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Germany

The popular perception of German modernism in the English-speaking world is defined by an almost exclusive preoccupation with the Weimar period, those fertile fifteen years stretching from the end of the First World War in 1918 to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. That such a thing as a popular perception of German modernism exists at all has largely to do with the allegorical subtext that we now invariably read into the period: the frenzied dance around the volcano by brilliant yet morally louche artists, and the eventual eruption of that volcano in the greatest political catastrophe of the twentieth century.¹ Yet such a reading is deeply flawed, and not just because German modernism, like all of its European counterparts, had roots that reached back into earlier decades and an afterlife that continued long after Weimar had perished. More importantly still, it suggests that German modernism was a self-contained phenomenon, an exceptional case that went exceptionally wrong. The political development of the Weimar Republic was indeed without parallels, but the culture that accompanied it was enmeshed in transnational networks that stretched from Paris to St. Petersburg, from Oslo to Milan. The fabulous diversity of German modernism, along with all the characteristics that make it so distinctive, would not have come into being without these multifold exchanges.

Ibsenism and Nietzscheanism at the turn of the century

The origins of the modernist movement in Germany are impossible to understand without reference to the country's violent and belated unification during the 1860s and the eventual proclamation of King William I as German emperor in 1871, following the Franco-Prussian War. Germany's new imperial fortune created an urgent need for a corresponding imperial culture that might bestow the semblance of dignity and legitimacy upon the rather ham-fisted Hohenzollern dynasty. This resulted in an ambitious public building program, the erection of much statuary, and a vogue for historical novels

and plays. A younger generation of German writers, many of whom first announced themselves to the public via the anthology *Moderne Dichter-Charaktere* [Modern Poet Characters] (1885) found an easy target for satire in these official, as well as officious, manifestations of imperial culture. The theoretical foundation for the new movement came in 1886, via a lecture that the historian Eugen Wolff gave to the Berlin literary association *Durch!* [Through!]. Wolff declared that “our highest ideal is no longer antiquity, but rather the modern period,” and “the task of the present-day writer is to give a poetic shape to all the meaningful forces of contemporary life [. . .] as well as to blaze a prophetic path for the future.”²² Within the span of a few hundred words, he thus not only proclaimed the dawn of a new artistic era, but also provided it with an energetic program.

To “give a poetic shape to all the meaningful forces of contemporary life” meant, first of all, to find an artistic response to the Second Industrial Revolution. The natural resources of the Rhineland as well as savvy investments in chemical and electrical technology allowed the Wilhelmine Empire to quickly overtake Britain as the leading industrial power in Europe, a development that gave rise to astonishing changes in the urban landscape. The population of Berlin, for instance, nearly trebled during the period from 1870 to 1905, as the formerly quaint garrison town, which had been the ridicule of cosmopolitan travelers earlier in the century, spawned ever more factories, train yards and tenement slums. A group of writers that included Gerhart Hauptmann, Arno Holz, and Otto Brahm set out to chronicle these social transformations along with their attendant ills of disease, prostitution, and alcoholism.

Although they opposed Wilhelmine pieties, many of these proto-modernists nevertheless participated in the proud nationalism that characterized their era. Hermann Conradi, for instance, wrote in his preface to *Moderne Dichter-Charaktere* that, “the spirit which moves us [. . .] is the spirit of a reawakened nationality. It is a Germanic creature, which can make do without foreign tinsel and trumpery.”²³ This curious mixture of revolutionary sensibility and conservative nationalism produced tensions from the very outset. For German modernism was, like the national unification that gave rise to it, a belated phenomenon. French naturalist writers, foremost among them Émile Zola, had begun exploring the darker side of industrialization at least a decade before their German colleagues, yet in the heady nationalist context of the Reich, founded in the Mirror Hall of Versailles, French achievements, though universally read, were sometimes difficult to publicly acknowledge. As late as 1915, Heinrich Mann still provoked the ire of his more nationalistic brother, Thomas, when he proclaimed Zola a model poet and intellectual.

This internal asynchrony between a rapidly developing industrial economy and a cultural sphere that was, in many regards, still playing catch-up helps to explain the rise of Ibsenism on the Berlin stage during the 1870s and 1880s. Ibsen was Norwegian, and thus easy to accommodate to the chauvinistic theories of a pan-Germanic cultural heritage that were gaining currency at the time. And he added to Zola's anti-bourgeois outlook a determined focus on the cataclysmic inner life of the modern individual. The German poets, who came from a national tradition in which inwardness and spirituality had long been valorized over social realism (and in which the novel had also never displaced the play as the dominant form of high artistic expression) could intuitively relate to this. The first Ibsen play to premiere in Berlin was *The Pretenders* in 1876, followed in quick succession by *Pillars of Society* in 1878 and *A Doll's House* in 1880. *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People* were put on in 1887, and they opened the floodgates to a whole series of productions that helped to establish Ibsen as a household name not only in Germany, but throughout the rest of Europe as well.

