Expressionist, to tear away the mask, to wrest nature's last secret from her and reveal her in nakedness complete... The expressionist seeks to depict ... spiritual reality direct. Discarding the incidental in phenomena entirely, in many cases, he concentrates upon the essence of it, and the more completely and audaciously he does this, the more expressionist he is, or hopes to be.<sup>2</sup>

If Hauch's definition does nothing else, it asserts the revolutionary nature of Expressionism in violent reaction

<sup>1</sup>Cheney, New York Times Book Review and Magazine, op. cit., p.26.

<sup>2</sup>Hauch, op. cit., pp. 125-126.

against the civilization of the Nineteenth century. He does not pretend to have given a full definition, for he seeks only a common element in the German Expressionistic plays -- his point, in consequence, is well made.

Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones, two ardent American prophets of Expressionism, studied German Expressionism at its source just after the European War of 1914-1918; for all their enthusiasm they were not blinded to the shortcomings of the theory as applied there. Their definition, really a description, gives us a fair idea of the chaos into which the playwrights carried their theory; Macgowan and Jones report that

The bizarre morbidity, the nauseating sexuality, the lack of any trace of joy or beauty, which characterize the work of most of those who labeled themselves expressionists in Germany during the past few years, match Strindberg at his unhappiest, while the vigor with which they drive their ideas forth in speech far outdoes him. Expressionism, in the narrow sense in which such plays define it, is a violent storm of emotion beating up from the unconscious mind. It is no more than the waves which shatter themselves on the shore of our conscious existence, only a distorted hint of the deep and mysterious sea of the unconscious. Expressionism, as we have so far known it, is a meeting of the fringes of the conscious and the unconscious, and the meeting is startling indeed.<sup>1</sup>

But Macgowan and Jones are not misled into believing that these early post-War plays are the whole of Expressionism, as is obvious in their words above. They saw the goal of the

<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones, Continental Stagecraft (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1922), p. 31.

Expressionist dramatist (like that of all Expressionist artists) to be the creation of "significant form", which form they felt to be equidistant from realism and romanticism, against both of which Expressionism is a revolt.<sup>1</sup> They go so far as to trace the theory of Expressionism to Platonic idealism, which speculation is more interesting than informative. At any rate, they hit upon this notion of significant form, which certainly is fundamental to the theory. It is this very feature of Expressionism which Arthur Eloesser attacks so vigorously as an obstacle in the path of German dramatic development; he writes,

The expressionist drama desired to rise superior to time and space, since it was the product of an intellectual purpose which was no longer willing to confine itself within the resources and limitations of sensuous perception, but intended to concern itself with the subjective only and celebrate the definitive victory of the idea unhampered by any objective limitations.<sup>2</sup>

Here we find the argument for Platonism in Expressionism strengthened; the conclusion Eloesser draws from the argument, however, is diametrically opposed to that of Macgowan and Jones, who, we shall find, hold for just the sort of acting he deplores. Eloesser writes,

The actor ... must make an abstraction from the attributes of reality and represent nothing by an idea, an emotion, or

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<sup>1</sup>Vide ibid., pp. 19-21.

<sup>2</sup>Arthur Eloesser, Modern German Literature (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933), p. 367.

a destiny. This theory also did away with the inner laws of causation, which always pressed for a superlative degree of expression, and thus checked again the progress of German dramatic art for years to come.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of the merits of the two arguments, for the moment, it is interesting to note the affirmation of this feature of dramatic Expressionism -- the attempt to objectify form.

Actually, of course, this is not a new feature of Expressionism as we have been examining it; objectification of form is merely another way of saying subjectivity -- the first control factor.

The list of descriptions and definitions of Expressionism based upon the German application of the theory might be greatly extended, but there is little profit to be derived from such an enumeration. Suffice it to say that like all esthetic movements Expressionism was dynamic; it departed from its stated aims again and again, abuses and corruptions crept in to obscure the original meaning of the theory, but behind all these variations the basic concepts of the movement, summarized by the control factors, remained intact. The Expressionism which appeared in America just after the World War was not pure, and being dynamic, it departed even farther from the original aims, never too clearly understood by its American practitioners at any time.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 367.

## CHAPTER IV: The Coming of Expressionism to America

How an esthetic movement passes from one country to another generally remains a mystery. The process of the infiltration of ideas usually is slow, and although literary historians frequently simplify the truth by pinning a transition on the publication date of a certain key work, they do no more than simplify; they do not explain. Perhaps they are unable to explain and merely are making use of a convenient device to effect the transition in their own minds. To explain the passage of Expressionism from Europe to America, therefore, is not a simple task. It has already been pointed out that experimentative playwrights in America were becoming dissatisfied with the drama as it existed on the American stage; they had nothing new of their own to substitute, and so, it may be deduced, they accepted the first foreign product which seemed to promise possibility of development. German Expressionism may have been such a product. Their experiments in this form may have resulted in this way. Such an explanation is necessarily conjectural, but its plausibility allows us to accept it, at least for purposes of argument.

We have noticed, in the Introduction, that the dramatic methods of the early Twentieth century were being brought into question.<sup>1</sup> In 1925 Thomas H. Dickinson looked back upon the first two decades of the century and made these

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<sup>1</sup>Vide supra, pp. 1-2.

observations:

The practice of a forced condensation of an entire action, whatever might be its stages of natural progression, into three, four or five tight compartments had deadened the imagination of the playwright. Playwrights now began to diversify the close logic of the construction either by breaking the action up into many scenes or by breaking the time scheme through the use of "flash-backs." Of themselves these changers were of comparatively little importance. Mechanical expedients are by rights subsidiary always to the imagination that directs them. It is only when mechanics controls and stultifies the imagination that the change from one mechanical form to another more flexible form becomes important.<sup>1</sup>

The first play to put successfully into effect the theory of a broken time scheme was "On Trial" by Elmer Rice (Reisenstein), produced August 19, 1914. Of this play the author says, "It occurred to me that it would be an interesting experiment to write a play backwards, just to see how it would work out -- to make it analytic instead of synthetic, deductive instead of inductive -- to make it break down instead of build up."<sup>2</sup>

Here, then, was the clarion call of something new in the theatre. As Dickinson points out, On Trial employs nothing more startling than a mechanical device of re-ordering the chronological sequence of dramatic action. Again as he points out, mechanical devices in themselves are sterile save insofar as they serve a fertile imagination. Without any reflections on Rice it may be said that his experiment is significant only insofar as it indicates the rising discontentment with the drama as it was in 1914. The "flash-back", even

<sup>1</sup>Thomas H. Dickinson, Playwrights of the New American Theater (New York: Macmillan, 1925), pp. 278-279.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 280-281.

then, was not new; it had been tried successfully in the cinema, and within a short time it was to become no more than a convention both of stage and screen.

More significant by far is another innovation of this period; Dickinson reports,

The constraint of a hard logic upon the imagination of the playwrights extends not alone to the mechanical features of the plot. It is even more serious when applied to the substance of the play, simplifying what is not simple, and subjecting to a cold regimen forces that are elusive and complex. The unities of whatever order have been under heavy fire in the theater of recent years. The idea that a human equation can be resolved with all the finality of mathematics has few adherents in the newer drama. A man may stand for many things, according to the light that is thrown upon him or the angle from which he is viewed. We no longer believe that one arbitrarily selected aspect can be employed to represent the man. Perhaps the man is better presented by a dualism of aspects. In the drama of life a man plays many parts. May he not do so in the drama of the stage as well? He is observer and observed, creator and created. He both gives and takes. The very prevalent custom of employing a containing action in which one or more characters are shown not alone as acting in the play, but as creating the action in their own minds is true to this fundamental conception of the unity in complexity of all human manifestation.<sup>1</sup>

As early as 1915 Alice Gerstenberg employed a device which allowed for the dramatization of the duality of human beings in her one-act Overtones; her characters engage in ordinary dialogue, but their real thoughts are also spoken by alter-ego-like characters, visible and audible to the audience, but unseen and unheard by the characters themselves. Obviously

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 281-282.



this device is no more than adaptation of the age-old aside, but the use of the non-realistic alter egos on the stage gives promise of something new, of a radical departure from the current realism. It may be argued that Gerstenberg's experiment is quite as mechanical as Rice's, but the implications innate in her innovation are far greater than those in his. The logical and ultimate conclusion to be drawn from her experiment is something closely analogous to Expressionistic subjectivity.

It was in an atmosphere such as this, one of discontent with prevailing methods and of questioning of traditions, that the World War came. There have probably been several million words written to prove the effect of the War on subsequent culture, and all of them taken together say, in substance, that the post-War period was one of ferment and social discontent and loss of traditional standards and psychological hysteria and all the rest. Among the traditional standards which were seriously shaken following the War was dramatic realism. Kenneth Macgowan, writing in 1921, sounds the keynote of the attack on realism when he says,

When someone writes the dramatic history of the past seventy-five years -- Realism; Its Cause and Cure -- he will find, I think, one reason for its coming and two for its going, bound up together in the single complex of industrial capitalism. Realism was the natural product of slavery to machines. It was both an evidence of how our minds were cramped by the hideous conditions of life and of how desperately they sought for some end to their slavery. We could see no farther than our

miseries, but at least we would seek a cure. Accordingly we began a photographic study of capitalistic society, mingled with propagandistic effort to end its more flaming pieces of injustice.

The playgoer tired of realism for two reasons, or rather some tired of it for one reason some for another. Even before the ghastly and gigantic folly of the war, there were those who were willing to give the whole thing up as a bad job and seek peace or distraction in an art divorced as far as possible from the surface of life about them. The desperate disillusionment of the war multiplied the audience tenfold and brought to it also men and women seeking new excitements and sensations as great as those they had passed through. This made a body of playgoers largely lacking in faith and devotion, but at least freed from the obsessions of realism. In addition to these, who were ready for a message of beauty, imagination, even austerity and truth, there was a more active group who had sought deliberately for something beyond or apart from the literalness of life. These men and women were a product of industrialism. They were members of a leisure class which it had created, a leisure class freed from both the absorption of money-getting and from the greater absorption of the search for the means of escaping the evils of money-getting. It was this class that supplied the sinews of the new art of the theatre.

When, and if, revolution comes, I cannot see how realism can avoid losing its remaining adherents. Revolution will bring no end of human problems, but the problems are likely to be more spiritual than physical. There will certainly be less room for the propagandist, the muckraker, the social healer. We shall still want to study the life of man, for that is the whole source of drama. But this life will be far less a matter of surface relationships than it is today. The future Gorky, for example, will not have to dig in the muck of the lower depths to find the soul of truth in mankind.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not we can accept the impassioned prophecies of Macgowan, we can at least detect the dominant note of the rebels of the time -- and there were many! Less emotional

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth Macgowan, The Theatre of Tomorrow (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1921), pp. 280-282.

and more complete is Dickinson's summary of the factors at work in the years immediately following the War; he writes,

... many factors have appeared: (1) the revolt against convention always present in the modern theater; (2) a growing tendency toward nihilism and destruction that had been in the air; (3) opposed to this a vaguely acquisitive, synthetic tendency that seeks to draw all knowledge, all speculation into a single focus; (4) the social and intellectual ferment incident to the Great War.<sup>1</sup>

His list of factors might be greatly expanded, but under these headings we can find sufficient means for explaining the intellectual and emotional status of the stage to which Expressionism found its way. It was on a stage such as this that The Emperor Jones found itself.

Before turning to American Expressionistic plays, we may well look to another phase of the drama -- stagecraft -- for an understanding of what happened just after the War on the American stage. Within a year or two of the signing of the Armistice, two men, one an artist, the other a born propagandist, visited the German theatres with an eye to the experiments which were being conducted there. They were Robert Edmond Jones and Kenneth Macgowan, from both of whom we have already quoted freely. The immediate product of that pilgrimage was their book, Continental Stagecraft.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup>Thomas H. Dickinson, An Outline of Contemporary Drama (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927), p. 263.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, p. 43n.

ultimate product was a major revolution in American stagecraft.

Appia and Craig were not totally unknown in America, but adequate application of their theories had never been seen and, in consequence, were not fully appreciated. By the time Macgowan and Jones had finished their ecstatic encomiums of the new stagecraft, there was no reason for anyone not to know the bases of the Craig-Appian theory. Jones, a gifted scenic designer, turned his hand to an application of the new theory, and he soon had many fellows. Macgowan, on the other hand, poured out writings on the theory and application of Appia and Craig and made them by-words of the stage. In the course of this theatrical ferment Expressionism and the new stagecraft came to be mentioned in the same breath, until the two terms were completely confused. It is not uncommon even now to hear of "Shakespeare produced Expressionistically," as though Expressionism were no more than a method of stagecraft. Actually the confusion in terms did neither the dramatic theory nor the method of stagecraft any harm; they provided each other mutual support during their infancy in America, and each served as a vehicle for the other. The fact that much of the new stagecraft has survived while much of the dramatic theory has gone into eclipse may give some indication of their relative soundness; certainly they were interdependent in America in 1920.

Macgowan has supplied us with a clear picture of the new stagecraft as developed for the Expressionistic drama in Europe. His picture bears re-sketching here, for it tells the story of the application of the theories of Appia and Craig to specific Expressionistic plays. Macgowan writes in general terms, for his The Theatre of Tomorrow is intended as instruction and interpretation and inspiration, not scholarship; we are correct in understanding the new stagecraft he describes to be that of Post-War Germany.

Concerning the purpose of the new stagecraft Macgowan writes,

For a positive purpose the new stagecraft sets itself to visualize the atmosphere of a play. Its artists aim to make, in the settings called for by the text, an emotional envelope appropriate to the dramatic mood of the author, a visualization in color, line and light of the dominant emotions to be pictured by the actors.<sup>1</sup>

The means at the disposal of the scenic designer in accomplishing this purpose, Macgowan writes, are simplification, suggestion, and synthesis.<sup>2</sup> On simplification he writes,

Simplification is the test in almost all great art. Simplification of effect always; simplification of means generally. On the stage simplification of both effect and means are essential, because the scenery is not the only thing to be seen. Stage architecture is not architecture alone, or stage picture merely stage picture. The setting is the background of the actor. And it is

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<sup>1</sup>Macgowan, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Vide ibid., p. 21.

essential that he shall be properly set off by his background and properly fused in it. He must mean more because of the setting, not less... On the stage we must have simplification for art's sake. But we must have it even more for the sake of the actor -- and therefore of the play.<sup>1</sup>

On suggestion he writes,

The complement to simplification is suggestion. Simplify as much as you please, you only make it the more possible to suggest a wealth of spiritual and aesthetic qualities. A single Saracenic arch can do more than a half dozen to summon the passionate background of Spanish Don Juan... On the basis of simplification, the artist can build up by suggestion a host of effects that crude and elaborate reproduction would only thrust between the audience and the actor and the play. The artist can suggest either the naturalistic or the abstract, either reality or an idea and an emotion.<sup>2</sup>

On synthesis he writes,

Finally the dominant quality in modern stage production is synthesis. For modern stage art, in spite of all the easel artists who may care to practice the painting of backdrops and let it go at that, is a complex and rhythmic fusion of setting, lights, actors, and play. There must be consistency in each of these, consistency of a single kind or consistency that has the quality of progression in it. And there must be such consistency among them all. Half the portrait, half the landscape, cannot be in Whistler's style and the other half in Zuloaga's. The creation of a mood expressive of the play is, after all, the final purpose in production. It can no more be a jumble of ends and ends than can the play itself.<sup>3</sup>

To these basic means Macgowan adds light, the keystone of the Applan theory; he writes,

Light is the heart of the stage picture. In the hands of the artist it is more important than the brush. Light can make drama in a void. And light has been the last discovery of our theatre.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 22-23.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

He summarizes the aims of the new stagecraft in these words:

The newer theatre tries to reach beauty and meaning, to win to a vivid **expressiveness** of the play, through spiritual abstractions.<sup>1</sup>

These restrictions [of the physical stage] can be minimized, of course, by the ingenuity and imagination of a great artist. His line can achieve spiritual tangents. By suggestion he can lead our eye from a single Gothic pillar to a whole soaring cathedral. Yet it is inevitable that the artist must revolt today from the physical and spiritual restrictions of the plastic theatre as he revolts from the physical and spiritual restrictions of the representative easel canvas. He will strive to free himself from the necessity of creating actuality in order to suggest the spiritual. He will seek for purer form. He will strive for clearer emotion. He will seek the expression of the spiritual by the most direct means.

Having denied pretense and achieved actuality, the artist of today is turning more and more away from the peep-show stage and its picture frame towards a new theatre. It is a theatre of an inner actuality instead of an actuality of fact. The artist turns from the plastic stage to the formal.<sup>2</sup>

At this point Macgowan introduces into his discussion a new type of stage, outside the tradition of Appia and Craig -- the formalized stage. It is obvious from the gist of this discussion of his that the new formalized stage, either in its pure form or in a synthetic form close to the plastic stage of Appia and Craig, was widely used in the production of Expressionistic plays, and from this fact he reasons to a new type of acting which he implies to be a characteristic of

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 108-109.

Expressionistic plays. He writes,

Obviously these attempts [at formalization] ... mean a new relation of audience and play, a return to a fundamental attitude forgotten by the theatre in its years of realism and its seeking after illusion. It means the treating of the actor and the things about him as actual materials to call up emotions, not as things suggesting and representing other things. The theatre of the Greeks, the theatre of the medieval church, the theatre of the Elizabethans, showed us things that suggested emotion, not things that suggested other things that might in turn suggest emotion. In his difficult but keen volume, The Path of the Modern Russian Stage, Alexander Bakshy has supplied an excellent term for the complementary form to representation -- presentation. This distinction between representation and presentation expresses the distinction between things upon the stage representing other objects than themselves -- which is realism or illusionism -- and things merely presenting themselves to the audience for what they actually are -- objects displaying emotion in themselves. If we are actually embarked upon this transition from a representational to presentational stage we must find evidence of it in the handling of the actor as well as in the handling of the setting.<sup>1</sup>

The new manner of handling the actor, of course, presents "presentational" acting, the kind of acting damned by Eloesser as an obstacle in the progress of German dramatic art.<sup>2</sup> In its defense Macgowan quotes Meyerhold, the Russian producer, as follows:

"Similar to the arena of a circus, pressed on all sides by a ring of spectators, the forestage is brought near the public, so that not one gesture, not one movement, not one glimpse of the actor should be lost in the dust of the back stage. And see how thoughtfully tactful are these gestures, movements, postures and grimaces of the actor on the forestage. Of course. Could an actor with an inflated affectation or with insufficiently flexible

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 146-147.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, pp. 44-45.



bodily movements be tolerated at the proximity to the public at which the forestages of the old English, French, Spanish and Japanese theatres placed their actors?"<sup>1</sup>

The theatre which Macgowan saw in Germany, then, was a "theatre theatrical," openly and professedly what it is, delivered from realism and illusionism. Even the acting is new, or, at least different from that of the immediately preceding theatre and the concurrent conventional theatre.

