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Literary expressionism and its publications

Expressionism is the name given to the artistic movement that swept through the German-speaking countries almost 100 years ago between 1910 and 1920, and which involved painters and sculptors, poets and writers, musicians and stage artists. This last, large avant-garde movement sought to establish a new kind of art, a new kind of individual, and a new kind of world, and emerged as a backlash to the Wilhelmian empire, the comfortable middle classes and the art of the 19th century. It revolted against the prevailing traditions and yearned for a new society and more just social order. This intellectual movement emerged at the end of a long era of peace under the influence of French modernism in art and poetry. In Germany it blossomed for only a few years before 1914, after which it was overshadowed by the murderous First World War – an event foreseen by many of the artists and which they were then forced to endure. Their hopes were high when the German Revolution took place in 1918, writing manifestos and proclamations and using the theatre as their political stage, but they then made the sobering discovery that: "Expressionism was a beautiful, good and large thing. The solidarity of the intellectuals, the march of the true. But the result unfortunately, and without the expressionists being to blame, was the German Republic of 1920" (Iwan Goll).

Literary expressionism emerged in Berlin five years after "Die Brücke", the group of modern painters formed in Dresden in 1905. The famous poem by Jakob van Hoddis "Weltende" (The End of the World) ("Dem Bürger fliegt vom spitzen Kopf der Hut ...") and the Berlin poems of Georg Heym, recited at the Neuer Club and the Neopathetisches Cabarett, founded by Kurt Hiller and his friends in 1909/10, mark the literary awakening of a new generation. "Die Jüngst-Berliner", as this group called itself in 1912 – "We are expressionists. Our focus is once again on will and ethos" – stood at the centre of a literary movement that, prior to the war, swept through Munich, Prague and Vienna, and was also in the process of conquering the provinces. The young authors, who were soon joined by older members of their profession, wrote poetry. "Poets sing into the typesetting machines", ran one slogan, and "They hate everything that isn't poetry" another. The first theatre plays to focus on the relationships between the poets and their fathers also began to appear around this time.

New publishing houses were founded by previously unknown booklovers: Ernst Rowohlt, Paul Cassirer, Alfred Richard Meyer in Berlin and Kurt Wolff in Leipzig. Older, established publishing houses decided to join in: S. Fischer and Axel Juncker in Berlin, later on even the Insel-Verlag in Leipzig, and soon new companies started shooting up from the ground. The reason for this was the abolition of censorship after the war, leading to the emergence of hundreds of new poets, writers, and critics.

These young authors, mostly born between 1884 and 1894, were promoted by established literary figures, men and women from the generation of Thomas Mann and

Hermann Hesse, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rainer Maria Rilke. Many belonged to the circle called the "Neue Gemeinschaft", centred on the Hart brothers at Schlachtensee near Berlin, including Gustav Landauer and Erich Mühsam, and future exponents of expressionism such as Ferdinand Hardekopf and Ludwig Rubiner. The most decisive contribution to the cultural discourse at the time, however, was made by two gifted and daring editors who stood on the fringes of the circle around 1900: Herwarth Walden and Franz Pfemfert. One was married to the poet Else Lasker-Schüler, who gave her artistically-gifted husband his poetic-sounding name, and the other with a Jewish immigrant from Russia, who moulded her husband into a political fighter. Both men founded journals that were later to become famous and which provided expressionist writers with a platform. They served as models for future publications and helped the movement secure lasting fame.

The first edition of *Der Sturm* appeared on 1 March 1910 as a folio, with articles by Else Lasker-Schüler and René Schickele, and by Karl Kraus und Adolf Loos from Vienna. Soon drawings and woodcuts by Oskar Kokoschka and artists belonging to the "Brücke" and the "Blaue Reiter" were being reproduced, alongside poetry by Alfred Lichtenstein, Albert Ehrenstein and Ernst Wilhelm Lotz, and later on by August Stramm, Lothar Schreyer and many others. Also published were articles by Paul Scheerbart and Alfred Döblin, and the journal became an illustrative mirror of artistic and literary expressionism that was also controversial and critical.