Many of these early performances were hamstrung by incompetent directors or overly zealous censors. But even if they did not immediately resonate with a large public, they nevertheless provided inspiration for such German works as Gerhart Hauptmann's *Before Sunrise* (1889) and *The Weavers* (1893). In another important development for the history of modernist literature, the controversy over Ibsen's plays also accelerated the creation of a counter-public that intentionally segregated itself from the public at large. In order to evade the compulsory state review of all public theater performances, Otto Brahm in 1889 founded a private theater association, *Freie Bühne* [The Free Stage], which immediately went on to premiere *Before Sunrise*. The paying members of *Freie Bühne* still possessed, for the most part, strictly conventional tastes, and *Before Sunrise* caused a riot not at all unlike the one in Dublin that James Joyce so memorably depicted in his "The Day of the Rabblement" (1901). Over the following decade, however, Berlin's theater life became increasingly liberal, and the nascent avant-garde found artistic outlets in an ever-increasing array of little magazines, literary associations, clubs, cabarets, and galleries.

The cultural transfer between Scandinavia and Germany did not just consist of texts, however. It had a human face as well. Ibsen himself lived in Dresden and Munich from 1868 to 1879. The Danish critic Georg Brandes, considered the father of the "modern break-through" in Scandinavian letters, settled in Berlin from 1877 to 1883. By the time of the first full flowering of German modernism in the 1890s, the Prussian capital, despite the ongoing conservatism of official Wilhelmine culture, had turned into an asylum for a variety of other Nordic artists who sought to escape an even more

chilling cultural climate back home. The tavern *The Black Piglet* became a meeting place for such poets and painters as Edvard Munch, August Strindberg, and Holger Drachmann. Here they mingled with German modernists like Richard Dehmel and Max Klinger, as well as the Polish poet Stanislaw Przybyszewski, to create a kind of “literary Hansa,” an artistic community founded on a shared cultural patrimony centered on the Baltic Sea.

The importance of Ibsenism for the development of a naturalist tradition in Germany already demonstrates that the cultural transfer within this transnational network was far from one-way. Modernist techniques didn’t merely move from what might be called the “Prussian semi-periphery” on the edges of industrialized Western Europe into the genuine “periphery” in Northern and Eastern Europe; the inverse was true as well. Yet another example of this dynamic appears in the rise of Nietzscheanism in Germany, which came roughly a decade after the discovery of Ibsen and at last provided German modernists with a genuinely indigenous aesthetic program. Nietzsche had published *The Birth of Tragedy*, his first major work, in 1872, but for almost two full decades he remained virtually unread in Germany. In 1888, however, Brandes, who had by then returned to Copenhagen, delivered an important lecture series on Nietzsche’s “aristocratic radicalism,” which was published in the *Deutsche Rundschau* in 1890, and which set off a veritable tidal wave of interest in the philosopher. Nietzsche’s theories thus traveled from German-speaking Switzerland to Denmark and back to Germany, from whence they were disseminated throughout the world, via the universities, the publishing industry, and through multi-national artist circles such as the one centered on *The Black Piglet*.

The influence of Nietzsche on German modernism was profound and multi-faceted. Three elements of his thought, however, were especially pertinent. The first was his rejection of academic historicism. In one of his *Untimely Meditations* of 1874, entitled “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche averred that “[a] man who wanted to feel historically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep.”⁴ For such an enforced insomnia, he prescribed the “unhistorical” ability to forget the past, as well as the “suprahistorical” capacities of art and religion to refocus attention from the “process of becoming” towards the eternal.⁵ The notion of art as an agent through which we might effect an irreconcilable break with the past resonated with many modernist manifestos of the period; it plays a central role, for instance, in the important essay “Die Moderne,” which the Austrian critic Hermann Bahr published in 1891.