We find the same note in Goldberg, who writes,

Such a drama [i.e., Expressionistic] calls for a new technique of acting and production, and Paul Kornfeld has thus presented his actors' intuition as a substitute for the histrionic realism that was part of the naturalistic method upon the stage... he [the actor] is to be no mere imitator; he is not to deny the theatricality of his calling.<sup>2</sup>

The report of the new drama, which Macgowan and his kind brought back to America around 1920, was, therefore, of a theatre theatrical in which Expressionistic plays were produced in consonance with the principles of the new stagecraft and acted in keeping with the principles of presentational acting.

The ground was ready. The seed was planted. Now let us look to the growth which appeared!

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<sup>1</sup>Macgowan, op. cit., pp. 149-150.

<sup>2</sup>Goldberg, op. cit., p. 273.

## CHAPTER V: Expressionism in America

Expressionism, whatever else it may be, is an esthetic movement; and any esthetic theory which gets beyond the treatises of the theorists must be dynamic. Dramatic Expressionism was dynamic in Europe before it came to America. After it arrived here, it grew and expanded and contracted and was modified almost beyond recognition, but it has never died completely -- nor will it, in all probability.

The very dynamism of dramatic Expressionism, of course, renders it virtually indefinable, and its indefinability is the direct result of the diversity of its manifestations on the American stage. No single cult has taken up and promulgated a single kind of dramatic Expressionism; there has not even been one writer who has devoted himself exclusively to the perfection of the Expressionistic drama. Eugene O'Neill and John Howard Lawson have undoubtedly done more for and with Expressionism than any other playwrights in America, but their work has always been in the nature of experimentation, and even their best works based on the theory are marked by tentativeness and uncertainty. Such a situation has led naturally to a discouraging diversity in Expressionistic types, a diversity so great that it almost defies classification as well as definition.

The classification which I have settled upon is necessarily arbitrary, but I believe that the plausibility of its basis

renders it permissible; it seems workable enough to allow us to bring some sort of order out of the existing chaos. I have chosen subjectivity as the most characteristic and most important control factor in dramatic Expressionism. Not only does Dahlström place it first on his list of six control factors, but very nearly every writer who attempts the definition of Expressionism hits upon subjectivity, the objectification of inner experience, as the characteristic mark of works conceived under the theory. Cheney in his definition of esthetic Expressionism,<sup>1</sup> and Sutton<sup>2</sup> and Hauch<sup>3</sup> in their definitions of dramatic Expressionism give us typical cases of this type of definition; they may be criticized for having given us incomplete and therefore not wholly satisfactory definitions, but their selection of subjectivity as the basic principle of Expressionism, along with so many other critics of the theory, provides us with adequate authority for our selection of subjectivity as the basis of classification. Ashley Dukes, the English critic, sums up neatly the critics' preoccupation with subjectivity when he writes, "One of the aims of the expressionists is to present character subjectively. We are asked to regard the persons

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<sup>1</sup>Vide supra, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Vide supra, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Vide supra, pp. 40-41.

on the stage, not only with our own eyes, but through their own emotional nature."<sup>1</sup>

Taking subjectivity, then, as the basis of our classification, we shall set up these four classes of American Expressionistic plays:

1. Purely subjective.
2. Manifoldly subjective.
3. Objective.
4. Expressionistic in technique only.

Those plays which fall under the heading of "purely subjective" are those which have as their primary end the objectification of the inner experience; the audience is, to use Dukes's words, "asked to regard the persons on the stage, not only with ... [their] own eyes, but through their [the characters'] own emotional nature." The plays coming under this heading are clearly, in the light of the control factors, the most purely Expressionistic. The second classification of plays, the "manifoldly subjective," includes those plays which take the audience inside the thoughts and emotions of several characters simultaneously, not just those of a single character. The third type, the "objective," appears to be a contradiction in terms. How can Expressionism with its basis

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<sup>1</sup>Ashley Dukes, The Youngest Drama (London: Ernest Benn, 1924), p. 133.

in subjectivity be objective? Expressionistic plays of this type are "objective" in that they do not take us inside the consciousness of any character; they are subjective in that they give us the author's peculiar and usually distorted vision of life without any consideration for objective, physical reality. The fourth type, those plays "Expressionistic in technique only," is a convenient catch-all for plays which employ the devices and technical features of the other three types of Expressionistic play, but which are psychologically realistic. In actuality, the first three types of plays are Expressionistic in degrees ranging from completeness to fractionality; the fourth type is Expressionistic only by descent.

The list of plays thus classified is drawn from a generous sampling of American plays written in the last twenty-odd years, available in print, and procurable in Chicago libraries and accessible private collections. It is by no means complete, but I believe that it is sufficiently representative to give us a fair cross-section of the American Expressionistic drama.

Within each class the plays are organized in the following order: the archetype or archetypes, as the case may be, are given first; the other plays are considered chronologically. The fourth class, being really a miscellaneous pigeon-hole, has no archetype.

### A. Purely Subjective Plays

Expressionism in a highly developed form may be said to have arrived on the American stage with Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones.<sup>1</sup> Produced in New York in the season of 1920-1921, the play was immediately and overwhelmingly successful, and probably did as much as any other single play to give Expressionism a hearing in America. But the success of the play alone is not adequate justification for designating it an archetype; analysis supplies the necessary justification.

The Emperor Jones picks up the life of Brutus Jones, erstwhile American Negro Pullman porter and chain-gang convict, at the most crucial moment in his brief career as self-appointed "emperor" of a little island in the West Indies inhabited by transplanted, but still aboriginal, Negroes. Having set himself up in regal style in a palace, Jones has convinced the "bush niggers" that his is a charmed life which can be ended only by a silver bullet. As the play opens, Jones is sneeringly but cringingly informed by Smithers, a Cockney trader on the island, that his "subjects" have deserted him. Soon the slow, distant beat of a tom-tom verifies Smithers' warning, and Jones realizes that his reign is over. He takes to the jungle in the hope of reaching the coast, and therein in six

<sup>1</sup>Eugene O'Neill, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Wilderness Edition; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), Vol. III, pp. 1-54.

rapid scenes we witness through his senses and consciousness the disintegration of his thin veneer of civilization under the impact of fear. First he is haunted by little formless fears, then by Jeff, the man he killed in the United States, then by the chain-gang and guards, then by the slave-auctioneers and planters of his childhood, then by a Congo witch-doctor, and finally by the primitive Crocodile God of his misty racial past. He is driven in a circle by his distracting fear enhanced by the incessant throb of the tom-tom until he returns by mistake to his own palace where he is shot -- with a silver bullet! -- by the rebelling Negroes.

The play provides a perfect study in Expressionism; it answers each of the six control factors. After the realistic first scene the next six scenes place on the stage the mental aberrations of Brutus Jones; the audience experiences, feels, and thinks with Jones's senses, emotions, and mind. His inner experience is dramatically objectified. We are taken inside the Negro's consciousness and beneath it down to the very basic atavistic fears. Jones, for all his cunning and contempt for the natives, is only superficially civilized; the first crushing impact of fear makes him once again a superstitious savage moved by elemental passions. The beat of the tom-tom, strictly speaking, is not music, but its rhythm forms the basis of all primitive music and the keynote of all primitive

ritual; the beat of the drum becomes the very symbol of Jones's reversion to the primitive. As soon as Jones becomes frightened, he instinctively turns to God for help, first the Christian God of his civilization but finally the primitive deities of Africa. And, finally, Jones, in spite of his apparent rascality and rapid degeneration, is made out to be a redoubtable and even a sympathetic figure who dies as he boasted he would -- by a silver bullet.

A. H. Quinn summarizes the consensus of critical opinion on The Emperor Jones when he writes,

It is a fine thing for an art when a creative master shatters conventions and thereby makes for freedom. O'Neill [in The Emperor Jones] went back to a freer form, he defied the ordinary rules of technique, but he did not violate the fundamental laws of drama. He kept the unity of time; he violated the unity of place; but he substituted a higher unity -- that of impression.<sup>1</sup>

O'Neill followed The Emperor Jones with a second, and almost equally striking, Expressionistic play, The Hairy Ape<sup>2</sup> (1922). The German heritage of this play is more obvious than that of its predecessor. Whereas The Emperor Jones is substantially an extended soliloquy, The Hairy Ape brings the two great social classes symbolically upon the stage, and although Yank Smith is the subjective center of the play, he

<sup>1</sup>A. H. Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present Day (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1936), pp. 180-1.

<sup>2</sup>O'Neill, op. cit., Vol. V, pp. 169-247.



never becomes humanized as Brutus Jones is. In eight staccato scenes we see the pitiful search of the hulking coal-heaver, Yank Smith, for evidence that he "belongs" somewhere in the chaos of modern capitalistic civilization. First, as a stoker on an ocean liner he speculates in vulgar, yet effectively cadenced, jargon on the place of himself and his ape-like fellows in the world. A terrified exclamation from Mildred Douglas, the caricatured daughter of a millionaire, that he is a beast drives him half-mad; he sets out in search of justification for his existence, of verification of his half-formed idea that he "belongs." In New York City he cannot even make the automaton-people of Fifth Avenue physically aware of his presence; he is rejected by the I. W. W. for being too violent; he wanders to the Zoo to harangue the great gorilla, but he comes too close to the ape and is crushed to death by it. As he dies, he observes that maybe now he "belongs."

The Hairy Ape is less given to analysis on the basis of the control factors than The Emperor Jones. Certainly it is subjective, for every trace of a thought which passes through the ape-like mind of Yank is spoken; the automatons on Fifth Avenue and Mildred Douglas are the capitalist class as seen by Yank; yet we are not admitted into the man's unconscious mind, possibly on the theory that it is too vague and muddled to allow expression. Beyond a doubt there is primitivity in

the play; O'Neill stresses again and again in his stage-directions that Yank Smith and the other stokers are ape-like in appearance; Yank repeatedly assumes a Penseur-like attitude; clearly, man in The Hairy Ape is a creature removed from the ape by only the faintest gleam of intelligence; he is primitive approaching non-existence as a man. Whatever music is in the play is the music of sound-effects: the rhythms of pounding engines and the song of heavy machinery; yet these noises are more than just a naturalistic auditory background -- they are music in the same sense that the tom-tom is music in The Emperor Jones: they are the symbol of slavery to a huge incomprehensible force. Yank's religion, if it may be termed that, is far more primitive than Jones's -- it is little more than a vain yearning for a raison d'être, utterly beyond Yank's command of words. The whole play may be taken as a plea for the essential worth of man, even a brute like Yank in all his pitiful primeval helplessness.

Kenneth Macgowan, who was intimately associated with O'Neill in the production of the play, gives us this clear insight into its basic Expressionism; he writes,

The Hairy Ape is expressionist in form because the author deliberately subordinates plausibility of language or situation to the need of making life clear. The people do not talk or act as they would in real life, because O'Neill wishes to give us things they feel which only reach us -- either in real life or in realism -- by faint

and allusive indications; these speak out directly in The Hairy Ape.<sup>1</sup>

In 1923 the third important American Expressionistic play appeared in New York -- Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine.<sup>2</sup> In view of our classification of The Adding Machine as purely subjective, the play is unique within the class for two reasons: in one scene, the second, the audience is taken inside the consciousness of two characters simultaneously, a device characteristic of our second class of Expressionistic drama, the manifoldly subjective; the other reason is that Mr. Zero, Rice's hero, is conceived far more universally than even Yank Smith. Thus, in the first respect, Rice's play is less purely Expressionistic than the two of O'Neill, and, in the second respect, it is more purely Expressionistic. This paradox in dramaturgy would reflect on Rice's consistency of method if Expressionism were clearly definable; since it is not, the aberration is merely an interesting phenomenon.

The Adding Machine deals with Mr. Zero, a hopelessly ineffective and insignificant cipher in modern conventionalized routine society. The first scene is nothing by an extended and horribly banal monologue delivered by Zero's wife as she lies in bed; it is marked by all the tediousness and pettiness

<sup>1</sup>Macgowan, "New York Sees Its First Expressionist Play" in Theatre Arts Magazine, Vol. VI (July 1922), p. 187.

<sup>2</sup>Elmer L. Rice, The Adding Machine (New York: Samuel French, 1929).

which characterizes the speech of persons who bore us; it is the endless nagging of a wife as heard by the husband -- the audience, being asked to identify itself with Mr. Zero, hears it as he does. In the second scene we are taken inside the minds of both Mr. Zero and Miss Devore, two adding clerks in a fantastically distorted office; when Zero is discharged after years of service on this particular day, something snaps in his mind -- there are flashes and the noise of sound-effects and whatever action takes place on the stage is obscured from the audience. The third scene returns us to Zero's home where people named Mr. and Mrs. One, Two, Three, Four, Five and Six are being entertained by the Zeros. The completely conventionalized and stylized patten of the first-scene soliloquy of Mrs. Zero forms the conversation of all the characters in this scene. At the end of the scene the police come to take Zero away; we learn then that when his mind snapped in the second scene, he had killed the employer who had discharged him. The fourth scene, the trial of Mr. Zero, is almost realistically pathetic as the prisoner pleads his case before a distorted court in an interminably involved and muddled soliloquy. Rice turns from Expressionism to the fantastic in the fifth, sixth, and seventh scenes in which Zero is seen first in the cemetery, then in the Pleasant Place (heaven, perhaps), and then in Purgatory. Rice's shift in theory is as

inexplicable as Molnar's in Liliom. Like Molnar, Rice may have made it to complete his thesis, but the meaning of the play is so poorly defined, that we may well question his artistic integrity. Rice here, as in On Trial,<sup>1</sup> seems to be more the theatrical opportunist than the conscientious dramatic artist. Yet the excellent Expressionism of the first four scenes renders The Adding Machine a highly significant play in our study.

Only three of the control factors appear to have cogency here: subjectivity, the unconscious, and the worth of man, and the last only by implication. The religion of the last three scenes seems theatrical rather than psychic, and so, I believe, may be dismissed.

The success of The Adding Machine on the stages of New York and London is satisfactorily explained by Meyer Levin when he writes, in comparing three Expressionistic plays,

The Adding Machine remains a little removed from the road of all Elmer Rice plays. Perhaps it was stimulated by the expressionist movements, perhaps it was the gesture of the commercial artist...

The Adding Machine bears direct comparison with the best products of the expressionist years. Like The Hairy Ape and From Morn to Midnight /translated from the German of Georg Kaiser/ it is the fragmentary picture-story of a representational man set against the machine age. The man is a symbol, a number: in Rice's play he is Mr. Zero. Be he clerk, bank-cashier /in From Morn to Midnight/, or stoker, a missed click jumps the cog free of the wheel, and he clatters to episodic disintegration. The story is the same in all three plays. In The Hairy Ape the symbol seems more deeply felt as a human being. Technically The

<sup>1</sup>vide supra, pp. 47-48.

Adding Machine is more adroit; in passages it is more human than the humorless O'Neill has ever been. Theatrically, it is less monotonous.

The Adding Machine was successful. It was hailed as a great play liberating the American theatre. It was deserving of the praise it won. The play has remained alive. But the expressionist method is of the sort that impels and propels a tour de force. Once he is started on the track, the very narrow limitations of the expressionist stylization practically force the writer to a good finish.<sup>1</sup>

The fourth important American Expressionistic play, also worthy to be considered archetypal, is Beggar on Horseback by George Kaufman and Marc Connelly. The debt to German Expressionism in this play is more than just a matter of deduction. It is actually a loose adaptation of Paul Apel's Hans Sonnenstoesser's Hohlenfahrt performed by two of America's leading theatrical craftsmen. The adaptation is thorough and leaves nothing of the original German flavor in the subject matter, but the method remains unmistakably German.

Beggar on Horseback is the perfect illustration of a particular development of the German Expressionistic drama derived from Strindberg -- the dream play. Neil McRae, a young composer, in a naturalistic opening scene seems on the verge of marrying Gladys Cady, the daughter of a millionaire manufacturer, in spite of the fact that he loves the far more compatible Cynthia. He falls asleep and dreams the body of the play. In rapid scenes governed by a sort of stream-of-consciousness logic he successively marries into the impossibly

<sup>1</sup>Meyer Levin, "Elmer Rice" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XVI (January 1932), pp. 56-57.

materialistic Cady family, enters their social circle, and is employed in the Cady Art Factory where he is forced to produce music on command in his cell in the factory. Interspersed throughout these scenes are idyllically beautiful episodes involving Cynthia. Every character is either caricatured by Neil's consciousness, and musical motifs are almost Wagnerian in their comment on important characters and situations. Certain of the dream-characters (e.g., the employees of Mr. Cady) perform jazz dances as an essential part of their stage business as the action becomes increasingly nightmarish and kaleidoscopic. Finally Neil awakes thoroughly convinced that it is only with Cynthia that he can realize his destiny as an artist.

Four of the control factors are clearly at work in the Kaufman-Connelly play; subjectivity, the unconscious, music, and the worth of man. The whole of the dream is the product of Neil's ego; the dream has all the irrational method of progression characteristic of the unconscious mind; music literally comments on every phase of the action; and the worth of man is effectively proclaimed in the biting satire which is typical of the whole play: more specifically, it is the worth of the artist and his originality of imagination which are proclaimed. A. H. Quinn gives the best general comment on Beggar on Horseback,<sup>1</sup> writing,

<sup>1</sup>G. S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, Beggar on Horseback (New York: Horace Liveright, 1924).

