Brecht’s Debt to Theatrical Expressionism

It would appear at first sight that much of Brecht’s theatrical practice stands in direct opposition to theatrical Expressionism, his sober, ironic view of life seeming totally opposed to the emotionalism of the Expressionists.

But in fact, Brecht owed a considerable debt to the Expressionists. This article discusses their engagement in a debate about contemporary events, the so-called Stationendrama structure, the interest in representative types rather than psychologically nuanced individuals, the introduction of “telegraphese” and the Expressionists’ exploitation of the resources of the theatre in this context. It furthermore contends that although Expressionist theatre tended to cast collectives in a negative light (the opposite of Marxist thought), Brecht too tended to have at best an ambiguous response to collective action.

Der Expressionismus der Nachkriegswoche hatte die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung dargestellt und einen eigentümlichen Solipsismus gebracht. […] Er war eine Revolte der Kunst gegen das Leben, und die Welt existierte bei ihm nur als Vision, seltsam zerstört, eine Ausgeburt geängsteter Gemüter. Der Expressionismus […] zeigte sich ganz außerstande, die Welt als Objekt menschlicher Praxis zu erklären.¹

So wrote Brecht in his essay Über experimentelles Theater of 1939, and at first sight it would seem that Brecht was diametrically opposed to Expressionist thought. His sober, ironic view of life contrasts strongly with the emotionalism of the Expressionists. The Expressionists’ inward-turning neo-Romantic view of the artist is poles apart from Brecht’s self-deprecating view of himself not as a creative genius but simply as a “Stückeschreiber”. He created the amoral and wonderfully gross figure of Baal to some extent as a riposte to Hanns Johst’s sentimental depiction of Grabbe as an idealized suffering artist in Der Einsame. His review of Ernst Toller’s Die Wandlung, when Brecht was writing as a theatre critic in Augsburg, was similarly dismissive: “Gedichtete Zeitung, bestenfalls. Flache Visionen, sofort zu vergessen. Kosmos dünn. Der Mensch als Objekt, Proklamation statt: als Mensch. Der abstrahierte Mensch, der Singular von Menschheit”.²

Indeed Brecht’s Trommeln in der Nacht can be usefully compared with Die Wandlung. (Brecht’s play cannot have been influenced by Toller’s, since Brecht had completed Spartakus, his first version of Trommeln in der Nacht, by the end of February 1919, over half a year before the premiere of Die Wandlung.) Both protagonists, Friedrich and Andreas Kragler, are “Heimkehrer” figures

who find themselves involved in a revolution, but while Friedrich’s revolution is pure, idealized, and depends on his personal leadership, the Spartacus revolt as portrayed in Brecht’s play is confused, real, and develops its own impetus. In Die Wandlung the birth of a child will herald the New Man, while in Trommeln in der Nacht Kragler goes off to bed with his fiancée, who is pregnant not with the New Man but with a child conceived with someone else.

Brecht jeered at the ecstatic utterances of Expressionism and despised the arrogant individualism of these self-proclaimed prophets of rebirth. It is impossible to imagine Brecht appealing in a law court, as Kaiser famously did: “Tut dem Geiste nicht weh!”. And yet in the essay quoted at the start, Brecht conceded that Expressionism “die Ausdrucksmittel des Theaters sehr bereichert”.3 Significantly, he consistently excluded Kaiser from his attacks on Expressionism, was appreciative of Von morgens bis mitternachts, noting its technical modernity: “Kaiser macht eine Filmaufnahme!”,4 and, similarly, after seeing Himmel, Weg, Erde wrote: “Die Entwicklung, unauflöslich, läuft zum Film hin” (BFA 21. P. 89). While having strong reservations about Gas, he nevertheless recognized that the Milliardärsohn, despite his confused ideology, was to be respected for relentlessly trying to change the industrial system: “[…] Schlechtlaufen [ist] besser als Garnichtlaufen […]”.5

In this paper I shall make some fairly predictable points about Brecht’s debt to Expressionism as a model for a new theatre (consideration of form) and conclude with the more contentious assertion that Brecht’s ideology is not as opposed to Expressionist thought as Brecht and his Marxist apologists would prefer to believe (consideration of content).

In terms of dramatic construction it is clear that Brecht’s dictum “Jede Szene für sich”6 is derived from the Expressionist “Stationendrama”, which in turn, of course, owed a debt to the dramaturgy of the Sturm und Drang and to Georg Büchner, whose plays were recently being rediscovered. The well-made play, in which each scene led smoothly into the next, had been replaced by the leaps in the construction of Expressionist plays. Thus, Von morgens bis mitternachts begins in a bank, jumps forward to a hotel room, and, by way of a snow-covered field, takes us to the Cashier’s modest home, then suddenly changes location from the provinces to a big city, where we visit in turn a sports stadium, a nightclub, and a Salvation Army hall. Almost the only element that links these seven “stations” is the figure of the Cashier. In a similar way Brecht emulates the leaps he recognizes in the natural world, at once laying claim to be a realist and

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3 Brecht: Über experimentelles Theater (n. 1). P. 546.