The second important aspect of Nietzsche’s thought, closely related to the first, was the philosopher’s scathing attack on positivism, a term used

here to refer to the tendency to describe human behavior using vocabulary drawn from the natural sciences. As Nietzsche asked rhetorically, “Is life to dominate knowledge and science, or is knowledge to dominate life? Which of these two forces is the higher and more decisive? There can be no doubt: life is the higher, the dominating force.”⁶ Nietzsche’s spirited argument for the supremacy of life had tremendous influence not only on the so-called *Lebensphilosophie*, or “vitalist” school of philosophy, but also on the artistic movement that would eventually come to be known as expressionism.

A third important element of Nietzsche’s thought is to be found in his critique of language. A pivotal text in this regard is the short essay, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1873), which contains one of the most frequently quoted sentences by this eminently quotable philosopher. Truth, Nietzsche there proclaims, is nothing more than a “mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations [. . .] which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people.”⁷ “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” was not published until 1896 and received scant attention even then, but it collects ideas that can be found throughout Nietzsche’s writings, and that contributed greatly to the so-called modernist “crisis of language” (*Sprachkrise*). This term signifies a general mistrust in the ability of language to represent external reality, as well as its ability to serve as a neutral medium in which competing claims about facts and values might be adjudicated. If words are, as Nietzsche claimed, really just worn-out metaphors, how can words ever keep up with what is new in the world or, even more importantly, be used to formulate new truths? This question is the driving force behind Fritz Mauthner’s voluminous *Contributions to a Critique of Language* (1901/02); but the most important response to the *Sprachkrise* came in poetic form. In October of 1902, the Berlin literary periodical *Der Tag* [The Day] published a short piece, by the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, entitled simply, “A Letter,” in which the fictitious sixteenth-century poet Lord Chandos complains to his friend and mentor, Sir Francis Bacon, that “the abstract terms of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course in order to voice a judgment [crumble] in my mouth like moldy mushrooms.”⁸ The sentiment underlying this statement would be shared by many other German poets over the following decades.

The Nietzsche euphoria of the 1890s spawned an army of second-rate disciples, prophets, and exegetes, but it also produced writers of undeniable genius. Among the first of these was the playwright Frank Wedekind. Only two years younger than Hauptmann, Wedekind wrote plays whose themes – sexual repression and the abasement of women in a hypocritical society – are basically naturalist; but his treatment of these themes is not.

In pioneering works such as *Spring Awakening* (1891, though not performed until 1906), *Earth Spirit* (1895), and *Pandora's Box* (1902), Wedekind abandons the naturalist preoccupation with verisimilitude and introduces fantastic, grotesque, and even explicitly anti-theatrical elements. *Spring Awakening*, for instance, concludes with the appearance of a *deus ex machina*, identified only as the “masked gentleman.” Wedekind also transcends the naturalists’ sometimes facile sexual politics. For instance, Lulu, the protagonist of *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box*, although she is a prostitute, is hardly a victim in the traditional sense. Her irrepressible lust for life is instead presented as a threat to her suitors, who regard her only as a plaything for their carnal desires. Her eventual death, at the hands of Jack the Ripper, can thus be read as a grotesque personification of social prejudice.

The Nietzsche cult was strongest, however, where it mixed with the influence of French symbolism, another artistic current imported from abroad, and one eagerly received by a new generation of artists who had no personal memories of 1871. The poet Stefan George, for example, served a kind of personal apprenticeship to Stéphane Mallarmé during a trip to Paris in 1889, taking from him the idea of literature as the expression of an aristocracy of the spirit. This notion was thoroughly Nietzschean at the core, but George took it to even further extremes than Nietzsche. He was obsessed with the notion that society needed to be revitalized by the powers of creative genius; only poetry, he believed, was capable of this task, in which philosophy had failed. For the final two lines of his poem, “Nietzsche” (1907), George quoted the philosopher’s self-critical lament, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that “it should have sung, this ‘new soul,’ and not spoken,” leaving little doubt that he, George, believed himself to be this “new soul” capable of song where others had been confined to mere speech.⁹ He lent concrete form to his vision of a spiritual aristocracy by forming the so-called “George Circle,” an especially interesting example of the cliquish nature of so many literary and intellectual movements during the modernist period.

Another poet deeply influenced by both Nietzsche and French symbolism was Rainer Maria Rilke, who lived in Paris during the early years of the new century, and whose famous description of an “Archaic Torso of Apollo” (1907) owes much to Nietzsche’s description of the “Apollonian element” in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “We cannot know his legendary head / with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso / is still suffused with brilliance from inside, / like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low, / gleams in all its power.”¹⁰ Through his poetry and his pioneering novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), in which he worked to counter the crisis of language by giving symbolic forms to the interior experiences that exterior objects occasioned, Rilke established himself as one of the most

important, as well as one of the most influential, practitioners of German modernism.