The dream is remarkably like a real dream; it has the peculiar assertion of verity, combined with the uncanny revelation of self-scrutiny and of the observation of others that is the experience of competent dreamers. The play is a fine expression of the resentment of the artist, the man who can do things that no one else can do, for the attitude of the Cadys and their like, whose ambition is to do everything like other people and who are contemptuous of those who show originality.<sup>1</sup>

The Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, The Adding Machine, and Beggar on Horseback are undoubtedly the archetypal plays of the purely subjective Expressionistic drama, both from the standpoint of popular appeal and of inherent excellence, but underneath them is arranged an interesting array of lesser products of American Expressionism, some of which are even more extremely Expressionistic than the archetypes. These relatively less significant plays we shall consider in chronological order.

John Howard Lawson, whose Processional<sup>2</sup> marks him as a leader of American Expressionism, wrote and produced Roger Bloomer<sup>3</sup> in 1922. More Freudian, and hence closer to German Expressionism of the immediate post-War years, than the four plays already discussed, Roger Bloomer managed to cause a considerable stir, chiefly of disapproval, when it appeared on Broadway. The play deals with the mental and emotional disturbances of Roger Bloomer, a supposedly typical modern

<sup>1</sup>Quinn, op. cit., p. 223.

<sup>2</sup>Vide subter, Section C.

<sup>3</sup>John Howard Lawson, Roger Bloomer (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923).



American adolescent boy. Roger rebels against the conventionality of his home-life in Excelsior, Iowa, and leaves his misunderstanding mother and father and the possibility of a college education to go to New York where he hopes to learn something about Life. An almost continuous sequence of thirty-odd confusingly brief scenes takes him through a series of adventures, most of which have sexual implications. He escapes the lewd advances of his lecherous landlady to find solace in the arms of a young non-professional prostitute, Louise, whom Lawson symbolizes as the life-force of purely biological love. In Act III Roger has a nightmare in which are dramatized the controlling factors of his life: the crushing conventions, sex, the fear of death, and the life-force symbolized by Louise. Ultimately Roger finds hope in a new faith, a "new marching song," which we are left to infer is communism.

The action of the play is set against a décor which Lawson describes in his opening stage-directions; he writes that the "Scenic plan involves the simplest use of setting conveying the impression by single articles of furniture, and portable setting, spotted against curtains, with occasional use of painted drops."<sup>1</sup> During the nightmare-sequence in Act III there are choreographic passages set to music; otherwise, music is used only incidentally.

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. xi.

Roger Bloomer, then, answers to the control factors of subjectivity, the unconscious, and primitivity (in the symbolism of Louise); in a sense, too, it is concerned with religion, for it is not until Roger finds communism as a new faith that he has any sort of intellectual or emotional stability. By inference we might also arrive at the play's proclamation of the worth of man; Roger is helpless and muddled while he is under the stifling influence of the conventions. Music, as we observed above, is used only incidentally save in one brief sequence, and cannot be said to be a governing factor in the presentation of Roger's rather sordid career.

Upton Sinclair, the radical writer of many parts, turned to Expressionism in 1924 for the dramatization of the career of an agitator; he called the play Singing Jailbirds.<sup>1</sup> Concerned as it is with the life of "Red" Adams, an I. W. W. agitator, the play is openly propagandistic; it makes no pretense of presenting a universal man as Lawson does in Roger Bloomer; Red Adams, so far as I know, may be a real personage -- such is Sinclair's implication.

Adams in the begging of the play is imprisoned unjustly and allowed almost to starve by the industry-controlled police of California. In prison he has a series of tortured visions of his past life, developing logically rather than chrono-

<sup>1</sup>Upton Sinclair, Singing Jailbirds (Pasadena: Upton Sinclair, 1924).

logically his change from a subservient transient worker into an enlightened labor agitator. Nell, his devoted wife, appears briefly until her untimely death, more or less the direct result of capitalistic oppression. Adams is freed to continue his work at the end of the play.

I. W. W. marching songs are employed as integral commentary on the action of the play, and in a court-sequence scene during Adams' visions the corrupted judiciary and its hirelings are equipped with animal-masks, the symbolism of which is proverbially obvious.

Subjectivity, the unconscious, music, and the worth of man are the control factors at work here.

It might be expected that if E. E. Cummings were to write an Expressionistic play, it would be the most extreme to reach print, if not the stage. E. E. Cummings wrote an Expressionistic play, Him, in 1927. It is the most extreme of its kind.

Him<sup>1</sup> is the allegory of the universal man; we may be led to suspect that Him is Cummings himself, but the author makes it quite clear that Him is none other than the modern Everyman, the Marquis de la Poussière. In three acts and twenty scenes Him, the eternal man, gyrates through a half-mad sequence of kaleidoscopic adventures, all of which are

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<sup>1</sup>E. E. Cummings, Him (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927).

in varying degrees psychic, accompanied by his female counterpart, Me. It would be literally impossible to trace through the mental and emotional activity of Him in anything less than half the number of pages required by the original text; the best that can be done here is a brief description of the salient features of this exceedingly obscure play, as I understand them.

All characters are universalized or caricatured, and all have multifold symbolic significance. The dialogue varies between free verse and stream-of-consciousness prose. The symbolism is Freudian. The succession of episodes, if psychic experiences may be called such, is prompted by no logic save that of a dream. Personality is represented as dual, or, more often, multiple, and life itself is really illusion; these two ideas are dramatized by the use of a device made famous by Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author -- the play within the play. But Cummings pushes the device, not to a conclusion, but to infinity. Him is writing a play about a man who is writing a play about a man who is writing a play, etc. On the subject of love Cummings, through the mouth and actions of Him, declares that man loves himself whom he has idealized while woman (i.e., Me) loves man as he is idealized in her image. Bitter irony is the keynote of the play.

Interesting as the play is as mental exercise, it remains

something more of a fascinating game rather than a stage-piece. Such was not Cummings' intention, for his stage-directions provide for an elaborate stage-machinery to carry out his complicated symbolism. The two chief features of this machinery are a rectangular room from which each of the walls is successively removed so as to allow the audience to see the activities of Him and Me in the round, as it were -- from each side of the room which symbolizes our conscious and unconscious existence, and, secondly, a painted flat representing a grotesquely distorted doctor operating upon an anesthetized patient, in which flat are cut three holes, one for the head of the doctor (who serves as raisonneur), one for the head of Him, and a third for the head of Me. The symbolism of this flat, used in the opening scene and occasionally thereafter, is apparently that life is really an ether-dream.

All of the control factors are at work in Him, it is almost unnecessary to point out, for the play is, so far as I know, the most ambitious single attempt ever made to study the mind of man in dramatic terms. Nothing which comes within the range of man's consciousness is knowingly omitted by the author. The significance of the play is scarcely theatrical; it may, however, be historical in that it gives some insight into one aspect of the modern intellectual turmoil from which movements like Expressionism arose.

Channing Pollock has given us in his play, Mr. Money-penny<sup>1</sup> (1928), which in large part is only a variation of Beggar on Horseback, a curious piece of drama. In place of Neil McRae, the Kaufman-Connelly artist-hero, Pollock substitutes John Jones, an Everyman figure. His Mr. Moneypenny is a Mammon-Satan figure. About these two figures the author recasts the Faust legend.

Jones, to escape the tedium of earning a miserable living under the materialistic capitalistic system, sells his soul to Mr. Moneypenny, his employer, for the privilege of living in material prosperity. His life becomes a hellish nightmare, in which every phase of the prosperity-mad social life of the 1920s is violently satirized by caricature. Scenes very reminiscent of the dream-visions in Beggar on Horseback flash before the audience, set to the tempo of jazz-variations of the song, "Hallelujah," from the Broadway review, Hit the Deck. The play ends on a didactic note with a debate between Mr. Moneypenny and the Professor, the sweetheart of Jones's daughter, who symbolizes culture; Pollock, through Mr. Moneypenny makes it clear that money rules the world and damns it, just as he has ruled and damned John Jones.

Mr. Moneypenny, for all its similarity to Beggar on Horseback, is less purely Expressionistic than its fore-

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<sup>1</sup>Channing Pollock, Mr. Moneypenny (New York: Brentano's, 1928).

runner, for it is little if it is not primarily a thesis play. Neil McRae may be universalized in the sense of representing the artistic imagination, but he remains human; John Jones is always a de-personalized puppet. Ostensibly Jones is the subjective center of the play, but he is never vitalized; the real subjective center is the author himself. The play, then, is more closely related to the second type of our classification, the objective Expressionistic play, and remains in the first class only by reason of the author's misuse of hero-subjectification. As a result, only music and the worth of man are control factors applicable here.

The success of The Adding Machine and other Expressionistic plays undoubtedly tempted Elmer Rice to write a second play in this vein. The Subway<sup>1</sup> (1929) was the result. The play tells the story of a typical shop-girl, Sophie Smith, who, in rebellion against the stifling pressure of daily routine, gives herself to a young artist, Eugene Landray; she becomes pregnant and commits suicide under the wheels of a New York subway-train. On this flimsy skeleton Rice hangs an interesting cloak of Expressionistic devices. In nine rapid scenes Sophie's world is presented to us with little if any attempt at realism. Against a background of caricatured and

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<sup>1</sup> Elmer Rice, The Subway (New York: Samuel French, 1929).

stylized and typified minor characters, Sophie, herself a type, is unfolded; only Landray gives any semblance of vitality among these characters who pass before us in an almost dream-like progression. The movements and speech of the others are mechanized and completely stylized; Sophie's fellow passengers on the subway-train in the first scene wear masks, the masks of animals, as they press in around her and symbolically crush out the very individuality of her existence. For one short scene Rice departs from the purely subjective; in the fifth scene Sophie and Eugene sit together in a movie, and as the picture unreels before them, we hear the inner thoughts of both of them; but in the sixth scene and those following Sophie again becomes the single subjective center of the play: the audience hears voices as they come to her in bed, and memories of her experiences with Eugene are relived upon the stage as she lies pregnant. The brief ninth scene is fairly close to realism; Rice does not attempt to dramatize her inner feelings at the moment of suicide, perhaps on the theory that after her decision to commit suicide Sophie would naturally become mentally blank.

All of the control factors are actively at work in The Subway, save perhaps primitivity and religion. The subjectivity of Rice's treatment of Sophie is self-evident; dream-sequences and spoken thoughts are clearly devices to objectify the



unconscious. A background of tawdry popular songs forms a striking commentary on the profound banality of Sophie's life. There is scarcely a line in the play which does not figuratively shout out a passionate belief in the essential dignity of the human soul and rail against the effects of modern mechanized, de-personalized society, of which the subway itself is the symbol. Perhaps it might be said that there is a kind of primitivity and religiousness about such a message.

Unlike The Adding Machine, The Subway was a commercial failure. Meyer Levin sums up, probably a little too patly, the reasons; he writes,

In 1929, Elmer Rice showed what he had been doing since The Adding Machine... He was trying to tell the story of a typical little shop-girl, in love with an artist. Somehow the shop-girl became more of an individual than the expressionist formula will allow, and the method failed. The play failed too, destroyed in the conflict between cubistic and magazine art.<sup>1</sup>

Another play, not unlike The Subway in certain respects, appeared successfully on Broadway in 1928 -- Sophie Treadwell's Machinal.<sup>2</sup> Based upon the same theme as Rice's play, Machinal tells fictitiously and with embellishments the story of the Ruth Judd murder case which was a sensation at the time. Miss Treadwell herself denied that the crime was her source, but critics have been loath to accept her denial which appeared to

<sup>1</sup>Levin, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>2</sup>Condensed in Burns Mantle, The Best Plays of 1928-1929 (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1929), pp. 225-251.

them nothing more than a politic gesture. Whatever her source the play proved to be effective theatre, and her dramaturgy Expressionistic in large part. The play is written in ten episodes, the first seven of which are purely Expressionistic; the last three vary between Expressionism and realism.

Machinal dramatizes the growth of a desire to kill in a nameless and, by implication, typical Young Woman. She is like Rice's Sophie Smith in that at the opening of the play she is seen bored to the point of madness by the agonizingly dull routine of daily work and living in a materialistic, mechanized world. The office and the home are equally maddening with their monosyllabic conversation and robot-like people; life passes before her (and the audience) in a nightmarish stream of consciousness. She marries her employer, Henry Jones, to get away from the office; she hates him in all his caricatured pomposity and empty conceit -- he is a self-made man! She gives birth to a child; while under ether she sees her life horribly before her -- the vision is dramatized on the stage. She soliloquizes. In the fifth scene she meets a young man who, if otherwise worthless, at least is capable of passionate physical love, and as a result of their liaison she knows that she can no longer tolerate her husband. She murders him. The last three scenes deal realistically with her trial and execution.

The same control factors apply here as in The Subway. Yet Miss Treadwell's play differs from Rice's in that it never becomes formula-bound. Robert Littell comments on this point when he writes,

Machinal is a play of episodes, divided into two parts. The first half shows us, intimately, the growth of the impulse to kill; the last half, the more public agony of punishment. The first half, ending with the terrible intangible certainty, in our minds and in the woman's, that she is going to kill her husband, would be a singularly fine short play in itself. Therefore the last scenes, court room, deathcell, electric in the dark, are somehow less real than the imagined tragedy...

This method, roughly speaking, is the stylization, the exaggeration, the repetition, the compression demanded to some extent by the breaking up of the dramatic form into a number of short episodes. It is that distortion necessary if the relevant truth is to be brought out within the limits of a short space of time. It isn't a new method, and it is a compound of several methods. What is new about it in Machinal, to my mind, is the flexibility with which it is used. It is a tool rather than a toy, and Miss Treadwell is not so fascinated with its possibilities, as other innovators have been, as to let it run away with her. When necessary, she carves deeply with it, at other times she lays it aside and uses a simple naturalism.<sup>1</sup>

Exhibited in Miss Treadwell's play, then, is a significant tendency in the development in American Expressionism. Never having risen to the dignity of a school, Expressionist playwrights never as a group felt constrained to adhere to a rigid dramaturgical discipline; individual playwrights in more or less isolated plays may be wholly consistent with German

<sup>1</sup>Robert Littell, "Chiefly About Machinal" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XII (November 1928), p. 777.

principles, but not one American playwright has been continuously and consistently Expressionistic. Miss Treadwell like many others is not even continuously and consistently Expressionistic for a whole play.

In 1933 James Hagan's One Sunday Afternoon<sup>1</sup> appeared. Unimportant as a play, Hagan's work has some academic interest as an example of the imperfect adaptation of the Expressionistic method to ordinary realistic drama. An examination of the play will reveal my meaning. "Biff" Grimes, a dentist, is pulling the tooth of his old friend, Hugo Barnstead. As he is doing so, he remembers their dealings with each other as young men. The whole of the story is recreated on the stage during the five minutes it requires Grimes to make the extraction. The scene fades from the dentist's office to the same small town as it was in 1900. In six fairly short scenes we see the story of Biff Grimes, Hugo Barnstead, Amy, and Virginia unfold. Grimes becomes infatuated with Virginia even though Barnstead claims prior rights; Amy tags loyally after Grimes without the slightest encouragement from him. Virginia discards Grimes because of his temper and bad manners and marries Barnstead; Grimes turns to Amy whom he marries. The eighth scene returns us again to the dentist's office where Grimes, now having become a dentist, is finishing his work

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<sup>1</sup>James Hagan, One Sunday Afternoon (New York: Samuel French, 1933).

on Barnstead, now a successful business man. Virginia enters and reveals herself to be a nagging vulgar woman; Amy enters and shows herself to be a wonderfully understanding helpmeet.

Certainly Hagan's play deals with material no more serious than that of Charlie's Aunt, but it is curious to note the occasional intrusion of the Expressionistic method into even run-of-the-mine sentimental plays. It requires a liberal stretch of the imagination to apply even two of the control factors. The subjectivity of the play could have been kept consistent rather easily, for the body of the play is supposedly the reconstruction of events in the mind of Grimes, but the author repeatedly forgets the discipline he established for himself in the prologue, and whole scenes are dramatized from the omniscient point of view of the realistic drama. If the six scenes of flash-back action are to be taken at all seriously in the light of the prologue, then certainly Hagan might have made them appear less like scenes from an Owen Davis play; their progression is as far removed from a stream of consciousness as the proof of a geometry theorem. Expressionism, for Hagan, is nothing more than a toy which he manipulates without comprehension.

Peace on Earth<sup>1</sup> (1934) by George Sklar and Albert Maltz,

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<sup>1</sup>George Sklar and Albert Maltz, Peace on Earth (New York: Samuel French, 1934).

on the other hand, makes legitimate use of Expressionism in much the same manner that Machinal does. The first two of three acts are naturalistic, but in the third act we enter the consciousness of Peter Owens, the protagonist, and the dramaturgy becomes as Expressionistic as anything of Kaiser. Peace on Earth is communist-pacifist propoganda, the story of Peter Owens, a sincere intellectual who is unjustly condemned for a crime he did not commit in order that his anti-war tirades can be silenced. The third act is devoted to Owens in his prison-cell as he awaits execution. The whole fiasco of his trial and condemnation and the growth of war-hysteria outside the prison are kaleidoscopically flashed across the stage in that madly logical disorder we have come to associate with German Expressionism. The whole capitalist war-mongering class appears as antagonist in the play, and every representative of the class is ruthlessly caricatured and stylized to underline the theses of the authors. The same chant-like dialogue, the same refrain-singing, the same flashed vignettes of events, past, present, and future, the same spectacular use of chiaroscuro in lighting, and the same tumbling succession of scenes, events, ideas, and emotions which we first met in Sinclair's Singing Jailbirds form the bases of the third act of Peace on Earth.

It scarcely need be pointed out that all the control

factors are at work in Peace on Earth, Act III. Nor does it seem any more necessary to point out that here the authors have turned to effective use Expressionism after they had used straight realism for two-thirds of the play. In this play we find an even better example of the tendency Miss Treadwell's play typified.