This also applied to Franz Pfemfert's literary-political magazine, published one year later and called *Die Aktion*, in which the poetry of young poets such as Georg Heym and Jakob van Hoddis, Ernst Blass and Franz Werfel were published, and whose expressionist graphics gradually came to symbolize the publication. The two leading journals of this artistic and literary movement were quite different to each other in terms of their profile. Pfemfert pursued radical political aims. During the war he published "Verses from the Battlefield" ("Verse vom Schlachtfeld") and criticized the prevailing military fervour in a column entitled "I am cutting out the time" ("Ich schneide die Zeit aus"). Walden, on the other hand, represented a radical, artistic expressionism, as symbolized by August Stramm and his followers. Both journals lasted until 1932, but after 1920 no longer led the way in art and literature as they had done previously. Both editors emigrated: Walden died in the Soviet Union and Pfermfert died in Mexico.

Der Sturm and *Die Aktion* served as blueprints for the more than 100 new journals published before and after the war. To understand the nature of expressionism in art and literature, one needs to read the poems, stories, reviews, manifestos, articles, and glossaries contained in these publications, which illustrate the spirit of the time. By examining them, it becomes evident how important they were as organs and rallying points for the expressionist movement. The most renowned journals were: *Pan*, *Die weißen Blätter*, *Das neue Pathos*, *Der Brenner*. During and after the war, as expressionism also took a hold in the provinces, drawings and woodcuts also became an integral part of the movement. They illustrate not only the time, but also reveal the hopes and desires of an entire generation. Journals were published in Kiel and Dresden, Hanover

and Hamburg, Darmstadt and Konstanz, as well as naturally in Berlin, Munich, Prague and Vienna. Their names said it all: *Neue Jugend (New Youth), Menschen (People), Revolution, Die neue Erde (The New Earth), Das hohe Ufer (The High Bank), Der Friede (Peace), Die Rettung (The Rescue), Das Tribunal (The Tribunal), Kündung, Die rote Erde (The Red Earth), Die Pleite (The Failure), Der blutige Ernst (Deadly Serious)*, etc.

The first anthologies of expressionist poetry were published as early as 1912 as special issues in printed form, such as *Der Kondor*, edited by Kurt Hiller. In the collections that were published during and after the war, the editors took stock of the latest developments, including in Franz Pfemfert's *Aktionsbuch* (1917) and Kurt Pinthus' *Menschheitsdämmerung* (1919), which he called a "symphony of the latest poetry". It has remained the most renowned anthology of expressionism to this day. At the same time, other yearbooks, anthologies, compendiums and text collections were also being published: for example, Kurt Hiller's *Ziel-Jahrbucher*, the first volume of which (1916) contains "Calls for an Active Mind" (Aufrufe zu tätigem Geist); Alfred Wolfenstein's "Yearbook for New Poetry and Appraisal" (Jahrbuch für neue Dichtung und Wertung) *Die Erhebung* (1919); Herwarth Walden's collection *Expressionismus. Die Kunstwende* (1918); Ludwig Rubiner's anthology *Kameraden der Menschheit. Dichtungen zur Weltrevolution* (1919); *Verkündigung. Anthologie junger Lyrik*, published by Rudolf Kayser (1921); *Verse der Lebenden. Deutsche Lyrik seit 1910* by Heinrich Eduard Jacob (1924) and many more.

Literary expressionism was a poetic movement, as described by Alfred Döblin in 1918 in his essay *Von der Freiheit eines Dichtermenschen*. It can even be expressed in figures: In the short period of time between 1910 and 1922/23, around 2,000 books were published by more than 300 authors, poets, writers and hangers-on. They published around 36,000 articles in the journals and anthologies dedicated to the movement. The actual number of expressionist authors was naturally considerably higher than this.

The era of literary expressionism has been well researched since the 1960 exhibition on the movement at the Schiller National Museum in Marbach am Neckar, which caused quite a stir at the time. The authors and their books are listed in a bio-bibliographic manual, a large number of editions have been published, and long-lost journals and collections have been acquired and commented upon. The current database is the result of the rediscovery of literary expressionism.

Of the poets involved in expressionism, Gottfried Benn wrote the most moving obituary to the era, which he believed deserved to be remembered and of which he himself was a part: "Expressionism and the expressionist decade: a number of heads strewn across the continent with a new reality and new neuroses. It arose, fought its battles on all Catalaunian Fields and fell into decline. It carried its flag across the Bastille, the Kremlin and Golgotha, but failed to reach Mount Olympus or any other classic terrain. What should we write as its epitaph? What we generally write about when writing about art and artists – the pain. Let us write on the grave a sentence of mine, one that I use to honour all those involved for the last time: 'You stand for incomprehensible empires in which there are no victories'".