Futurism, expressionism and the search for a modern voice

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Rilke's achievement and influence were rivaled only by those of Thomas Mann, whose early short stories sold poorly, but who leaped into prominence with the success of his first novel, *Buddenbrooks* (1901, although sales did not take off until the second edition of 1903). *Buddenbrooks* is symptomatic of a new stage in the reception history of German modernism, which by the turn of the century had made far greater inroads into official Wilhelmine culture. Whereas the plays of Hauptmann and Wedekind had been *succès de scandale*, *Buddenbrooks* was simply a success.¹¹ Perhaps partly due to this popular success, *Buddenbrooks* has sometimes been classified as a "late realist" novel, but in truth, it reflects the most advanced artistic currents of its day: the influence of Scandinavian literature (especially the genealogical novels of Alexander Kielland and Jonas Lie), the flirtation with naturalist elements (Mann's original title had, in fact, been *Downwards*), Nietzscheanism, symbolism, irony, and decadence.

One of the factors that helped bridge the gap between modernist and official culture was the rise of the feuilleton. The new century brought with it the birth of the modern German newspaper industry, exemplified by the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* (founded 1892), the *Berliner Morgenpost* (1898), and the *BZ am Mittag* (1904). Many of these new papers were tabloids, but their success changed the form of bourgeois periodicals as well, creating, among other things, a steady demand for punchy pieces of cultural criticism. This need was filled with gusto and genius by such writers as Alfred Kerr and Siegfried Jacobsohn. It wasn't just that these journalists were willing to defend and explain modernist authors; they also created an entirely new *style* of writing that was very much of its own time. The critical miniature has a long tradition in German letters, reaching at least as far back as Friedrich Schlegel's philosophical fragments, but Kerr and his colleagues gave it a new edge. The literary culture of the Weimar Republic would owe much to their achievements.

Another important new arrival on the German literary scene in the first decade of the twentieth century was the poet Else Lasker-Schüler. Lasker-Schüler, whose short lyrics rival those of Rilke in their linguistic inventiveness and symbolic compression, and whom Gottfried Benn would later call "the greatest female poet that Germany has ever had,"¹² suffered decades of neglect because she was a woman and a Jew. Her husband, Herwarth

Walden, on the other hand, quickly became a figurehead of the modernist movement and vociferously defended the avant-garde just when some of its more moderate elements were being absorbed by the mainstream culture. One of the most telling of these defenses came in an article entitled “The Jungles of Berlin,” which he published in 1911 in *Der Sturm* [The Storm], a journal that he himself had founded a year earlier and which he continued to edit until his emigration to the Soviet Union in 1932. In this article, Walden depicts his circle of friends as a cosmopolitan clique plugged into the latest artistic developments throughout Europe:

With a resounding thud, the daily papers are being tossed into a corner, the Brockhaus encyclopedia has been burnt along with Goethe and Schiller, but the works of [minor modernist poet] Alfred Mombert make the rounds. [Peter] Altenberg unfortunately can't stand to travel, but Hermann Bahr comes twice a week, while Alfred Kerr calls on the telephone and Karl Kraus sends dispatches from the [Viennese journal] *Die Fackel* by telegraph. The wires are full of news about Ibsen and Hauptmann, Strindberg and Wedekind, Hofmannsthal and Maeterlinck, Shaw and d'Annunzio.¹³

The description is pure satire: the Berlin avant-garde was at that time neither as prolific nor as international as Walden suggests. It is a deeply telling satire, however, appropriating the breathless style of the newspaper extra edition to enumerate the qualities he thought the mainstream press considered suspicious about the modernists: their mistrust of the bourgeois canon, their scorn for public opinion makers, their enthusiasm for modern technology, and, finally, their organization into transnational networks that defied the national distribution channels (and frequently nationalist rhetoric) of the daily papers.

