

**Georg Lukács, "Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline,"**  
from *Internationale Literatur* (Moscow, 1934)

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As an opposition from a confused anarchistic and bohemian standpoint, expressionism was naturally more or less vigorously directed against the political right. And many expressionists and other writers who stood close to them took up a more or less explicit left-wing position in politics (Heinrich Mann is an exceptional case). But however honest the subjective intention behind this may well have been in many cases, the abstract distortion of basic questions, and especially the abstract "anti-middle-classness," was a tendency that, precisely because it separated the critique of middle-classness from both the economic understanding of the capitalist system and from adhesion to the liberation struggle of the proletariat, could easily collapse into its opposite extreme: into a critique of "middle-classness" from the right, the same demagogic critique of capitalism to which fascism later owed at least part of its mass basis....

For expressionism is undoubtedly only one of the many tendencies in bourgeois ideology that grow later into fascism, and its role in the ideological preparation for fascism is no greater-if also no less-than that of many other simultaneous tendencies. Fascism, as the general ideology of the most reactionary bourgeoisie in the post-war era, inherits all the tendencies of the imperialist epoch in as much as these express decadent and parasitic features; and this also includes all those that are sham-revolutionary or sham-oppositional. . . .

The World War and its ending form the high point of expressionism. In this period it attained an importance that went beyond the literary field in the narrow sense-the first literary movement to do so in Germany since the beginnings of naturalism. This seems at first sight to contradict what we have maintained about the ideology of expressionism, but only at first sight. For we did indeed grant that expressionism was a literary opposition movement, even if, as a result of the circumstances that we explained, it stood ideologically on the same terrain as its adversary (imperialism). We shall now see that this common ground was never really abandoned, even at the time of the most violent, and subjectively most sincere, opposition. The passionate struggle of the expressionists against the war was objectively only a mock battle, even when their literary works suffered prosecution in wartime Germany. It was a struggle against war in general, and not against the imperialist war....

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... however, the method of abstraction . . . , which diverts from the real battlefield of the class struggle, was also a spontaneous manifestation of the expressionists own class position; their continued use of this method in their world outlook and creative method was thus not just a political maneuver, treachery, or a betrayal. The objective affinity of method, which at some points amounted to actual identity, was due to the fact that both tendencies, USPD [Independent Socialist Party] and expressionism, while remaining on the class foundation of the bourgeoisie, sought to avoid a confrontation with the underlying causes by their attacks on symptoms. Within this affinity, however, there was the distinction that the expressionists who, naively, and out of genuine conviction, retained the backward, petty-bourgeois values, imagined-both in their world outlook and in their creative method-that at the level of form they had reached the topmost peaks of abstraction, the purest essence of the phenomena, and necessarily fell into the same

exaggerated and empty, even if subjectively honest, pathos, that characterizes this era of war and revolution.

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... The bitter struggles of the first ten years of revolution, and the initial defeats of the revolution in Germany, were to shatter ever more clearly the sham distinctions between revolutionary phrase and whimpering capitulation. And so expressionism came to an end as the dominant literary tendency in Germany—at the same moment in time, and this by no accident, as the dissolution of the USPD.

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What was new in the creative method of expressionism lay in the way that on the one hand it accelerated this process of abstraction, while on the other hand it transformed its formal orientation. The impressionists and symbolists, as open and honest subjectivists, subjectivized their creative method more and more, i.e., they mentally abstracted the material to be depicted from its real foundations. Yet they still preserved the general structure of immediate reality.... The expressionist precisely abstracted away from these typical characteristics, in as much as he proceeded, like the impressionists and symbolists, from the subjective reflex in experience, and emphasized precisely what in this appears—from the subject's standpoint—as essential, in as much as he ignored the "little," "petty," "inessential" aspects (i.e., precisely the concrete social determinations) and uprooted his "essence" from its causal connection in time and space. This "essence" is then presented by the expressionist as the poetic reality, as the act of creation that simultaneously reveals the "essence" of reality as attainable by us.

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. . . But while the naturalists, with the almost photographic fidelity of their superficial presentation, kept at least certain (uncomprehended) features of the mode of appearance of this conflict, the expressionist abstraction from reality only serves up as the "essence" a childish nonsense. Of course, this nonsense is not accidental: it shows close affinity in content with the romantic and reactionary "youth movements." . . .

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Here we can see the internal contradictions of expressionism as contradictions of creative method. Firstly, its extreme subjectivism is revealed—a subjectivism that borders on solipsism.... the second point—that expressionism should raise [is] the question of totality. Its internal contradiction, from the standpoint of class basis and world outlook, shows itself in the expressionist creative method in the contradiction that, while on the one hand it has to lay claim to a total portrayal (simply on account of the social and political position it adopted during the war and after), on the other hand this creative method does not permit the portrayal of a living and dynamic world. The totality, therefore, can only be brought in via an external surrogate, and is purely formal and empty in the works of expressionism." Simultaneism, for example, is such an empty and formal external means designed to substitute, for the missing internal all-round

context, an external juxtaposition of words grouped by association. But this means a gaping contradiction between content and form. And the sham solution that expressionism invents shows the same antagonism in its most intense form. The nothingness of the content—and this is the third point—is disguised in a self-trumpeting emotionalism in the use of language....

... The fact that the fascists, with a certain justification, see expressionism as a heritage that they can use, only seals its tomb the more firmly. Goebbels accepts expressionism, and also the validity of the "new objectivism" (which is again instructive), but he rejects naturalism, which "gets distorted into environmental description and Marxist ideology," i.e., he maintains artistic continuity only with the art of post-war imperialism....

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. . . As a literary form of expression of developed imperialism, expressionism stands on an irrational and mythological foundation: its creative method leads in the direction of the emotive yet empty declamatory manifesto, the proclamation of a sham activism. It has therefore a whole series of essential features that fascist literary theory could accept without having to force them into its mold. Naturally the conscious tendencies of expressionism are different from this, indeed sometimes even the direct opposite. And for this reason it can only be incorporated in the fascist "synthesis" as a subordinate element. But its abstracting away from reality, and its lack of content, facilitate such an incorporation and "*Gleichschaltung*" to an extraordinary degree.

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. . . In actual fact the theory and practice of national socialism is a unity of decadence and regression. The expressionists certainly wanted anything but a regression. But since they could not free their world outlook from the basis of imperial parasitism, since they shared uncritically and without resistance in the ideological decay of the imperialist bourgeoisie, even being sometimes its pioneers, their creative method needed no distortion to be pressed into the service of fascist demagogy, of the unity of decadence and regression. Expressionism forms a legitimate part of the general "November legacy" of national socialism. For despite its rhetorical gestures, it was unable to rise above the horizon of the 1918 Weimar republic. Just as fascism is the necessary result of the November betrayal of the German working class and the revolution by the SPODE and USPD, it can also take up this November legacy in the literary field.