O'Neill's Days Without End<sup>1</sup> (1934) is a far cry from his The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape, and yet, on the basis of my classification of Expressionistic plays, it belongs in the same class with both of them. It may even be argued that Days Without End is not Expressionistic at all. It may be argued that in method, so completely unlike that of The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape, Days Without End is closer to the Subjectivism of the Russian, N. N. Evreinov, or to the peculiar method of the Italian, Luigi Pirandello, both of which bear some resemblance to the method of this play. Certainly Days Without End is not purely Expressionistic; yet, in its employment of a personified alter ego, it strives to accomplish the greatest objective of Expressionism -- the objectification of the inner experience. True, the objectification is only in words, not visual images (save that of Loving himself), but still it is the inner meaning of the protagonist, not the realistic, external meaning, which is sought by the author.

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Days Without End (New York: Random House, 1934).

We may, then, I believe, classify the play as Expressionistic of the first classification.

Days Without End deals with the spiritual struggle of John Loving, a man with a curiously split personality. O'Neill calls the spiritual, emotional half; John; John is seen and heard by all the other characters in the play and, of course, the audience; he calls the rational, nihilistic other half Loving; Loving is heard by the other characters but not seen although he is both seen and heard by the audience. John Loving, then, is portrayed by two actors, dressed identically; they differ only in that Loving wears a mask, a cold, cynical, sneering mask which is more a distortion than a likeness of John Loving's face. John Loving is the eternal seeker after religious truth; he has dabbled in almost every known creed and mystical system after having abandoned the Roman Catholicism of his youth. John wants, needs to believe in something; Loving is cynically derisive of all religion -- faith, to him, is a sign of cowardice and weakness. As the play opens, we find John Loving happily married to Elsa, in whom he hopes he has finally found something worth living for; but he is writing a novel in which, if he is intellectually honest, he must make the hero (himself) in some way reveal another love-affair. Such a revelation, John is afraid, will estrange Elsa; Loving taunts



him with charges of cowardice. Father Baird, John Loving's uncle who had reared him as a boy, calls upon him. Father Baird is aware of his spiritual struggle for religious truth, and tries to draw him out; he knows the novel is autobiographical, and so he convinces him that he should tell the plot to him and Elsa that evening. The audience discovers that the other party in the seduction, which is tormenting John's conscience, is Elsa's friend, Lucy. As John Loving tells Father Baird and Elsa the plot of his novel, Elsa realizes her husband's infidelity. She is so agonized by the discovery that she attempts to follow out the actions of the hero's wife in the novel: she virtually attempts suicide. As she lies near death, making no effort to fight for life, John is half-mad with grief; Loving still torments and scoffs at him. John finds no relief for his anguish which borders on insanity until he finds the faith to pray once again to what Loving sneeringly calls his "Roman Catholic God." As John prays in the words of his childhood religion, Loving falls dead at the foot of the Cross. John becomes a whole man again -- John Loving. His wife almost miraculously recovers at just this time, and John Loving is beatific in his new-found faith, the answer to life which he has sought for so long and which Father Baird finally helped him to find.

Days Without End is realistic in all respects save the

character of John Loving, but John Loving is, almost literally, the whole of the play. O'Neill's use of a split character may stem either from the Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde device or from the ego-drama of Evreinov in which all actions takes place within the mind of the central character; but regardless of his source he has written a play which is purely subjective. Only in the fourth act is there any delving into the unconscious; both John and Loving speak their thoughts as well as their words; but the play as a whole can hardly be said to obey the second control factor on that account. In fact, the only other control factor having relevance is religion, for in this play O'Neill has tried to symbolize the struggle of the modern intellectual for faith in a skeptical world. Days Without End, therefore, is clearly Expressionistic only in part.

In 1934 another playwright showed the influence of Pirandello: Benjamin Kaye wrote On Stage.<sup>1</sup> Whereas O'Neill had used a novel in the process of composition as the motivating device of Days Without End, Kaye followed Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author more closely by employing exactly the same device, a play in the process of composition, as the Italian used. On Stage is Expressionistic, I believe, whereas Six Characters in Search of an Author is not, because Morgan Crawford in Kaye's play is the subjective center of all

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin M. Kaye, On Stage (New York: Samuel French, 1936).

the action; Pirandello's play has no subjective center.

On Stage tells a complicated narrative of a bachelor playwright, Morgan Crawford. Edward Gilson, Crawford's friend, criticizes the play he is writing on the grounds that he knows nothing about people from first-hand experience; Gilson further accuses him of doing nothing but rewriting his own autobiography with variations. Crawford is irritated. He falls asleep and awakes to find his home peopled by the characters of his own play; he himself has become Martin Cooper, the hero of the play. All the while Crawford is Cooper in the dream, he retains a half-conscious awareness of his role as both protagonist and creator of the play in which he is forced to act. He falls in love with his heroine, Eleanor Chanler, who alone of the characters in the play is purely fictitious; all the other characters are merely friends and enemies of his whom he has adapted for use in the play. The characters in the dream-play assume personalities of their own, and although he is able to manipulate them to a certain degree, a new character whom he has not created -- Gerald Harmon -- enters and appears to be a serious rival for the affections of Eleanor. Cooper (i.e., Crawford) kills Harmon in jealousy after he has discovered Gleason (i.e., Gilson) to be a disloyal friend who has engineered the Harmon-Eleanor affair. As he is being tried for murder, Crawford awakes and admits to Gilson, who has returned, that

he is right in his criticism of the play.

Kaye, in this play, succeeds in doing what Hagan tries to do in One Sunday Afternoon. He adapts the Expressionistic method to subject matter which ordinarily would lend itself more readily to another type of technique. Morgan Crawford is much too personal an individual to be the conventional Expressionistic protagonist, and yet Kaye has used Expressionistic methods of sounding out his peculiar personality. He treats of no cosmic themes even though he deals extensively with his chief character's unconscious mind; thus it is that only two of the control factors apply -- subjectivity and the unconscious. Still, these two are so rigorously and consistently applied, that there is little question of the basic Expressionism of the play.

Paul Green, in his play, Johnny Johnson<sup>1</sup> (1937), has given us a thoroughly Expressionistic drama, more remarkable for its recency than its theatrical excellence although it is by no means a poor play. Green has subtitled his play, "The Biography of a Common Man," and we find it to be anti-war propaganda of considerable skill. Written in free verse in sixteen staccato scenes, Johnny Johnson tells the story of a most uncommon "common man." Before the end of the play he takes on aspects of Everyman and Christ which go far to

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Green, Johnny Johnson (New York: Samuel French, 1937).

develop the author's thesis, but render the protagonist something more than his creator claims him to be. Johnson is a contented stone mason who has carved a memorial for the dead of the Civil War. In the midst of the dedication ceremonies news of America's entrance into the World War comes, and Johnny is left alone with his statue, everyone else having gone off burning with the war-fever. Johnny does not want to fight; he is forced to enlist, finally, because Minny Belle, his sweetheart, will have nothing to do with him otherwise. He is sent to France. There he is regarded as something of an anomaly because, even though a soldier, he still acts like a rational, emotional human being. He is wounded while trying to kill a German sniper who turns out to be a very young boy with no more hatred for his enemies than Johnny has for his. In the hospital Johnny works a hoax whereby he is mistaken for the Allied commander-in-chief; he calls a halt to the war. When he is found out, he is returned to the United States to be committed to an insane asylum. There, in perfect accord with the inmates (all of whom bear striking resemblances to the ruling statesmen of the world), he sets up a world-government under which peace, universal and unending, is possible.

There are wild dream-like sequences like those in which Johnny is being chased by the whole Allied general staff during his perpetration of the hoax and in which Johnny rules the "world"

in the asylum. Key-characters have representative musical themes which are developed in the background throughout the play. Inanimate objects, as, for instance, the cannons in Act II, Scene 2, come alive, sing, and speak in their symbolic significances. Mere vignettes of action are flashed on the stage to form specific and telling comments on the main trend of the play's action. The settings, according to the stage-directions and the New York production both, are distorted particularly in the Allied headquarters and asylum scenes. Musical accompaniment makes specific comment on every phase of the play.

Johnny Johnson, then, is of a very pure variety of Expressionism. Obviously all of the control factors are applicable. Still, the play is as purely American as Beggar on Horseback. The weight of German tradition has not obscured the rich, underlying American humor; for all its burden of message the play never becomes bitter or pessimistic in its irony, and Green, unlike most of the German Expressionists, is mature enough to be able to laugh at himself, his people, and even his own ideas. Whereas German Expressionist plays, at their best, have great power, Green's play and others like it have an added element of charm. Johnny Johnson is strong evidence of the dynamism of dramatic Expressionism.

## B. Manifoldly Subjective Plays

Unquestionably Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude<sup>1</sup> deserves to stand as the archetype of this class. Never before or since its time has there been a comparably comprehensive effort on the part of a playwright to expose completely the inner workings of his characters. O'Neill's most ardent admirers would undoubtedly argue that Strange Interlude is not Expressionistic; they might say that the play, if it is based on any dramatic credo at all, is based on what O'Neill rather pompously referred to as "Interludism." We have no quarrel with O'Neill's most ardent admirers. If they prefer to call the play's dramaturgical method "Interludism," they may do so -- but it is my opinion that "Interludism" is nothing but a variation of Expressionism. True, it is not Expressionism in its pure German form, but its aims are similar; in consequence, many of the control factors of Expressionism are applicable to Strange Interlude; therefore we advance the play as the archetype of the second class.

Strange Interlude (1928) deals with the Freudian interpretation of a woman's period of fertility. Nina Leeds is taken through nine long acts (the play is full thrice the length of the ordinary full-length play) from young womanhood

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Strange Interlude (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928).

to menopause. Whether O'Neill intends her to be taken as an individual woman or a prototype is difficult to determine; the implication of the title and of much of the play seems to indicate her to be typical; his method augments the implication; his employment of Freudian psychoanalysis, with its preoccupation with psychic patterns rather than individual variations, is still additional evidence to support Nina's typicality. If she is a type, then Strange Interlude is undeniably Expressionistic; likewise, if she is a type, the other characters in the play are types; the resultant study (and the play certainly has most of the marks of a case-history) gives us a cross-section of American middle-class morality during the 1920s.

Nina Leeds, the daughter of Professor Henry Leeds, a pedant in an ivory tower, falls in love with Gordon before the World War when both are very young. Gordon, at the outbreak of the War, becomes an aviator, goes to Europe, and there is shot down in flames. At the opening of the play (a year or two after the war) Nina is trying to reconcile herself to the loss of Gordon whom she has now completely idealized. She regrets that she did not give herself to him before he left for France; in compensation she resolves to serve as a nurse in a hospital for the war-wounded and to give herself to as many of the survivors as she can. Her father, naturally, is bitterly resentful, both of her action and Gordon who is its cause. Meanwhile



Charles Marsden, a life-long Platonic friend of Nina, stands by awaiting developments. In the hospital Nina meets Dr. Ned Darrell, a coldly scientific young man who is convinced that life is merely a matter of biology; he guesses her trouble and suggests that she marry Sam Evans. She does so without love. Sam is kind and stupid; he wants children. Nina discovers, from Sam's mother, that there is a strain of insanity in the family; afraid to have children by Sam, she proposes a strictly biological liaison with Ned. The child is born. Sam thinks the boy to be his own. Nina names the baby Gordon after the only man she has ever loved. Gordon grows to manhood and is on the verge of marriage; Nina is bitterly jealous of the girl, Madeline Arnold, but finally she realizes that she is getting old and that even her possessive love of her son like the passion she had for the original Gordon is not so important as it was once. Now middle-aged she turns to Marsden, and the play ends.

Most of the Freudian love-patterns are brought out in the play: the normal passion of man and woman existing between Nina and Gordon; the mother-fixation of Marsden for his mother; Ned's narcissism; Nina's possessive love for her son Gordon; Sam's blind romantic love for Nina; Professor Leeds's possessive love for his daughter; and Marsden's virtually sexless love for Nina. In view of this array of motivations one almost must

agree with Margaret Mayorga's comment that the play is psychopathic rather than psychological, but then psychoanalysis is more interested in psychopathology than psychology; we may question O'Neill's insistence on the abnormality of men, but we are at least able to see now that he intends his characters to be taken as typical.

One device makes O'Neill's play Expressionistic in technique. It is the device first introduced as a stunt by Alice Gerstenberg in her Overtones in 1915: the spoken thought. The device is simple; it is merely a developed form of the old aside. Mayorga's remarks on it are revealing even if her criticism is a confession of her own misunderstanding of Expressionism; she writes,

In all fairness, however, it must be said that interest in Strange Interlude probably attaches as much to the mechanics of the play as to any attempt at extraordinary psychopathic portrayal, for the play represents the expressionistic manner, in which all of the characters speak their individual thoughts as well as their social ones; or, to put it otherwise, speak subconsciously as well as consciously, the individual or subconscious thoughts being referred to the audience in the form of asides. The dangers of such a method of character delineation are obvious, principally because the self consciousness of human beings is entirely a matter of relativity; and how can such relativity be expressed by any one method? Furthermore, it will be ascertained by omitting the asides in the reading of expressionistic texts that the character delineation of the conscious dialogue is without individuality; in other words, the dramatist has sacrificed individuality of speech to the novelty of his method. There is of course clinical interest in the outspoken thoughts of the acting characters, but at the same time it may annihilate the tremendous dramatic interest which would be inherent in the play of

the spectator's imagination upon realistically subtle dialogue in the conventional manner.<sup>1</sup>

Either Mayorga misunderstands the objectives of Expressionistic drama (with its abhorrence of conventional surface realism), or she, understanding it, has hit upon a basic theatrical weakness of the theory.

From the very nature of O'Neill's Expressionism in this play it is clear that all of the control factors are not applicable here: subjectivity, certainly, the unconscious, certainly, the others, possibly, but not to any great extent. In Strange Interlude O'Neill is concerned with the whole complex of social relations between individuals; he strives to arrive at the innermost motivation of each individual (taken as a type). With such subject matter and such an aim we would expect him to concentrate on the first two of the control factors; the other four, if and when they appear at all, are no more than incidental and derivative.

Strange Interlude, the archetype of the manifoldly subjective Expressionistic play, appeared on the American stage nearly twenty years after the publication of H. L. Mencken's The Artist.<sup>2</sup> Very often discussions of American Expressionism begin with Rice's On Trial or Gerstenberg's Overtones. Neither

<sup>1</sup>Margaret G. Mayorga, A Short History of the American Drama (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1932), pp. 329-330.

<sup>2</sup>H. L. Mencken, The Artist (Boston: John W. Luce, 1912).

of these plays are Expressionistic in themselves; yet both employ devices which later became stock tools of experimental dramatists. The fact remains, however, that H. L. Mencken, as early as 1909, wrote a play employing the spoken thought. The Artist is an interesting little one-act piece, which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been professionally produced. Perhaps it is for this reason that it has been neglected by theatrical historians.

Mencken's play is no more significant than Gerstenberg's experiment. It has nothing more to recommend it than the same tour de force executed so extensively by O'Neill in Strange Interlude. Still it has the distinction of being the first of its kind. How Mencken arrived at his use of the spoken thought is not known; probably the device is only the product of an ingenious mind with a flair for good-natured satire. At any rate the play pushes our search for the beginnings of revolt against conventional drama in America back into the first decade of the present century.

In his opening stage-directions Mencken writes, "During the action of the play not a word is uttered aloud. All the speeches of the characters are supposed to be unspoken meditations."<sup>1</sup> The Artist, then, differs from Overtones; here nothing but the thoughts of the characters are uttered.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

The "artist" is a great European pianist appearing for a concert before an American, probably a Boston, audience. He plays a Haydn sonata against an obligato of silent comment from the Janitor, Six Music Critics, A Married Woman, A Virgin, 1643 Other Women, and Six Other Men; the resultant mental reactions are incisively witty in the best Mencken tradition. To force an analysis of The Artist further is pointless; it remains nothing but a fascinating oddity.

To Alice Gerstenberg credit is usually given for having first made use of the device which makes workable the manifoldly subjective Expressionistic play. Her Overtones (1915) extends Mencken's experiment in that her characters have both social psychic voices upon the stage. Two women meet to arrange for the commission of a portrait. The wife of the artist skillfully conceals her husband's poverty from the other woman who once loved the artist and who now has predatory designs upon him. The surface conversation is suave and cultured; the alter egos are brutally frank in their comments. The portrait is finally commissioned, the women kiss each other hypocritically, and the little satire is finished. It is doubtful that Gerstenberg realized fully at the time of writing the implications of her method; at the time it probably seemed to her to be merely a facile means of dramatizing a richly ironic episode. It remained for O'Neill to bring the device to fruition; in

Strange Interlude he probably brought it all the way to incipient decay.

Two years before the production of Strange Interlude another O'Neill play caused almost as much comment as its successor. The Great God Brown (1926) employs not only the spoken-thought device of most plays of this second class, but a set of masks for each character. The symbolism of the play, so necessary to the full understanding of the essentially non-realistic plot, is based more upon the masks than upon the spoken thoughts of the characters; yet the masks are no more than an additional device used to achieve the same end aimed at by the spoken thought: the objectification of the inner consciousness, the dramatization of man's duality.

The Great God Brown fundamentally is a study of the duality of life, conceived by O'Neill as a synthesis of good and evil, of sensualism and asceticism, of living and dying. Dion Anthony, the protagonist, is, as his name suggests, half pagan sensualist (Dionysius) and half Christian ascetic (St. Anthony). The mask he wears is that of Dionysius; it represents the external man seen by the world, the protective covering adopted by man to keep safe the hyper-sensitive inner man. As long as he wears the mask, he is recognized by the other characters; when he removes the mask, he is unrecognized except by Cybel, the prostitute, who symbolizes the all-comprehending

Earth Mother of mythology. Billy Brown, the son and heir of another Brown, is the conventionally successful businessman-materialist so frequently damned by writers in the 1920s. Margaret, Dion's wife, knows and loves only the masked Dion.

The plot of the play is simple; it presents difficulties only when the shifting of masks makes the symbolism hard to follow. Dion Anthony is an artist; he becomes an excellent architect, but like his father he is subservient to the Brown family, this time in the person of the son, Billy. Dion marries Margaret who has spurned Billy. Brown, for all his business acumen, can never evoke love from a woman. He is even forced to buy the affections of Cybel, the prostitute who is Dion's mistress. Dion has nothing but contempt for Billy, and yet he is forced to work for him in order to support Margaret and his children; it is Dion's artistic genius which makes Brown's business a success. Driven half-mad in his bitterness and frustration, Dion takes to dissipation; only Cybel understands. One day Dion dies in Brown's office, and Brown sees his opportunity to get the things Dion has always won from him -- particularly the love of Margaret. He conceals Dion, dons Dion's mask, and poses as Dion. Margaret and her children do not detect the deception, but Billy is agonized even more than before because he is now fully aware of his own futility and incompetence. He dies in the arms of Cybel talking to her as

if she were his mother; Margaret kisses Dion's mask which Billy has been wearing -- it is that which she has always loved.