During his years at the helm of his journal, Walden turned *Der Sturm* into a veritable media empire, through which he tirelessly promoted the kind of artistic internationalism that he could still only dream of when he wrote “The Jungles of Berlin.” At various times, this empire included a publishing house, a book store, a theater, an arts academy, and a gallery. It was through the last of these that German modernism received its next great fertilizing inspiration from abroad. The larger-than-life avatar of this inspiration was Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who arrived in Berlin in April of 1912 to publicize an exhibition of futurist manifestos and paintings at the Sturm-Galerie. Marinetti and Walden drove through Berlin in an open car, distributing leaflets, waving placards and yelling *evviva futurista!* It was a giant advertizing stunt that once again used the methods of a modern media society to disseminate a subversive message. When the Prussian authorities reacted with predictable force against this “disturbance of the peace,” the

avant-garde had successfully completed its guerrilla raid into the public sphere: up to 1,000 visitors a day now streamed into the Sturm-Galerie to view the scandalous new paintings.¹⁴ Among them were many of the most radical poets and painters of the time, who reacted to futurism with a mixture of fascination and anxiety comparable to that which had greeted naturalism forty years earlier.

Just a month prior to the futurist exhibition, the Sturm-Galerie had hosted a number of works by the *Blaue Reiter* group, a painters' circle held together by the brilliant and temperamental Russian émigré Wassily Kandinsky. The term "expressionism" was then still new and not yet in universal use. It had been coined by Lovis Corinth in 1911 to refer to the art of Vlaminck and Matisse. Deeply inspired by these two provocative exhibitions shown in quick succession in the same gallery, the German modernists began the difficult task of explicating what they had seen. One critic, for instance, sought a common ground for futurism and expressionism in the legacy of cubism, which he defined as a "feeling for the profound relationship of things, a cosmic world feeling," and which he claimed futurists and expressionists alike harnessed to rebel against the cold, analytical stance of impressionism.¹⁵ Gottfried Benn, who first burst upon the literary scene with his poetry collection, *Morgue*, in 1912, soon applied a similar analysis to futurist and expressionist verse. He defined both of them through their "inner disposition to smash up reality, their tendency to dig down to roots, to a point where individualism and sensualism can no longer taint, falsify and soften things in order to appropriate them for the psychological process."¹⁶ Alfred Döblin also expressed admiration for the "energy, hardness and masculinity" of futurism, for its rhetorical power and its effort to become an "art without wrapping paper." His "Open Letter to F. T. Marinetti" nevertheless concludes with a defiant vow to depart in a different direction: "Go on and cultivate your futurism. I will cultivate my Döblinism."¹⁷

Tellingly, this "Döblinism," which bore first fruit in *The Three Leaps of Wang-Lun: A Chinese Novel* (1915), involved a return to the living totality of the epic, as opposed to the joyous fragmentation of experience that the futurists advocated. For futurism and expressionism were never in reality as closely related as some critics made them out to be. Futurism was the brain-child of a small group of radical intellectuals aiming to create a modern Italian culture through a categorical break with the past. German modernism, on the other hand, as we have already seen in the earlier tempering of French naturalism with Ibsenism, was essentially a compromise formation, seeking to build bridges between a deeply entrenched cultural tradition and more recent industrial advances. Expressionist poets such as Georg

Heym, Ernst Stadler, Gottfried Benn, and Jakob van Hoddis wrote about modern life, but they always attempted to synthesize and impose meaning – frequently of a religious kind – onto what they observed. Ernst Stadler’s sonnet “Ride Across the Cologne Rhine Bridge at Night” (1913), for instance, begins with a celebration of the vertiginous speed of the machine age: “The express train feels and jerks its way through the darkness / No star dares appear. The entire world is but a narrow mine-gallery railed round by night, / Into which now and then haulage stations of blue light tear abrupt horizons.” But the poem ends with an invocation of “Reflection. Contemplation. Communion. And ardor and the urge / To the ultimate, to what blesses. To the feast of procreation. To ecstasy. To prayer. To the sea. To extinction.”¹⁸ As much as they rearranged their syntax and abandoned conventional meter, the expressionists never succeeded in treating words as pure materials, in the way that the futurists did with their *parole in libertà*. In short, expressionism remained wedded to a poetics of depth, whereas the great conceptual breakthroughs of cubism and futurism arguably lay in their discovery of a poetics of surface.

Expressionism remained the dominant literary paradigm in Germany throughout the rest of the decade, but as political events hurtled forward, it soon outlived itself. The outbreak of the First World War, that ultimate conflict between the souls of men and the horrors of modern mechanized warfare, confronted the expressionists with a challenge they could not handle. Carried through to its logical conclusion, the search for depth in the trench experiences could only lead to the kind of psychotic self-reification celebrated by Ernst Jünger in works such as *In Storms of Steel* (1920) and *Battle as an Inner Experience* (1922). Kurt Pinthus published his great expressionist anthology, *The Dawn of Humanity*, in 1919. The German word for “dawn” (*Dämmerung*), however, notoriously can also mean “dusk”; and many of the voices commemorated in this work had already been silenced with bayonets and mustard gas.

Exiles and émigrés in Weimar and beyond

The armistice of 1918 marked a monumental turning point not only in the political history of Germany, but also in its cultural history, and it is worth pausing to consider some of its most significant ramifications for the development of modernist literature. The defeat in the war turned the country from an autocratic empire into a representative democracy practically overnight, a transformation that brought almost as many problems as it did blessings. The conditions for peace that had been dictated at Versailles were oppressively harsh, while the actions undertaken by the founding fathers

of the new republic waffled between the farcical and the tragic. From the beginning, Weimar Germany thus had to confront a serious legitimization crisis. Among intellectuals, this manifested most clearly in the phenomenon of the so-called “republicans of reason,” who supported the new state with their minds, but not with their hearts. Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* (1924) has been read persuasively as the supreme product of this mindset, even as Mann himself became over the course of the 1920s a staunch supporter of liberal democracy.

Contributing to this problem was the fact that the Wilhelmine Empire’s rigid social hierarchy and ideological narrow-mindedness had prevented a younger generation from acquiring the skills and experience necessary to run a state. The same was true in the cultural arena as well, where state censorship was abolished (at least in its most overt forms) and the conservative gatekeepers of culture departed along with the regime that they had propped up for so long. The modernists suddenly found themselves no longer confined to the periphery of cultural life, but rather at its very center. The result was a flurry of activity, in which new theaters, cabarets, galleries, or literary magazines seemed to open up almost every week – and often closed just as quickly. The Weimar Republic undoubtedly represented a golden age for the performing arts. But it is equally important to remember that for many dramaturges, musicians, and bit players, this artistic frenzy represented above all a source of uncertainty. There was always the chance to make it big, but a more likely fate would be to find oneself on the street once again, in a society that was infamous for its lack of a social net to protect the poor.

Modernist artists are not expected to hold sinecures, of course. Still, the economic uncertainty of the Weimar years had lasting effects on both their outlook and output. The hyperinflation of 1922 and 1923, in particular, hit the intellectuals harder than most other strata of society. Unlike farmers, intellectuals produced no consumable commodities; unlike workers, they did not receive weekly salaries and could not fall back on union protection. Their income was instead tied to royalties, contractual advances, and the interest earned on prior investments. During the peak of inflation, sums that might have seemed princely when they were originally written into a contract would often no longer cover even the cost of a single breakfast. As a result, many artists and intellectuals turned cynical, frequently withdrawing their support from the new democracy that had failed to protect them. The rise of so-called “reactionary modernism,” which embraced the technological aspects of modernity while rejecting the emancipatory legacy of the Enlightenment, is at least partially tied to these economic conditions. Ernst Jünger and the later Gottfried Benn are prime examples of this tendency, as,

for that matter, is Joseph Goebbels, who held a doctoral degree in literature and published the expressionist novel *Michael* in 1924.

Cynicism and the need to earn a steady income in rough times marked other directions of cultural production as well. The years following the inflation saw the rise of a new aesthetic ideology that valued practicality and adaptability above all else, and that demanded that all art possess a *Gebrauchswert*, or “value for everyday life.” The precise ramifications of this are perhaps best expressed by a famous anecdote about the composer Paul Hindemith, who, during a performance tour of England in January of 1936, was told that the British premiere of his viola concerto, *Der Schwanendreher*, would have to be cancelled due to the recent death of King George V. With less than twenty-four hours before the performance, Hindemith gutted his composition, rearranged several of its themes, and thereby produced a new piece, the *Funeral Music*.¹⁹

The very best *Gebrauchsliteratur* was ironically conscious of its ambivalent status between art and mere functionalism. This is especially true of the works of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht first made a name for himself immediately after the First World War, when he wrote a series of plays that deconstructed the expressionist pathos to which many of the older poets still clung. In the early 1920s, both in poetry and in such plays as *Man is Man* (1926), he developed a sophisticated aesthetic that tasked itself with leading the reader or spectator toward critical reflection, rather than mere artistic appreciation. His *Manual of Piety* (1926) groups poems into functional rubrics, such as “supplications,” “spiritual exercises,” or “chronicles,” and suggests different occasions on which individual works might be used, even as it wryly subverts the standard expectations that one might bring to a manual of piety. Thus the final stanza of his “Great Hymn of Thanksgiving” runs: “Praise ye the coldness, the darkness, the decomposition! / Look at the sky / And without qualms you can die / Knowing that you count for nothing.”²⁰ Around the same time, Brecht also advised theater directors to make their houses more like sports arenas (“More Good Sport,” 1926), and he caused a major uproar when he refused to award a prize to any of the 400 entries to a poetry competition for which he was the judge, suggesting that the laurel instead be awarded to a piece of doggerel he had found in a cycling journal (“A Short Report Concerning 400 (Four Hundred) Young Poets,” 1927).