Of all the plays of the second class The Great God Brown is probably the closest to German Expressionism. All the control factors, save possibly music, are brought into play. Although Dion Anthony is not the sole subjective center of the drama, he is the dominant ego, for, even after his death, it is still he who shapes the destinies of the other characters. His unconscious mind as well as those of the other characters is projected on the stage both through the spoken thought and the mask. All the action centering around Cybel brings out the essential primitivity of man, pre-Christian and even prehistoric man. Man is shown to be half-angel and half-animal. Man's search for religious truth is the very substance of the characters' unconscious life. The worth of man, with all his contradictions and warring instincts, is O'Neill's thesis. The theatrical limitations of The Great God Brown may be many, but they are the result of the selection of clumsy mechanical devices rather than of any departure from a well-articulated dramatic theory; the play is at least consistently Expressionistic.

In 1929 O'Neill again employed the spoken thought in his play, Dynamo.<sup>1</sup> Less successful than either The Great God

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, Dynamo (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929).



Brown or Strange Interlude, Dynamo is the only play of the second class to meet all the control factors.

Reuben Light, the protagonist, is an adolescent, but he is taken to symbolize the modern man who deifies Science, or, more specifically, Electricity, in place of the old divinities. He is the son of the Reverend Light, an old-school fundamentalist Protestant minister; he falls in love with Ada Fife, the daughter of Light's neighbor, an atheist who has long delighted in tormenting Reuben's father. The minister's discovery of Reuben's defection causes the boy to leave home, to renounce his father's religion, and to worship at the shrine of the new god, Electricity. In a few years Reuben returns to find his mother dead of grief and his father shaken by the turn of events. Reuben himself is now changed; he is cold and hard and superficially a man of the world, but underneath the surface he is fired with a fanatical faith in Electricity. He overwhelms Ada, who has previously regarded him as a little boy, and terrifies her into compliance by his violent passion, primarily for the new god and secondarily for her. He vows complete submission to the will of Electricity, objectified by the dynamo, whose hum provides a kind of musical comment to the action of the play. Half-crazed by his devotion, Reuben is convinced that he can serve Electricity only through asceticism, and when he succumbs again to his carnal passion

for Ada, he sacrifices both himself and the girl on the dynamo, the altar of his god.

Reuben is, of course, the subjective center of the drama, but all the characters are portrayed more or less subjectively through the medium of the spoken thought. O'Neill does not succeed, however, in plumbing the unconscious mind completely. Robert Littell aptly comments on this point when he writes, "The method of spoken thought alternating with actual speech ... was used irregularly throughout, and served rather more as necessary autobiography than as illumination of the secret places of the heart."<sup>1</sup> Still, the defect is in execution rather than in aim. The play's primitivity of feeling is clearly shown in the wild, almost irrational ravings of Reuben in the last act in which he worships his new god with all the rapture of a savage in the presence of lightning. The hum of the dynamo is the only music which can penetrate the consciousness of the ecstatic Reuben; it symbolizes the whole of his motivation. The whole of the play is a study in the search for religion. The worth of man is the only control factor which is not clearly applicable in this play. Electricity, an impersonal force, is deified, and man, in the person of Reuben, immolates himself to it. From just the context of the play, then, we are forced to deduce the supremacy of matter over man,

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<sup>1</sup>Littell, "The Land of Second Best" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XII (April 1929), pp. 246-247.

but we may be justified in considering the author's implicit message to be the folly of man's self-abnegation before the forces released by Science, for Reuben is a tragic character, and his end is catastrophic.

### C. Objective Plays

John Howard Lawson's Processional<sup>1</sup> (1925) was hailed upon its appearance as a great American drama. It was regarded as a still unpolished gem for the tiara of American drama; it was taken to be prophetic of the drama of the future: Expressionistic in technique and American in tradition and subject matter. That the play's eulogists erred on the side of overstatement is only a matter of historical interest today. The play did not have the influence its adherents predicted, but it does have the two characteristics predicated of it at the time: it is thoroughly Expressionistic in technique, and it is completely American in tradition and subject matter.

Lawson subtitles his play "A Jazz Symphony of American Life," and aptly so. The play is even more than a "jazz symphony"; it is vaudeville with a plot. Lawson, never at a loss for words about his own plays, characterizes the tone of his play when he writes in his preface, "The rhythm of Processional is staccato, burlesque, carried out by a formalized arrangement of jazz music."<sup>2</sup> He calls the writing "vaudevillesque." No more accurate word could be found to describe the play, for the minor characters are caricatured in the bold, bright colors of the variety stage, and the whole of the

<sup>1</sup>Lawson, Processional (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1925).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. iii.

play has the extravagance characteristic of vaudeville. The striking miners are ushered on to the stage through the auditorium led by a jazz band; characters break into a jazz dance at the slightest provocation; the backdrop in Act I is explicitly a vaudeville painted drop picturing a West Virginia mining-town. The dialogue varies between vaudevillesque patter and powerful poetic prose; it is never wholly realistic.

The plot of Processional is loose, almost formless; its protagonist is Dynamite Jim, a typical American in that he is passionately individualistic and incidentally a criminal because he refuses to bow to the authorities of American capitalistic society. A miners' strike has been called in a West Virginia town; the mining company brings the weight of its wealth and influence against the miners; National Guardsmen are called to keep order. Jim is arrested and jailed, but he is freed through the assistance of Jake Psinski, a communist agitator. Two soldiers recapture him momentarily, but Jim kills one of them, and a man-hunt is on. Jim is protected by his mother and Sadie Cohen, the flapper-prostitute daughter of the town's general merchant. The Ku Klux Klan enters with a pharisaically sadistic intention to set matters right with tar and feathers. Suddenly the play ends in a mad bacchanalia with everyone in the cast cavorting wildly about the stage. This slight continuity of narrative is set against a kaleidoscopic background of the mine

strike with its attendant caricatured figures of The Man in the Silk Hat (representing officialdom in all its phases), National Guardsmen, Isaac Cohen (the vaudeville Jewish merchant), Pop Pratt (a totally irrelevant Civil War veteran), the Sheriff, the Miners, a Jazz Band, a Newsboy, and Klansmen.

Joseph Wood Krutch has, I believe, hit upon the reason for Processional's impressiveness in its day. He writes,

the enormous increase in both our knowledge of the natural world and the extent of our familiarity with mere details of "the news" has made it difficult any longer to arrange that knowledge into a comprehensive or meaningful pattern. Processional is not a completely successful attempt to mirror this state of mind... Taking a story based upon an incident in the West Virginia coal region, he Lawson deliberately threw realism to the winds. Basing his technique upon the expressionistic drama, now upon the rough caricature of vaudeville, he mingled tragedy and satire, pathos and burlesque into a phantasmagoria of diverse elements which does somehow suggest both the wild disorder of contemporary life and the emotional exasperation which it produces.<sup>1</sup>

Such an extravagant method as that of Processional can be justified only if it obtains effects which a more conventional one could not produce. Mr. Lawson's play does, it seems to me, thus justify itself. The things which he definitely says could be and have been said in straightforward plays dealing with social themes, but the emotional effects could not be duplicated by any drama of conventional structure. His various types with their recurrent and characteristic utterances are less protagonists in any definite story than different instruments, each with a characteristic range and timbre, composing the orchestra upon which is played the jazz symphony of contemporary life. Each seems almost unaware of the other and yet each is obedient to an underlying rhythm, set by the lust of life, which makes them, without knowing it, play in a sort of wild harmony. What one gets from the performance is not

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918 (New York: Random House, 1939), pp. 240-241.

the particular story which the play has to tell but the sensation which it gives of the cries of disorganized humanity orchestrated into the form of a nearly formless jazz symphony.<sup>1</sup>

Processional is certainly the archetype of the objective Expressionistic play. The action may appear to center around Dynamite Jim, but he turns out to be little more than a convenient pivot. The only subjective center is the author's own imagination and consciousness; it is he whose inner experience is objectified on the stage. And it is he whose unconscious mind is explored, probably not as relentlessly as it might be if it belonged to someone else, but to some degree at least. The third and fourth control factors, primitivity of feeling and music, are firmly fused by the extensive use of jazz music -- "blues" songs, "torch" songs, "mammy" songs, and all the rest -- for our jazz music of the 1920s is probably the closest approach we can find to pure aboriginal emotional expression in the civilized world. It is a little futile to seek religion in Processional, but the whole of the play, like all propagandistic plays, is given to an ardent proclamation of the worth of man.

John Dos Passos, in the following year, wrote a play somewhat akin to the Lawson work. It is The Garbage Man, subtitled "A Parade with Shouting." Just on the basis of the two subtitles the kinship of the two plays is apparent. In

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

thesis the two plays are alike: both attack the materialism of modern capitalistic society; both imply that communism is its cure. Both plays have figures who recur in several successive incarnations but always with the same single significances:

The Man in the Silk Hat, who represents institutional authority in Processional; and The Garbage Man, who represents Death in The Garbage Man.<sup>1</sup> Both plays break into poetic prose dialogue, and both plays use jazz music and jazz dancing as integral comment on the action of the plays. And both plays progress with something of the insane logic of dreams.

In his opening stage-directions the author states that at the beginning of the play "After a shrill overture of some long-drawn crooning tune the music rises into the wail of the six o'clock factory whistles."<sup>2</sup> Thereafter there is a continuous blending of music and sound-effects very much in the manner of certain types of modern music -- e.g., Carpenter's Skyscrapers and Honegger's Pacific 231. The central figure of the drama is Tom, the heir of a wealthy family who rebels against everything his family represents; he tries to take his sweetheart, Jame, with him, but she, who never has had anything, is still convinced that wealth will bring her happiness. Tom wanders to New York City, a penniless transient. He is wanted by the

<sup>1</sup>John Dos Passos, The Garbage Man (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 3.



police for his part in some labor trouble, and finds refuge in the room of a fabulously popular and wealthy actress, who turns out to be Jane. He half-sings and half-declains the illusory glory of New York City in a long free verse poem, but Jane is still afraid to face his world; he escapes still looking to the moon as a symbol of man's liberation from our business civilization.

Ostensibly The Garbage Man is a subjective Expressionistic drama, but Tom is not the real subjective center of the play. He is merely the protagonist; it is the author whose inner experience is objectified. Tom, like the Garbage Man, only serves to carry the thread of the plot through to the end of the play. The eight rapid scenes are more concerned with a concentrated satire of modern society than with the soul of Tom or Jane. The same control factors applicable to Processional, therefore, are applicable to The Garbage Man.

Processional and The Garbage Man are clearly the archetypes of the objective Expressionistic drama by reason of their adherence to the objectives of German Expressionism. The other plays included within this same class frequently stray far afield and justify the epithet, Expressionistic, only because of the applicability of one or more of the control factors.

The first of these, in order of chronology, is Upton Sinclair's Hell<sup>1</sup> (1923). Although there is no record of the

<sup>1</sup>Upton Sinclair, Hell (Pasadena: Upton Sinclair, 1923).

stage career of the play, it is of great interest from several standpoints. In the first place, Hell is as close to fantasy as it is to Expressionism; in the second place, it is written in blank verse; in the third place, the actors frequently step out of character to address the audience with criticisms of the play itself; in the fourth place, it covers much the same ground as does Milton's Paradise Lost; and in the fifth place, it employs motion picture projections to portray simultaneous action in a place other than the stage. The first point shows another genre to which Expressionism may be applied; the second is remarkable in view of the fact that Hell antedates Maxwell Anderson's poetic dramas by several years; the third calls for "presentational acting"; the fourth is of literary interest; and the fifth may suggest a source of the Living Newspaper technique made familiar only within the last five or six years.

Hell is not as far removed from the archetypes of this class as one might think. It treats ironically and wittily of the same subject as do Processional and The Garbage Man, but from an entirely different point of view. The scene of the play is laid in hell, and the chief characters are the Biblical denizens of that region. Satan, at a council of war, determines to wreak vengeance on God by tormenting His creature, man. The court jester, Whip-o'-wit, and Mammon undertake the job; these two institute capitalism on earth, and the fiends rejoice as

man goes through an endless cycle of wars and depressions. As the scenes of the catastrophes on earth are projected on a screen in hell, a counter-plot is being fomented by the Angels of Love, Justice, and Humor; the plot is carried out by Comrade Jesus with the assistance of Karl Liebknecht and Bill Haywood, communist agitators in America during the era centering around 1900. Before the play has a chance to end, however, the actors rebel against the author, refusing to carry his ridiculous fantasy any farther. Here the play ends, but already the author's point has been made with an engaging flash of humor.

Whether or not Sinclair expects to be taken seriously is hard to determine. If he does, his play provides an interesting study. For all the author's apparently juvenile faith in his panacea he has treated his material with sophisticated wit. His very sophistication makes pure Expressionism impossible for Sinclair; he never achieves anything like primitivity of feeling or ecstasy in his piece. But he has injected an element of subjectivity into his treatment of his myth, and there is something of the unconscious mind in his dream-like presentation of the material. Music which makes specific comment on the action recurs frequently, and the worth of man, naturally, is the implicit message of the play.

When we turn from Hell to Virgil Geddes' The Frog<sup>1</sup> (1926),

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<sup>1</sup>Virgil Geddes, The Frog (Paris: Edward W. Titus, 1926).

we give our attention to a play with almost no kinship with any of its predecessors in this third class of Expressionistic drama. The Frog, in fact, bears only slight resemblance to any other play coming within the range of our study. It might come under the heading of Impressionism or Symbolism as well as under that of Expressionism, for in its basic theory it conforms as well to the tenets of these esthetic creeds as well as to those of Expressionism. Its theme is man's attempt, sometimes successful, more often not, to escape into illusion. The theme is treated in a manner as far removed from that of The Wild Duck as realism is from Expressionism, but Expressionism is not the only esthetic reaction against Ibsenism. The play abandons realistic psychology for a sort of intuitive artistic logic, expressed in terms of a systematic symbolism. Now, Impressionism, to a certain extent, employs symbolism, and Symbolism, naturally, makes a comprehensive and an intensive use of symbolism; so, too, does Expressionism, but the symbolism of the last creed is more erratic and perhaps even more subjective than that of the first two creeds. The symbolism in The Frog is highly systematized and more poetic in its inspiration than is that of the ordinary Expressionistic play which very often takes its symbolism directly from psychoanalysis or the political cartoon or even the newspaper comic strip without too great a concern for consistency. Yet, since neither Impressionism nor Symbolism has been used very extensively as terms applicable to the drama, we shall

include Geddes' play here.

Five characters, all of them de-personalized and symbolic, form the dramatis personae of The Frog: Hugo, a circus clown who works toward the ultimate perfection of his impersonation of a frog; Bob, a circus performer who, in the role of poet-commentator, serves as raisonneur; Cleo, a girl circus performer, who serves as foil to Hugo and Bob; Oscar, a juggler, who is little more than a passive witness of the action; and Glory, a comparatively realistic clown without any understanding of the deeper implications of his profession. Hugo seeks to find the secret of "frogness" in order that he may be a more perfect entertainer and not merely a diverter of children. Bob understands Hugo's objective and sympathizes; he tries to explain to Cleo, who loves Hugo, what Hugo is trying to do and why he acts so strangely. Glory is alternately jealous and uncomprehending of Hugo, and one night in a drunken daze he tries to emulate Hugo's inexplicable communion with the frogs of the pond, falls in, and drowns. Through all this Hugo goes on unperturbed, and finally he loses himself in his quest, forgetting everyone about him, including Cleo -- but in the process he achieves the perfect impersonation of a frog. Hugo alone is perfect in self-delusion, and he alone of the five principal characters achieves anything like happiness.

The subjectivity of The Frog is that of the author, but

it differs from that of the ordinary Expressionistic play in that it is perfectly orderly and consistent; the play, then, is subjective in much the same sense that a William Blake poem is subjective. Hugo is an indirect study in the unconscious mind of the conscientious self-deluder, but the study always remains implicit and non-didactic and non-analytical. The other four control factors find little applicability in The Frog save by implication, although there is a very real religious strain running through the whole of the play.

John Howard Lawson, in 1927, became more explicit in his proclamation of communism as the cure of industrial capitalism. His play of that year, The International,<sup>1</sup> falls far below Processional and even Roger Bloomer in quality. The play is very consciously experimental although the innovations he employs tend to be new in the combinations in which they occur and not in themselves; i.e., the method of The International is synthetic and eclectic. He makes the point clear in his preface to the play, in which he writes,

The International is musical throughout. It requires full musical score along modernistic lines with special emphasis on broken rhythms, machine noises and chanting blues... The chanting is a weaving of jazz rhythms with orchestral backgrounds.

The chorus, divided into two parts, eight women in each part, is a combination of jazz treatment with the dignified narrative strophe and antistrophe of Greek drama. Their

<sup>1</sup>Lawson, The International (New York: Macaulay, 1927).

dancing is also adapted from simple review formations to suit needs of swaying tragic movement inherent in the play.

The method is new and requires a new form of presentation. The drama is formalized pattern or symphony.<sup>1</sup>

The International, then, is intended to be, in technique, a synthesis of modern stage review, Greek choric drama, and jazz symphony. It is to be set against a scenic design which Lawson describes as follows:

The permanent structural setting is a series of blocks building up like a futurist impression of mass from the gray pit of the orchestra to a rear point fourteen feet above stage level. Separate massive and strangely shaped geometric blocks... The structure might suggest a futurist city, a mountain pile or a rough relief map. It allows a maximum amount of movement up, down and around. From left and right steps lead down to audience...

The flat front surfaces left and right are removable, showing interiors...

The structural set is blocked off on occasions by a front curtain, gauze, capable of transparent effect when lighted behind.<sup>2</sup>

As in most of Lawson's plays minor characters and even some of the principal characters are ruthlessly caricatured by the author so that the audience cannot possibly mistake his exposition of the excellence of communism in contrast to the evil of capitalism. Characters sing and dance when the occasion calls for it, and the dialogue they speak varies from vulgar slang through poetic prose to rimed and free verse. The International is almost wholly eclectic.

In a whirling succession of short scenes the plot, such as

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-9.

it is, unravels over three continents, the action being set chiefly in New York City, Thibet, Moscow, and Paris. David Fitch, the liberal son of a powerful but responsible capitalist, feels the fallacy of his father's philosophy and departs for the Far East in search of adventure. There he meets Alise, a beautiful Russian communist agent, and Karneski, her colleague. Together they seek to get the good will of the Buddha of Lhasa, a Thibetan potentate who controls rich oil lands. They anger the Buddha who is about to have them executed when they are rescued by the gallant British officer, Colonel Fitzmaurice. They escape to Paris, where, after a number of experiences with French diplomats and Italian Fascists, it is decided that David is to return to New York City to carry on the work of the revolution there. The final scene is a chaotic picture of the revolution in New York City, complete to barricades in the streets.

The International is a bit too fantastic for the serious application of the control factors. Yet, in view of Lawson's notable lack of a sense of humor, the factors should be considered out of fairness to him. The subjectivity of the play is, of course, that of the author; the cogency of music in the play is apparent from the author's preface, quoted above; the religion of the piece is the customary deification of the proletariat; and, of course, the worth of man, more specifically,



of the worker, is the very substance of the author's message.

In the same year a far more interesting play was written by another Left Wing playwright, Em Jo Basshe -- The Centuries.<sup>1</sup> Basshe subtitles his play, "The Portrait of a Tenement House." In effect, The Centuries is an Expressionistic rendering of Gorky's The Lower Depths; an essential difference between the two, however, is expressed by the author in his preface; he writes,

No definite time periods or lapses are indicated nor are seasons, months, days, or given undue importance since their action upon the characters in their battle for life and existence -- except in practical instances -- is no different from the other phases of their struggle. The tide and flow of their life is so swift, so brutal and primitive that neither night, day, heat, cold, or death can have any more than a glancing effect upon the whole community.<sup>2</sup>

Here is explicit declaration of the irrelevance of time as a factor in drama; herein lies the play's strongest claim to Expressionism. Basshe, in suggesting the scenic design of the play, re-emphasizes the point when he writes,

Setting: a large tenement house on the East Side of New York and the street in front of it... The effect obtained may not be unlike that of the mudhuts of our ancestors and may still keep within the period of the play.<sup>3</sup>

The Centuries wavers between extreme naturalism and pure Expressionism, but the balance, because of the stagecraft necessary, generally tips toward the latter. Scenes succeed

<sup>1</sup>Em Jo Basshe, The Centuries (New York: Macaulay, 1927).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

each other without interval or curtain, and time-lapses must be inferred by the audience. Realistic dialogue is interspersed with passages of poetic prose. Music, chiefly Yiddish pogrom songs and Hebrew ritual chants, and sounds with symbolic significance make specific comment on the action of the drama.

The Centuries has more plot material than The Lower Depths, but still the plot is of only secondary importance. Shames and Chave, a Jewish immigrant couple, take up residence in a Lower East Side tenement and there attempt to rear their son and daughter, Yankel and Gitel, in the old traditions. Both of the children rebel: Yankel becomes a ward politician by maneuvering out of power the equally corrupt Yoshke; Gitel, a good girl, becomes involved in communist activities and finds love and hope with Reuben, another communist agitator. These personal developments are laid against a background of a communist-inspired garment workers' strike, underworld killings, and a tenement fire. Brief scenes are laid in a synagogue where the congregation (and the audience) sees re-enacted before it the pogroms of the mother-country; the tenement fire and the subsequent search for loved ones are flashed Expressionistically across the stage without any attempt at realism.

None of the control factors, with the possible exception of the unconscious, may be ignored in connection with The Centuries. The materials of the play are a little too

systematically handled on the whole to permit our inference of extreme subjectivity on the part of the author. Only in brief sequences, as in that of the synagogue and in that of the tenement fire, is there the subjectivity we have come to associate with Expressionism, and then the distorted, kaleidoscopic treatment, suggesting subjectivity, is administered apparently only for purposes of effect; for, in the main body of the play, life is portrayed with considerable, if not complete, objectivity. In consequence, therefore, of this de-emphasis of subjectivity, the unconscious has little if any part in the dramatization -- once again excepting the synagogue and tenement fire scenes.

The failure of The International did not discourage John Howard Lawson from writing another Expressionistic drama in the same year -- The Loud Speaker.<sup>1</sup> Lawson, perhaps out of a basic inability to criticize himself as a playwright, attempts in this piece to create a farce. Joseph Wood Krutch, in a very generous prefatory essay, calls the play "an American example of the Commedia dell' arte."<sup>2</sup> If he is correct, we see Lawson, then, as an experimenter in still another old dramatic form. The Loud Speaker ought to be of at least academic interest, therefore.

In The Loud Speaker Lawson employs all the familiar Expressionistic devices of his earlier works with an additional trick or two. On a constructivist set the author lays the action

<sup>1</sup>Lawson, The Loud Speaker (New York: Macaulay, 1927).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. x.

of his play in several strata; in one niche he places a negro jazz band who provide musical comment on the action from time to time and musical accompaniment for the dancing which forms an integral part of the stage business.

Lawson's play is a burlesque of the mad 1920s. It centers about Harry U. Collins, mythical candidate for the governorship of New York state, and his family. Collins, in the midst of a high-pressure political campaign, is harried alternately by his flapper-daughter, Clare, his essentially stupid wife, his mistress, Floradora, his campaign manager, Peterson, and an idealistic newspaper reporter, Johnnie Dunne. Finally, in revulsion from the dirtiness of the whole business, Collins makes a completely honest political speech in which he reveals all the collusion of his campaign. The public is so overwhelmed by his honesty that he wins the election anyway.

The Loud Speaker is wild and nightmarish in its dream-like progression toward its rather conventionally melodramatic ending; for this reason it approaches true Expressionism more closely than did its immediate predecessor. The subjectivity and the unconscious are unquestionably control factors applicable here; music is the only other factor which has relevance from the farcical nature of the materials used.

Thornton Wilder has become familiar to the American public as an experimental playwright, chiefly through his immensely

popular Our Town, but he is rarely considered an Expressionistic playwright. To the best of my knowledge, he has never written a purely Expressionistic play. Many of the short pieces preceding Our Town have Expressionistic features, but he tends toward a relatively simple symbolism more often than toward the more extreme allegories of the Expressionists. Two of his short plays, dating from 1931, serve to illustrate the point.

The Long Christmas Dinner<sup>1</sup> aptly illustrates Wilder's predilection for simplification. Simplification, we have found, is a hall-mark of Expressionism, but Wilder's method is basically different from that of the Expressionists. Wilder employs a rational simplification whereas the true Expressionistic dramatist uses an emotional simplification; the distinction, I believe, is fundamental. Wilder evolves a neat and orderly pattern after which he models his dramatic materials; the resultant drama is simpler than life, perhaps, also, more superficial, and certainly more orderly. The Expressionist dramatist, on the other hand, takes his dramatic materials in a raw state and virtually allows them to develop themselves -- the only pattern he superimposes upon his materials being the universal principles of psychoanalysis; the resultant drama is also simpler than life, perhaps less superficial, and certainly less orderly. Wilder's plays, usually, are neat; the Expressionist's, most often, are chaotic.

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<sup>1</sup>Thornton Wilder, The Long Christmas Dinner (New York: Samuel French, 1934).

The Long Christmas Dinner is a characteristically neat Wilder drama.

The play has only one setting, and the action is continuous without the indication of any time-lapses in spite of the fact that ninety years pass during the play. The pattern adopted by Wilder is the simple cycle of human events in a typical American family, in this case, the Bayard family. The scene is laid in the new Bayard home at some indeterminate time, presumably a century ago; it is Christmas day, and Mother Bayard is presiding over the Christmas feast. The setting is a simple drape affair with two portals: the left portal is flooded with a warm light -- it is the symbolic representation of birth; the right portal is flooded with a cold light -- it is the representation of death. On the stage there are no properties save the table and chairs; all other properties are indicated by pantomime. The personnel of the family changes with the passage of years: the old, one after another, pass out through the right portal, and they are replaced by children who enter through the left portal, only to grow old and pass out on the right. There are a succession of "Mother Bayards," each of whom presides over the continuous Christmas feast. The dominant interests and problems of each generation are at least suggested. At the end of the play a new Mother Bayard is at the head of the table, and the beginning of a new cycle is strongly suggested.

The Long Christmas Dinner has the same quality of timelessness.

ness as does The Centuries. Aside from this quality, the play has few features of the Expressionistic play; although it applies a kind of stylized psychology to its characters, it does not use the stylization of psychoanalysis; it finds applicability in none of the control factors except the worth of man. Why, then, does it deserve treatment here as one of the third class Expressionistic dramas? Merely because it shows a reaction against the realistic drama, and, positively, it has the same general objectives as the purely Expressionistic drama; and it requires the kind of presentational acting hypothesized of Expressionistic drama.

The other Thornton Wilder play to be considered is The Happy Journey.<sup>1</sup> In general, its stagecraft is the same as that of The Long Christmas Dinner; a stage manager, the type made famous in Our Town, is added. He reads the parts of minor characters who never appear at all, and he goes about his other duties in very much the same manner as the stage manager of the Chinese theatre.

The plot of The Happy Journey is simple. It develops -- more accurately, sketches -- the family life of the Kirby family, centering around Ma Kirby. The family makes an automobile journey from their home to Trenton where the Kirby's elder daughter lives with her husband. The whole of the play deals with that journey, "the happy journey," and the homely incidents during

<sup>1</sup>Wilder, The Happy Journey (New York: Samuel French, 1934).

its progress.

It is possible to interpret The Happy Journey in terms of the control factors, but it would be ridiculous to push the interpretation too far. There is always a temptation to read too much into the writing of writers like Wilder who simplify, perhaps over-simplify, and consequently seem to imply a great deal. Should we be thus tempted, we might discover to everyone's surprise, chiefly Wilder's, that The Happy Journey is really a purely subjective Expressionistic drama of our first classification, in view of the fact that Ma Kirby appears to be the subjective center of the action. But I believe that the play is too neat, too orderly, and too rational to be any character's subjective vision of life. The whole is patly Thornton Wilder's systematized vision of American middle-class life.

Irwin Shaw, representing a new generation of American experimental playwrights, has given us as recently as five years ago a play which falls into our third class of Expressionistic dramas -- Bury the Dead.<sup>1</sup> Shaw's play is an effective propaganda piece against war; its technique is clearly, if not purely, Expressionistic. Built into the familiar episodic structure, Bury the Dead presents an anti-war plea in terms of de-personalized characters, notably six American soldiers killed in action who rise in their graves and refuse to be buried. The consternation

<sup>1</sup>Irwin Shaw, Bury the Dead in The Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre (New York: Random House, 1939), pp. 33-82.



of the generals is unbounded. They seek every means possible to induce the men to allow themselves to be buried, but the pleas of all, even the soldiers' women, are unavailing. The action progresses through a series of brief scenes punctuated by black-outs and commented upon by the singing of the demoralized soldiers at the front.

Shaw's conceit, while highly effective theatre, is not original, for Hans Chlumberg's Miracle at Verdun antedates Bury the Dead by at least a decade. Yet Shaw's play indicates once again the effective use to which Expressionism can be put to dramatize a fundamentally didactic thesis. Music and the worth of man are the only two control factors clearly applicable to this play.

The last play which we shall consider under this third classification of Expressionistic dramas is noteworthy for several reasons. Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock<sup>1</sup> (1938) is perhaps the most recent successful Expressionistic play of this class; it is thoroughly Expressionistic; and it is as much operetta as it is play.

All of Blitzstein's characters are typical and more or less stylized; music is the very core of the drama; the dialogue is stream-lined and frequently becomes free verse. The chronological order of the action is repeatedly violated by flash-backs

<sup>1</sup>Marc Blitzstein, The Cradle Will Rock in The Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre, pp. 113-167.

which explain or underline the current action. The scenes are brief and rapid and cumulative in their effect, and pay but slight heed to the dicta of classic drama. In theme the play is, as we should expect from a Left Wing playwright like Blitzstein, a satire of American capitalism with a communist labor-leader as hero.

Larry Foreman, the labor leader, and Moll, a prostitute, are arrested and brought to a night court. While they are there, the members of the Liberty Committee, a front organization subservient to the villainous capitalist Mr. Mister, are mistakenly brought into the court on a charge of disturbing the peace. The sycophancy of each of the committee members is broadly satirized and dramatized for the audience. Eventually Mr. Mister arrives to bail his creatures out of jail; he seeks to bribe Larry into abandoning the workers he has convinced to go on strike, but Larry spurns his offers. At the close of the play he is freed to continue his work among the unenlightened.

Like most late Expressionistic plays The Cradle Will Rock tends to be more objective than the Expressionist formula allows. In its wilder moments, however, the play is obviously the product of the author's vision of life, and there are unmistakable suggestions of subjectivity and the workings of the unconscious mind. Some primitivity of feeling is expressed in the musical score (composed by Blitzstein), and the worth of man, as usual,

appears to form the basis of the author's message. The religion, if any, is the religion of materialistic communism.

#### D. Plays Expressionistic in Technique Only

This fourth classification of American Expressionistic plays is necessarily irregular, for the plays contained under it vary widely as to basic intention and even dramatic theory. Their inclusion in our study, however, serves a twofold purpose: first, it shows the range of uses to which Expressionism may be put outside the specifically Expressionistic drama; and second, it gives us some indication of the direction of the trend away from Expressionism into less extreme dramatic forms.

A very large number of plays might be covered under this heading, but the mere multiplication of instances would in no way add to the effectiveness of the study. We shall treat, therefore, of a comparatively small number of representative plays.

O'Neill, in his continuous search for new, effective means of dramatic expression, employs a number of Expressionistic devices in All God's Chillun Got Wings<sup>1</sup> (1924) in order to present as graphically as possible the sharp divergence between the negro and the white man. Essentially realistic in its psychology, All God's Chillun Got Wings makes use of Expressionistic stagecraft. The stage is sharply divided into halves, the one side representing the negro side of a district in New York

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<sup>1</sup>O'Neill, All God's Chillun Got Wings in The Wilderness Edition, Vol. IV, pp. 3-85.

City, the other side the white man's side. Throughout the first act the line of demarcation is rigidly adhered to; the massing of minor characters establishes and maintains a studied balance between the two racial groups. In the second act the home of Jim Harris, the negro, and Ella, his white wife, establishes the opposition of the two races again, this time by the contrast of good negro taste and bad white taste. In the closing scenes of the play O'Neill uses a decorative Congo mask as the symbol of the incompatibility of the two races and of Ella's mental degeneration.

I. J. Golden, in 1931, adapted the rapid-fire scene sequence of the Expressionistic drama to his play, Precedent,<sup>1</sup> in which he dramatizes the Tom Mooney case with telling effectiveness. Probably in no other way could he have achieved the emotional impact he does than by the use of short scenes, cumulative rather than logical, in their progression. There is nothing in the play which violates the strictest psychological realism, but the organization of the dramatic materials is clearly derivative from Expressionism.

Paul Peters and George Sklar, in 1934, wrote a Left Wing social drama under the title of Stevedore,<sup>2</sup> which for all its realism profits by the employment of the Expressionistic rapid

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<sup>1</sup>I. J. Golden, Precedent (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1931).

<sup>2</sup>Paul Peters and George Sklar, Stevedore (New York: Covici-Friede, 1934).

sequence of scenes, black-outs, and the singing of negro songs for specific comment on the action. The resultant effect is an emotional power which would not have been possible by means of realism alone.

John Howard Lawson was still writing plays in 1934, although by that time he had abandoned pure Expressionism, the mark of his earlier technique is clearly upon his work. His play of this year he called The Pure in Heart.<sup>1</sup> The psychology of his characters is now consistently realistic, but he still makes use of music to "underline dialogue," as he puts it; and he still calls for an "unrealistic setting, imaginatively suggesting a small town shack" in the first act and for an "impressionistic rendering of a bachelor apartment" in the second. Songs form a part of the text of his play.

In the following year Paul Green again turned a sympathetic pen to the negroes of the deep South and wrote Roll Sweet Chariot<sup>2</sup> subtitled as "A Symphonic Play of the Negro People." Psychologically Roll Sweet Chariot is realistic, but in structure it is, as the subtitle suggests, symphonic, musical to so great a degree that the play comes close to being an operetta. Music, particularly negro spirituals and folk-songs, gives the play an inner unity which could hardly be achieved by purely realistic

<sup>1</sup>Lawson, The Pure in Heart in With a Reckless Preface (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934), pp. 1-111.

<sup>2</sup>Green, Roll Sweet Chariot (New York: Samuel French, 1935).

means. Scenes are rapid and cumulative, and the plot is always subservient to the emotional effect sought by the author.

Waiting for Lefty<sup>1</sup> brought accolades and predictions of a great future to Clifford Odets in 1935. He was hailed as the white hope of the American theatre; particular commendation was given his dramaturgical originality. But what the critics did not realize was that the originality he brought to the stage was nothing more than an adaptation of Expressionistic means to realistic drama. In Waiting for Lefty Odets creates individualized chief characters and peoples the background with impersonal types. He minimizes the plot in the interest of emotional effect; the play has an emotional crisis rather than a narrative crisis, which he achieves by the wholly Expressionistic means of short scenes, dramatically spot-lighted with no more than a suggestion of place. Flash-backs re-create for the audience the past histories of various striking cab-drivers, and underscore the pathos and irony of the current dramatic action. Odets' effect, then, is cumulative in the best Expressionistic tradition.