Gebrauchsliteratur was itself part of a larger trend that has come to be known as “the New Objectivity,” or *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and which was crucially influenced by the reception of American culture in Germany during the 1920s. The works of Sinclair Lewis and especially Upton Sinclair left a lasting impression upon the literature of the Weimar Republic and led

to the development of the so-called “journalistic style” (*Reportagestil*), in which writers commented on contemporary events of popular significance. Other hallmarks of the New Objectivity included factual observation, anti-psychologism, neutrality of view, and emotional distance between narrator and subject. Needless to say, this kind of writing was especially suited for publication in the newspapers that provided many of the most innovative Weimar authors – among them Joseph Roth, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Erich Kästner – with their principal source of income. Women writers, such as Irmgard Keun, Marieluise Fleißer, Gabriele Tergit, or Mascha Kaléko, profited from the commercial appeal of the new aesthetics as well. For perhaps the first time in literary history, they could live off the fruits of their labors (although the case of Fleißer, who attempted suicide after her publisher did not renew her contract, shows that this foothold was often tenuous). The women modernists also tackled subjects – such as gender relations in the new democratic state – that their male colleagues had sorely neglected. The Marxist Left was nevertheless quick to attack the New Objectivity as an intellectual surrender to the alienating effects of industrial capitalism (see Walter Benjamin’s “Left-Wing Melancholia,” 1931), although this did not prevent the movement from remaining artistically dominant throughout the life of the Weimar Republic.

The journalistic style was far from the only cultural influence that America exerted upon Germany during this period. Without America, the development of Brecht’s epic theater would have been impossible, for it was Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) that first inspired the young playwright to search for an aesthetic method capable of representing the workings of global capitalism. Brecht abandoned an early project about the international grain trade, but he returned to Sinclair with his play *St. Joan of the Stockyards* (1930); a little earlier he had also relied on Charles Lindbergh’s memoir, *We* (1927), as the principal inspiration for his innovative learning play, *Lindbergh’s Flight* (1929). Looking beyond high culture, *Amerikanismus* was a great influence (as well as a major source of anxiety) on almost every facet of life during this period. Factories were Taylorized, modern offices were constructed on the American model, and at night, the weary masses danced their troubles away in the countless night clubs that pretended to be straight out of Chicago. Theodor Adorno’s cantankerous grumblings notwithstanding, most strains of Weimar musical modernism would have been impossible without the influence of jazz – or at least what the Germans took to be jazz. One of the composers who learnt the most from this musical style was Kurt Weill, who collaborated with Brecht on several projects (including *The Threepenny Opera*, 1928); Weill repaid his international debt during his later American exile, when he revolutionized the Broadway musical.

Another cultural influence on the Weimar Republic that was very different from what America provided came from the large number of Russian émigrés who arrived in Germany in the wake of the Soviet Revolution. The young republic was a logical destination for such émigrés; most of the Russian intelligentsia spoke at least a little German, and many of the aristocrats had family connections there. More importantly, however, Germany during the time of hyperinflation was incredibly cheap for anyone who possessed gold or foreign currency. In the years 1922–23, roughly 300,000 Russians migrated to Berlin, then a city of just over four million inhabitants (the unflappable Berliners rechristened the ritzy district of Charlottenburg “Charlottengrad”). These numbers dwindled rapidly after the end of the inflation, but it is estimated that more than 100,000 émigrés were still living in Berlin when the Nazis seized power in 1933.