Undoubtedly the most strikingly effective genre brought upon the American stage in recent years has been a creation of the Federal Theatre Project, now defunct. The so-called "living newspaper" literally took New York by storm five or six

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Odets, Waiting for Lefty in The Best Short Plays of the Social Theatre, pp. 1-31.

years ago, and although the Federal Theatre Project has gone the way of most political enterprises, its creature cannot have died; its vitality is too great. Whether or not the creators of the Living Newspaper were ever aware of the objectives of German Expressionism, they, consciously or otherwise, used the chief devices of Expressionism and the new stagecraft in a manner which even today seems to justify the faith of the early Expressionists in their visionary dramatic creed. Living Newspapers are not Expressionistic plays; they can scarcely be called plays at all -- rather, they are dramatizations of problems, to use the words of Arthur Arent who was instrumental in the compilation and editing of the most successful works of this type. For first-hand information on the genre let us look to the words of Arent himself, then; he writes,

the Living Newspaper is the dramatization of a problem -- composed in greater or lesser extent of many news events, all bearing on the one subject and interlarded with typical but non-factual representations of the effect of these news events on the people to whom the problem is of great importance. The word "non-factual" may be misleading here. Let me explain: a news item will carry information concerning a Congressional debate on a Housing Bill. We produce this debate, let us say, including the statement from one of the Bill's partisans that one-third of the nation is ill-housed. So far we are literal, transposing a front page story to the stage, using only the direct quote. But the human element is missing. The statements and statistics are flat. We have made no use of the theatre. The next step, then, is the creative scene, based on slum conditions as we know them to exist, where instead of one-dimensional characters, speaking the unattractive patois of the politician, we have a man expressing himself in the warm speech and theatric idiom of a humanity undeterred by the hopelessness of being immortalized in the Congressional Record. This character



represents the one-third of the nation. He is the audience's identification, the bridge that leads to an understanding in human terms of the subject of the debate. And the proof of his being is the debate itself.<sup>1</sup>

The episodic approach is altogether different, the fewer scenes being self-contained and having each three primary functions: 1, to say what has to be said; 2, to build to the scene's own natural climax; and 3, to build to the climax of the act curtain and the resolution of the play. The smaller number of scenes also permits of roundness. One aspect of the problem should be explained or dramatized fully and completely in one scene and then forgotten, with the next scene going on to another point. A single idea spread over two or three scenes becomes diffused and lacks wallop. The episodic type of construction is patterned closely on the revue, with the same kind of spotting: the flash scene, full stage; the down in one scene; the factual, the comic and the realistic sketch. The musical interlude between scenes in the episodic method is of great help, giving the audience a chance to catch its breath before chewing on the next morsel...

Going further along in the series [of Living Newspaper productions], we find two important developments which appeared in Power. First and foremost, the Loudspeaker or Voice of the Living Newspaper ceased to be merely an annotator or datelines and began to take on individuality and coloration. It spoke lines, it editorialized, it became a definite character, but never the same for long... it was all things to all men, and particularly to the dramatist.

The second innovation was the use of projection as background. Lantern slides, some hand-drawn, others photographs-- a tree, a door, a lamppost -- were thrown on a scrim and replaced the usual flats...

The projections in One Third of a Nation are not backgrounds, not static. They are functional, a part of the action itself. Thus, two characters go for a stroll around New York in 1850. We project stills of that period. The characters observe them, talk about them. In the second act, another trip around New York -- in 1938. This time motion pictures, more in keeping with the period. Again the projections are discussed and the changes in the city's appearance noted.<sup>2</sup>

The Living Newspaper is in effect, then, an Expressionistic

<sup>1</sup>Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XXII (November 1938), pp. 821-822.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 824-825.

newsreel, or, more accurately, an Expressionistic March of Time, in the fullest implication of both terms.

Four Living Newspapers, notable for their excellence and theatrical effectiveness, will be considered briefly here: One Third of a Nation, Triple-A Plowed Under, Power, and Spirochete, all of which appeared in 1937 and 1938.

One Third of a Nation<sup>1</sup> is based on the congressional debate over the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act. Its materials are drawn from newspapers, civic reports on housing, the Congressional Record, sociology text books, etc., and are edited by Arent. One Third of a Nation dramatizes the growth of the housing problem in New York City over the last hundred years. It is shown to be directly traceable to land speculation and subsequent political corruption. Catastrophes are flashed Expressionistically across the stage, and there is no human element in the various aspects of the problem which is not brought upon the stage to illustrate and underscore the academic burden of the subject matter. The scenes are brief and cumulative; all manner of inanimate objects are given voices; strong audience-actor contact is established by the introduction of a character, patently "a little man," the man in the crowd, a member of the audience. The Loudspeaker serves as commentator,

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Arent, One Third of a Nation in Federal Theatre Plays (New York: Random House, 1938).

narrator, raisonneur, and, in general, the means of preserving some sort of unity in a narrative which has no other basis for unity than a dynamic sociological problem. Time is established, in the best Appia and Craig tradition, by music -- simple songs immediately recognizable as typical of the year represented on the stage; place is established by a few realistic, but greatly simplified, sets and by symbolic properties -- as, for instance, a grass mat used to represent a section of unimproved land. Some scenes have no other setting than motion-picture or still projections. Characters carrying the burden of a scene are spot-lighted on a darkened or dimmed stage, and black-outs are the most common means of punctuating the progress of the action.

Triple-A Plowed Under<sup>1</sup> treats the problems of the American farmer between 1917 and 1938 in much the same manner employed in One Third of a Nation in its treatment of the housing problem. Twenty-six short scenes, peopled by fictional type-characters and impersonators of real persons in public life, carry the audience from the first World War, at which time war demands and inflation gave rise to the acute agricultural crises of subsequent years, through the post-War depressions and the enactment of the A. A. A. during the first Roosevelt administration, to the final invalidation of the Act by the Supreme Court. The piece is openly polemic, and illustrated exposition is its

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<sup>1</sup>Triple-A Plowed Under in Federal Theatre Plays (New York: Random House, 1938).

method. There is only one significant variation in its Living Newspaper technique; the Loudspeaker of One Third of a Nation is displaced by "The Voice of the Living Newspaper," a more personalized and humanized commentator.

Power,<sup>1</sup> the third of the Living Newspapers edited by Arent, is closely akin to its two predecessors in its basic theatrical devices. It dramatizes the desirability of federally operated utilities; it uses as its test case the Tennessee Valley Authority. The only noteworthy technical advance in the production is the further humanization of The Voice of the Living Newspaper, which now speaks not only to the characters and the audience, but also to the stage-hands and anyone else within earshot.

In Spirochete<sup>2</sup> Arnold Sundgaard has given us an interesting variation of the Living Newspaper technique in his chronicle history of the growth of and the fight against syphilis. The whole of the action is a flash-back from a prologue in which two young people applying for a marriage license become incensed when they are informed by the clerk that first they must be subjected to a physical examination for venereal diseases. Lenny, a radio announcer who is interviewing marriage license applicants at the bureau, overhears their indignant remarks

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<sup>1</sup>Power in Federal Theatre Plays (New York: Random House, 1938).

<sup>2</sup>Arnold Sundgaard, Spirochete in Federal Theatre Plays (New York: Random House, 1938).

and explains to them the purpose of the examination. His explanation forms the body of the Living Newspaper production, and his voice becomes The Voice of the Living Newspaper. The action progresses through fifteen scenes from 1493, the year in which Columbus' returning sailors brought syphilis from the West Indies, through the intervening years during which the disease spread and popular superstitions and prudishness hampered the fight of medical science against it, to 1937, the year in which the Illinois Legislature passed the Salties Marriage bill providing for the physical examination of all applicants for marriage licenses. Spirochete is more dramatic than its three predecessors, its scenes more poignant and powerful in their human appeal. Material for a dozen or more dramas is glossed over in scenes which, because of time limitation, do little more than suggest the human conflict inherent in the material. Sundgaard's theatrical devices are substantially the same as those employed by Arent in his productions, but he manages to preserve a stronger sense of continuity and roundness than Arent does. If the Living Newspaper lives on the American stage, it is safe to predict, I think, that a method closer to that of Sundgaard than to that of Arent will be the cause of its preservation.

## CHAPTER VI: A Description of American Dramatic Expressionism

Dramatic Expressionism has never existed as a cult in America. For this reason no precise definition of the movement is possible -- only a description based on Expressionistic plays which have appeared on the American stage. Our description is necessarily based on just those American Expressionistic plays available in print. These we have discussed in the preceding chapter. Let us summarize our findings.

We have dealt long enough with inadequate attempts at definition. We have noted the correspondence of individual plays with the control factors of German Expressionism. It is now time to turn our attention exclusively to a description of American Expressionism in general terms. We shall consider American Expressionistic drama in four aspects: first, writing and construction; second, characterization; third, subject matter and plot; and fourth, intellectual and emotional content.

In the consideration of the writing of any play attention automatically goes first to the dialogue. The dialogue of American Expressionistic plays, those in closest conformity with the German control factors, is free to the point of license. This is not to say that the purer Expressionistic plays use dialogue indiscriminately, but that in its use they range all the way from the tersest and most brutal to the most involved and most lyrical, all within a single play. Rosamond Gilder expresses this use of dialogue admirably when she writes,

Today a certain impatience is felt with the verbal feu de joie of the drawing room comedy. Brightness per se, repartee, witty dialogue, obscure the issue and serve as padding to fill an evening's entertainment. A play centered on one climax can carry such light freight and still achieve its object, but when the pilgrimage of the soul of man is to be unrolled in the two hours and a half usually allotted to one episodic love affair, dialogue must be as stripped and telling as elimination can make it. In this effort toward a sincere and direct expression of the essential reality underlying a given situation a number of divergent methods have been evolved. On the one hand we have the long rhythmic outbursts of Yank in O'Neill's The Hairy Ape or the monologue of the Emperor Jones -- direct expressions of the laboring sub-conscious minds of these bewildered men, on the other the newspaper headline jargon of Pinwheel,<sup>1</sup> dialogue limited to the few phrases, the constant dull repetition, which is the actual language of such people as the Guy and the Jane. In this play /which in most respects is no different from such plays as Machinal and The Subway, discussed at some length in Chapter V/ the theatrical license of building with words, of creating the impression of reality by an unreal effectiveness and resourcefulness of speech is sacrificed in almost every scene in an effort to convey the barrenness of these lives by an equally arid barrenness of language. Two or three scenes, however, resort to that "primary magic of the theatre, the magic of the spoken word" so effectively that in this case the tabloid method of expression is still left unproven... We hear this man and woman /in Hasenclever's Beyond/ think, and as the play progresses, their thinking becomes, as it were, audible to each other, their words tend to converge upon the same objects, only to part again on their fundamentally different points of view. Again, Le Tombeau sous l'Arc de Triomphe presents three individuals whom the author has endowed with the cosmic gift of speech. We have a sense of the soul itself receiving the gift of tongues. These people do not speak with the subconscious mind of Yank, the conscious mind of the man and woman in Beyond, or in the street vernacular of the Jane in Pinwheel. Theirs is a language not of men but of angels. It is the inmost spiritual essence of typical yet entirely individual characters... Finally we have the purely poetic expression of abstract idea which does not attempt to approximate colloquial idiom but creates its effect through the emotional force of rhythm and harmony.

<sup>1</sup>An American Expressionistic play by Faragoh; not available in print.

The new freedom which permits the use of every resource of theatric expression from dull or violent realism to philosophic meditation and lyric outburst has given the young playwright a wide field from which to select his medium of expression. He will perhaps learn once again the lost art of passing from prose to poetry, from poetry to song and prose again as was done in an older and more generous day. The rich store of language is released from the constraint of a fixed type of attempted realism and lies ready for the craftsman who can mould it to his uses. Slang and poetry are equally colorful and effective weapons and wielded as they are today with renewed fearlessness, they have swept the merely clever dialogue from its preeminent position in the middle of the stage.<sup>1</sup>

It would be a gross exaggeration to say that all of even the purest Expressionistic plays make use of the five types of dialogue mentioned by Miss Gilder; perhaps none of them save E. E. Cummings' Him does, but the tendency of all of the purer examples of Expressionism is toward such complete diversity of dialogue. There are passages in most of these plays which force us to agree with Sheldon Cheney's characterization of Expressionistic dialogue; he writes,

the Expressionist playwrights sling [language] around somewhat as the radical painters sling paint...

The staccato abruptness, the word used for its immediate suggestion without regard to grammatical constructions, the side-by-side universal-trivial placing of ideas, are all of the method... there are pages and pages of dialogue where hardly a speech runs beyond the single word, to be followed by half-page and full-page speeches where words and ideas are built up into emotional mountains.<sup>2</sup>

Complete license, then, seems to be the dominant characteristic of the dialogue of Expressionistic plays.

<sup>1</sup>Rosamond Gilder, "New Forms for Old" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XI (July 1927), pp. 517-518.

<sup>2</sup>Cheney, "'Expressionism' in German Theatres and Our Own" in New York Times Book Review and Magazine (April 30, 1922), p. 26.



In Chapter V the analysis of each play reasserted one remarkable similarity which pervades the construction of very nearly every Expressionistic play -- viz., the large number of short scenes. Few of the plays discussed have fewer than seven scenes, and some of them we found to have four times that number of scenes. Certainly there must be some significance behind so prevalent a feature. Ashley Dukes has made the significant statement that "composition" rather than "plot" is the leitmotif of the experimental playwright.<sup>1</sup> By this he means that the playwright, and most especially the Expressionistic playwright, is more intent upon the development of an idea or an emotion than he is upon maneuvering a complicated narrative; this shift of intention on the part of the playwright minimizes form, actually subordinates form to matter. So it is that episodic scenes, rapid and terse, displace the neatly articulated acts of the realistic drama. The classic unities go by the boards. Continuity of narrative bows to the climax of emotion.

From the very nature of the scenic structure of Expressionistic plays certain theatrical devices might be deduced without any knowledge at all of specific plays. These deductions would be in remarkably close conformity with the analyses of Chapter V. Since the scenes of the typical Expressionistic play are individually climactic and so written as to develop a dominant emotion rather than the logical sequence

<sup>1</sup>vide Dukes, "The Play as Composition" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XI (May 1927), p. 358.

of a narrative, it is only reasonable to suppose that the playwright will take measures to underscore the emotion sought. So it is that music plays a vital part in the Expressionistic drama; so it is that, in certain plays, dancing becomes an integral part of the stage business; so it is that O'Neill resurrects the ancient mask; and so it is that the new stagecraft of Appia and Craig is pushed sometimes beyond all reason into spectacular uses. Each of these devices, of course, is employed for other reasons than just the exploitation of the play's emotionality, but each of them is more appropriate to the episodic Expressionistic play than to types of drama more dependent upon the narrative element.

One device, peculiar to our second classification of plays (i.e., the manifoldly subjective), that of the spoken thought, has already been adequately covered in Chapter V, but it, too, has special relevance in a kind of drama which subordinates narrative; therefore it also is characteristic of the Expressionistic drama in spite of its necessarily limited use.

No theory of drama has ever had a more composite conception of the art of the theatre than has Expressionism. Craig's conception of the theatre as a home for the synthesis of the arts is at least implicitly Expressionistic. The stage-directions of the Expressionistic playwright bear out this conception; but some few experimental playwrights go even farther than the fusion of the arts. O'Neill and Kaye, for example, effect fusions of

drama on the stage with drama or another literary form in the process of composition: O'Neill's Days Without End employs a novel in the process of composition as its chief plot device, and Kaye's On Stage follows Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author in employing a play in the process of composition. Less notable examples of the same type of fusion are Cummings' Him (less notable only because of its untheatricality) and, to a certain degree, Lawson's The Pure in Heart. Four plays in a decade hardly constitute a general tendency, but they do indicate something of the eclectic expansibility of Expressionism.

More significant, however, than this facet of Expressionistic evolution is the fusion of arts in the theatre so earnestly pleaded for by Craig. "Fusion" is scarcely the word for the mixture of methods exhibited by the more extreme Expressionistic plays. Miss Gilder, again, makes a revealing comment on this tendency in her discussion of Lawson's Processional; she writes,

We have grown accustomed to carefully segregated types of entertainment, song and dance in one place, tears in another, moderate laughter and an occasional thought in a third, crime, passion and adventure in the last strongholds of melodrama that still remain in a pulseless land. The new playwright will not tamely accept the limitation of a single species. Youthfully he attempts omniscience -- and makes mince pie. But the pie has at least the spice of the unexpected and an evening of Processional is worth a year of tamer fare. In Lawson's combined maze we have vaudeville, tragedy, jazz ballet, murder, and the "Blues," a bit of Hamlet, a bit of passion, a lyric interlude and much noise,

all united to make a satiric comment on the American scene. This mixture of elements makes for variety if not for harmony and again as in all points of technical equipment depends for its success on the skill with which it is handled. As a tendency it is of the greatest value in the theatre, helping to restore drama to its original integrity, to re-unite action and word, song, sight and rhythm in one dynamic whole.

In brief, then, the writing of the typical American Expressionistic play is free to the point of license, and the construction is loose almost to the point of formlessness.

In its second aspect, characterization, the American Expressionistic drama is remarkably consistent. The more purely Expressionistic the plays, the more uniform is the method of characterization. We have noted again and again the fact that dramatic Expressionism eschews individual psychology in favor of typifying psychoanalysis. In consequence, few of the characters in Expressionistic plays are any more than types. Some few, as, for instance, Brutus Jones and Yank Smith, assume individuality of a sort, but even they are universalized men representing whole classes of men. Cummings in Him has created the most universal of men in his protagonist, but even though Him is the most extreme American Expressionistic play in all respects, it indicates the general tendency in characterization. The characters of no other play approach Him in universality; yet all are closer to him than to the Ibsenesque protagonist.

Whereas the chief characters of the Expressionistic play

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<sup>1</sup>Gilder, op. cit., pp. 518-519.

tend toward the universal, the minor characters are either bloodless types or out-and-out caricatures; they serve no other purpose than to dramatize ideas or emotions or forces.

Occasionally a playwright will forget himself and revert to realism in his delineation of a major or minor character, but when he does, that character generally stands out as inconsistent with the author's purpose and tends to distract from rather than to enhance the dramatic action.

The playwrights' conscientious attempt to de-personalize their characters is clearly indicated by the repeated use of such surnames as Smith, Jones, Brown, and Johnson; some playwrights go even farther -- they label their creatures merely with personal pronouns or with numbers or with the simple designations, "man" and "woman".

In considering the scenic structure of Expressionistic plays, we hit upon some pertinent points regarding the third aspect of American dramatic Expressionism -- plot and subject matter. We noted then the subordination of narrative to emotions and ideas. Plot, therefore, plays only a minor part in any description of Expressionism. Most Expressionistic plays use some straggling sort of narrative outline as a skeleton on which to hang the flesh of their emotional and intellectual message. The plot most often used is a simple one, so simple, in fact, and so often repeated that it might justly be called stereo-

typed. The protagonist is some worthy non-entity (i.e., in the present scheme of society) who finds himself or herself oppressed by the deadly conventionality and corruption and materialism and routine of the present social order. He or she finally rebels and finds solace in any of a number of solutions: love, communism, activity of some sort, or even crime. Sometimes the character's end is tragic, sometimes comic, but in either case it is the direct result of rebellion. The variations of this typical plot are, of course, numerous, but they are no more than mere variations.

The dream is frequently used as a vehicle for the author's emotional and intellectual message; and here again we see Expressionism's preoccupation with psychoanalysis. American Expressionistic plays, however, show a significant departure from their German model in the matter of their treatment of psycho-analytical material. Far less attention is paid to sex neuroses and psychic aberrations. Macgowan notes this departure, and he adds a suggestion as to the alternative channel most often selected by the American Expressionistic playwright; he writes,

True to American type, The Adding Machine, like the two plays by O'Neill [The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape], shows very little dependence on the study of sex-neurosis which has been so absorbing a feature of the expressionist drama in Germany, the land of its birth. Roger Bloomer to the contrary, this kind of play is not doomed to a contemplation of the more unpleasant aberrations of the unconscious mind. The ego is sometimes busy with other matters than sex. In The Adding Machine Rice chooses the balked ambitions of a clerk, as O'Neill chose the balked ambitions of a stoker in The Hairy

Ape. Both comments on the effects of social cruelty have the stuff of drama in them.

If the expressionist drama shows a tendency towards neurosis and often sex-neurosis in a subject, it is still more addicted to satire and irony as an end.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the typical plot outlined above and in view of the methods of characterization employed by the Expressionistic playwrights, it is not surprising to find satire and irony as staples of the plays. Satire and irony, furthermore, are the most effective weapons of propagandists, and it requires no very penetrating eye to perceive the political and social leanings of many of the Expressionistic playwrights. While few of them may be openly communistic, the majority of them certainly are to the left of center in their politics. Many of them, radicals in politics, remain consistent, at least by analogy, by being radicals in esthetics; Expressionism presents itself as an easily adaptable instrument for their ends. Satire and irony, therefore, are facile devices to be used in adapting the instrument. As early as 1923 Macgowan foresaw the danger; he writes, "But always in expressionist drama, even in The Hairy Ape, satire tends to replace emotional power. It is a tendency to be watched and feared."<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it has been this very tendency prophesied and deplored at the beginning of the movement, which has been in large part responsible for the eventual decay of

<sup>1</sup>Macgowan, "Experiment on Broadway" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. VII (July 1923), pp. 175-176.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

this type of drama.

The intellectual and emotional contents of American Expressionistic plays, the fourth aspect of our description, are so chaotic as almost to defy intelligent classification. Probably the best which we can do is to treat the contents under two headings, social consciousness and spiritual struggle, and to eliminate the less important subjects in the interests of simplicity. We have already mentioned the propagandistic tendency of many American Expressionistic playwrights, and this tendency seems to present important historical evidence to disprove Dahlström's assertion that there is no basic kinship between Marxism and Expressionism.<sup>1</sup> Meyer Levin summarizes the interrelation of Expressionism and social protest in the following words:

The expressionist movement, when in its ascendance ... seemed about to produce an American rhythm. For such a style becomes a foundation prop to the play, supplying the writer with a unifying rhythm, enlarging his art with the aura of poetry and music. Thus American playwrights whose first approach to the social theme was through the channels of expressionism, came nearest to their desired goal. Caught up in the rhythm, spurred with genuine enthusiasm for the form and content of expressionism, they were carried toward ... propaganda. Rice's Adding Machine, Lawson's far weaker Processional, made people excitedly believe that great and beautiful plays were to come in this mode. What the writers "had to say" then was largely the same as what they "had to say" in their plays of this season. The art form compelled a reverberation, supplied suggestions of depth and vista lacking in the realistic play. Perhaps those suggestions

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<sup>1</sup>Vide supra, p. 18.



were false.

But in one sense stylization overcomes an American resistance to propaganda that has stood against the realistic plays of this season...

The stylized play attains fairness by avoiding the naming of realities. The opponents are never presented as humans; opposition is a formalized concept, capitalist in a high hat. The big boy is not represented in the flesh and blood of realism, but rather as a sort of snow-man who may be pelted with impunity by the well-behaved prize pupils of the proletarian model school. By "playing the game" called satire the playwright is permitted to knock over the high hat. Therefore expressionist plays like The Hairy Ape and The Adding Machine aroused no feeling of outraged fairness in the American mind. So, also, when ideas of social revolution are translated into poetic forms of dance or pageant, we immediately accept the governing rhythm as a condition that precludes the need for the "fairness" we demand in realistic presentation.<sup>1</sup>

Levin's summary suggests an interesting explanation of the apparent kinship of Expressionism and Marxism, and it also suggests a justification of Dahlström's assertion. Expressionism is concerned with the worth of man (sixth control factor); so, too, are Left Wing idealists. What would be more natural, then, than the employment of Expressionism as a useful vehicle for social protest?

Less radical or less vehement social idealists have also turned Expressionism to their uses. In Chapter V we noted again and again the recurrence of the applicability of the fifth and sixth control factors (religion and the worth of man); and not all these plays are communistic. Many of them are merely

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<sup>1</sup>Levin, "Playwriting and Protest" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. XVII (May 1933), pp. 357-358.

records of modern man's spiritual struggle for faith in a world gone mad with materialism and secularism. The solution suggested by the playwright is not always convincing, and sometimes there is no solution suggested at all, but the spiritual struggle is omnipresent. Owen Barfield, writing in 1924, was aware of this spiritual ferment in the drama; he writes,

the way in which men prefer to look at each other in the theater is not determined by accident, but ... it springs organically from the way in which they look at each other, and at the world, outside the theater. And it is worth while bearing in mind when we are considering such questions as the future of the drama or the significance of modern movements in it. While experiments of all sorts will no doubt continue to be made, we may be certain that any general change in the presentation of drama will come only as the accompaniment to some general change in the consciousness of human beings. And of this I believe there are some present signs. If, for example, it should happen that life, reality, force, or whatever we choose to call it, should draw out of the human being again, as it drew into him at the beginning of the Christian era, but, this time, consciously -- if he should consciously give back to nature the life which he took from her, feeling in himself a more various vitality than he can express by the words that come out of his mouth and by the movements of his face and limbs, then that change would call for a new kind of dramatic form and a new kind of production. It would be a form in which the movements taking place on the stage were felt quite naturally to be living projections of the movements of thought, will and feeling which take place inside a human personality. The first warnings of such a change, borne on the wings of a new and special kind of music, can be heard rumbling through the fantastic machinery of Wagnerian opera. But outside music I am inclined to think that the aid of the cinematograph will be called in. Meanwhile, on the legitimate stage, The Adding Machine appears to be an actual attempt at the kind of projection I have suggested, and the movement called "Expressionism" a conscious effort towards it.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Owen Barfield, "Changes in the Theater" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. VIII (September 1924), p. 641.

Barfield's conception of spiritual ferment may be unduly naturalistic, but at least he seems to be aware that playwrights of his day were not satisfied with dramatic realism and that Expressionism opened an avenue of escape from it.

This, then, is a brief summary of our more detailed findings of Chapter V. It makes no pretension at all at being a definition of dramatic Expressionism in America; at best it is only a general description.

## CHAPTER VII: The Significance of Dramatic Expressionism in America

Expressionism as such is virtually dead on the American stage. An occasional production, like that of Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock, or an occasional revival of Expressionistic plays by amateur and semi-professional theatres is the only sign of life left in a dramatic credo, which, as recently as fifteen years ago, was hailed as the salvation of the American drama. The gradual shift of opinion over the last two decades away from the first ecstatic prophecies toward a more objective and soundly critical outlook is an interesting phenomenon, interesting primarily because it supplies an extensive footnote on esthetic dynamism in a country still too young to have a stable national culture.

In 1921 Macgowan wrote the following on dramatic Expressionism:

It [the drama of the future] will attempt to transfer to dramatic art the illumination of those deep and vigorous and eternal processes of the human soul which the psychology of Freud and Jung has given us through study of the uncenscious, striking to the heart of emotion and linking our commonest life today with the emanations of the primitive racial mind.<sup>1</sup>

In 1922 Cheney wrote,

the faults of what I am calling the Expressionist play do not lie in the direction of inanition, pussyfooting and dry rot. Such plays may turn out to be merely the violent gestures that go with the birth pains of something finer and serener to come, and the name Expressionism may not outlast a decade of critical wranglings; but the strength, the violence, the brutal directness of this drama may well

<sup>1</sup>Macgowan, The Theatre of Tomorrow, p. 248.

be the force that will revitalize the whole institution of the theatre.<sup>1</sup>

In 1925 Ivor Brown introduced a jarring but important note when he wrote,

So far the theatre has met cinema competition by yielding to it. In the drama vaguely called "Expressionist" the debt to the cinema is obvious... the whole thing might be better realized in the idiom of the up-to-date cinema... The dramatist ... is surrendering to the cinema, not defying it.<sup>2</sup>

Writing in 1927 Rosamond Gilder reestablishes the prevalent strain of criticism:

The new craftsmanship demands, and on the whole has not yet received, as expert handling as the well-made play in the strictly limited sense of the term... We will /however/ have a theatre that is an integral part of the life of today, a theatre able to reflect and transmute the metallic violence of the physical world, the restlessness and yearning of the spirit. We will have a flexible, a living, a vital theatre which will be an adequate release for the chaotic energies within us.<sup>3</sup>

By 1931, however, the tide has definitely turned; Walter Prichard Eaton wrote then,

The subjective projection of a character's inner being too often means the projection of chaos ... and in the constant use of this method, with its quick, shifting scenes, the author may easily lose track of his spire of meaning and end in dramatizing a fog.<sup>4</sup>

And then in 1934 Eaton, again writing on dramatic Expressionism, sounded the note of all subsequent comment on

<sup>1</sup>Cheney, New York Times Book Review and Magazine, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Ivor Brown, "The Dramatist in Danger" in Theatre Arts Monthly, Vol. IX (May 1925), p. 303.

<sup>3</sup>Gilder, op. cit., p. 520.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Prichard Eaton, The Drama in English (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 325.

the theory as practiced on the American stage; he wrote,

What the future of expressionism will be no man can say. Indeed, few can say just what expressionism is! If we had to define it, we should probably declare that it is the attempt to translate into concrete stage terms the inner rather than the outer story. As it has been used by a few of the most sure footed of our dramatists, it has been accepted by the public; but when employed by the rest it has so far made little headway. Expressionism had its birth, perhaps, in Strindberg, and came to the front in modern Europe at a time when the "inner story" of most men was a story of doubt and pessimism. It reached us after the War, and was employed by several young writers (none too sure of themselves as craftsmen) to dramatize their own and the world's perplexities. It was used as a technique to dramatize chaos<sup>1</sup> and perhaps that was implicit in its origin. But it is the ancient and probably eternal mission of art to resolve chaos, not to confound it. I do not believe it was because of their realistic training that the American public found little nourishment in expressionism. Rather it was because the expressionistic plays, on the whole, increased their confusion...

Straight expressionism, then, does not appear a likely line of escape from realism in the immediate future. But expressionism has invented, or can invent, certain technical devices which may be employed to intensify, explain, or to make short cuts of stabbing emotional excitement.<sup>1</sup> O'Neill has so used it. The movies, often quite unconsciously, so use it. Already most of us are quite willing to accept it, when so used, without feeling that it shatters the mood or unity of the play... With the aid of the modern scenic artist at his disposal, the new dramatist has thus a weapon to heighten, to quicken imaginatively his play, even to achieve a kind of poetry, denied to his immediate predecessors in the realistic theatre. Much may come of this, though the term "expressionism" may pass away.<sup>2</sup>

In this brief passage, remarkable as a whole as a piece of penetrating dramatic criticism, two statements stand out. The first italicized phrase suggests both the strength and the

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<sup>1</sup>The italics are mine.

<sup>2</sup>Eaton, "Revolt from Realism" in The Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol. X (October 1934), pp. 525-526.

weakness of dramatic Expressionism: its strength, in that the post-War era in which American Expressionism flowered was one of chaos, emotional, intellectual, economic, political, and, above all, spiritual, and Expressionism, therefore, was a highly effective means of expression; its weakness, in that chaos cannot long remain either the form or the matter of an art. The second italicized statement has been borne out by the subsequent years and probably will continue to be so borne out.

"Expressionism as such is virtually dead on the American stage." So we began this chapter. The important words in this statement are "as such". Few if any Expressionistic plays find their way to the commercial stage today, but this is not to say that dramatic Expressionism has not had its effect on the American drama.

Perhaps the most significant single contribution of Expressionism to the American theatre has been an indirect one: the development of the new stagecraft of Appia and Craig. Expressionism has not been alone among dramatic creeds in its furtherance; neither would it be correct to state that without Expressionism the new stagecraft would not have appeared, for even before the World War men like Joseph Urban had come to America with new ideas on the mounting, coloring, and lighting of stage productions. Yet it remained for Expressionistic plays to give the new stagecraft a sufficient impetus to assure its permanence on the American stage as early as the 1920s.

Imaginatively conceived plays by O'Neill and Lawson and Rice and the others demanded theatrical production in terms of Appia and Craig and their practicing successors. Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones, returning from Germany with its post-War Expressionistic theatre firmly implanted in their imaginations, both practiced and preached the new methods, and it was not many years before even the most realistic of plays began to show the effects of the new technical movement. Lee Simonson, Jo Mielziner, Norman Bel Geddes, Donald Oenslager, Jones himself, and a score of others led in the vanguard of the new stagecraft until, at the present time, these names are the great names in American scenic design; their methods are unmistakably traceable to Appia and Craig; and, as we have pointed out, Expressionism was in no small measure responsible for popularizing their methods in America.

Expressionism in the American theatre has had, I believe, influences other than an indirect fostering of the new stagecraft. Not all of these influences have been in the legitimate theatre. The motion pictures have undoubtedly been affected, consciously or otherwise, by the methods of the Expressionistic playwrights. Reference here is not to European-made Expressionistic films such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and The Golem, but to the everyday, conventional motion pictures regularly produced in Hollywood and New York. The exact extent of this influence would provide a study of scope at least equal to that of this



paper, and so we cannot hope to do more than to suggest a few of the Expressionistic features of present-day motion pictures.

We noted the comment of Ivor Brown on what he considered the deleterious effect of the motion pictures, particularly on the Expressionistic drama.<sup>1</sup> His statement, in spite of its obviously prejudiced tone, is significant, for it was made in 1925, and it indicates that even as long ago as sixteen years there was a definite kinship between Expressionistic drama and the motion picture. Brown asserts that the Expressionistic playwright does nothing more than adapt cinematic tricks to the stage. It cannot be denied that there is some truth in this assertion, for more than a decade before, Elmer Rice had done just that in his employment of the flash-back in On Trial, the play often regarded as an important ancestor of the American Expressionistic drama. But Brown errs in asserting, or at least implying, that the borrowing process always proceeds from the motion picture to the Expressionistic drama. The process actually has been reversible.

It would undoubtedly be a difficult task to determine which member of the transaction was the borrower and which the lender of the devices common to both media. The wise course, therefore, seems to be merely to enumerate the common devices without historical comment. Under means of characterization we find the

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<sup>1</sup>Vide supra, p. 157.

most striking correspondence: both media use caricature and stylization of character, the spoken thought, the personification of abstractions, the dramatized alter ego, the subjective presentation of sense experience and emotion, and the dramatization of the unconscious, generally in the form of dream-sequences. Under language we find a correspondence, perhaps not too close, between the skeletal dialogue of the cinema and the streamlined, monosyllabic dialogue of certain Expressionistic plays; both media, further, make extensive use of pantomime. Under structure we find a remarkable likeness, for both media are conceived in terms of short scenes and episodic progression rather than of "well-made" neatly articulated acts; here the debt of the Expressionistic play to the cinema is pretty well established, or, at least, it may be said with certainty that the motion picture was the first to use this type of structure in America. Under stagecraft we find extremely close interrelationship, particularly since the advent of sound-films: both music and lighting are used as highly effective means of establishing mood, and, more important, of commenting on the dramatic action in the motion picture and the Expressionistic play alike; here the motion picture, because of its far superior technical capacity, has far surpassed the Expressionistic play, but the reason is purely one of mechanics and not of intention. Both media, too, make extensive use of symbolism of inanimate objects; the symbolism of motion pictures tends toward the crude and

hackneyed because of the nature of its audience, whereas the symbolism of the Expressionistic play frequently goes to the other pole in its subtlety and subjectivity. Probably many of the apparent correspondences in method of the motion picture and the Expressionistic play belong in no cause-and-effect relationship as the above enumeration implies, but the establishment of the exact relationship is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that some relationship is apparent.

Walter Frichard Eaton, in his remarkable criticism of dramatic Expressionism in America, quoted above,<sup>1</sup> has stated that although the term "Expressionism" may lose all but academic significance in the study of the drama, the dramatic technique designated by that term has created and probably will create "certain technical devices which may be employed to intensify, explain, or to make short cuts of stabbing emotional excitement." Within seven years of the writing of this statement the truth of it has already been adequately proved by the plays which have appeared and are appearing on the American stage. Each of the plays in our fourth classification in Chapter V is an item of evidence to support Eaton's contention, and the number of plays not even mentioned there but equally noteworthy for their employment of Expressionistic devices is great and undiminishing over the years. The undeniable effectiveness of

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<sup>1</sup>Vide supra, p. 158.

the Living Newspapers and of the more orthodox drama of playwrights like Odets, Saroyan, Irwin Shaw, and Robert Ardrey is the most conclusive evidence we could hope to have now at a time so slightly removed from the enunciation of the prophecy.

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