The Russian diaspora included many first-rate writers and literary critics, among them Vladislav Kodasevich, Viktor Shklovsky, and, most famously, Vladimir Nabokov. Between 1918 and 1924, Berlin’s eighty-six Russian publishing houses printed over 2,100 different titles, more than Moscow or Petrograd.²¹ For all this, however, cultural relations between Germans and the Russian émigrés remained underdeveloped. Many of the intellectual leaders of the diaspora were aristocrats who looked down on plebeian Berlin, with its tenement slums and petty bureaucrats. The émigrés were also acutely aware of the political instability of the Weimar Republic and the strong influence of the Communist Party: what had happened in Russia might also happen in Germany. A much more substantial impact was made by the new Soviet avant-garde during its brief efflorescence. German–Soviet relations did have an institutional dimension (for instance, in the form of exchanges between the Bauhaus and the Russian state design academy in Moscow, the VChUTEMAS), but in the face of pervasive mistrust between the two young states, individual encounters played an even larger role. German intellectuals like Walter Benjamin, George Grosz, and Egon Erwin Kisch traveled to the Soviet Union to examine the new workers’ state, while a number of Russian artists found inspiration in the turbulent life of the Weimar Republic. Among the many figures who exerted a profound impact on the German avant-garde were the graphic artists El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodtschenko, the playwright and poet Sergei Tretyakov, as well as the director Vsevolod Meyerhold. As so often, Bertolt Brecht stood at the center of things. He derived numerous inspirations from Meyerhold for his own epic theater, and he adapted Tretyakov’s play, *I Want a Child!* (1926).

Of course, not everyone who chose to relocate to Germany during the 1920s came as an exile or an émigré. Artists and writers from all over the world flocked to the Weimar Republic, attracted by the low cost of

living, the intellectual vibrancy, and the legendary night life. Unlike their Russian counterparts, these modernists were free to leave whenever they chose, as most of them did when Hitler came to power in 1933. W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, and Thomas Wolfe are just the best-known English voices to report on these tumultuous times. In masterpieces such as *Good-bye to Berlin* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), they carried back to their own countries a disciplined and socially engaged approach to literature thereby preserving the cultural legacy of the Weimar Republic even as Nazi stormtroopers were burning books within Germany.

The most important international art form of the Weimar Republic was film, however. The famous Universum Film AG (UFA) was founded in 1917 and quickly reached a golden age as the home of expressionist directors like Robert Wiene, Fritz Lang, and F. W. Murnau. The economics of inflation meant that movies could be shot cheaply and earn great profits in foreign markets; for a brief while, German cinema enjoyed world-wide success. Audiences in the 1920s, however, quickly developed a preference for melodramas and physical comedies – genres in which German films found stiff competition from Hollywood productions anchored by Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Buster Keaton, and similar stars. As a result, UFA went bankrupt in 1925 and was purchased by the American studios MGM and Paramount, who in turn sold it back to the right-wing industrialist Alfred Hugenberg in 1927. Ironically, some of the most successful American movies were made by the German-born director Ernst Lubitsch, who came to Hollywood of his own accord in 1922 but was followed, a decade later, by a number of his former colleagues upon whom this decision was thrust by the Nazi seizure of power.

After 1933, the landscape of modernism shifted once again, as most of its German practitioners were forced into exile. The diaspora was international in scope, taking prominent modernists as far from home as Mexico (Anna Seghers), Brazil (Stefan Zweig), or Moscow (Herwarth Walden and others). Most of the émigré writers – Bertolt Brecht, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Alfred Döblin, Carl Zuckmeyer, to name but a few – ended up in the United States, however, where ironically they found themselves in a situation not unlike the one that Russians in Berlin had experienced fifteen years earlier: they spoke at least the rudiments of their new country's language, but nobody understood their own; they established tight social networks among themselves, but encountered utter indifference among their hosts. Just like the Russians, they were also shocked by the hyper-modernism and what they regarded as the inherent barbarism of their new surroundings.

Most accounts of the German diaspora in America have emphasized the tragic dimensions of emigration, telling stories of once powerful artists who,

having made the tragic realization that cultural capital is rarely portable, had to contend daily with poverty and ignominy. The suffering was certainly real and should not be underestimated. It is given memorable form in some famous lines by Bertolt Brecht: “Every morning, to earn my daily bread / I go to the market where lies are bought. / Hopefully / I take my place among the sellers.”²² But despite what Brecht claims, there were among the émigrés some who managed to sell their books without succumbing to lies: Lion Feuchtwanger, Anna Seghers, and Franz Werfel all produced bestsellers; Thomas Mann even enjoyed celebrity status. Cultural exchange, furthermore, frequently takes unpredictable forms. Brecht himself, for instance, was slighted and mistreated during his stay in the United States, but his plays were rediscovered in the 1960s by such institutions as the Living Theater, and helped launch a new stage in the development of the theatrical avant-garde in America. Many other artists underwent career changes that previous generations of scholars have lamented as compromises, but which are slowly being reevaluated now that the old barriers between “high” and “low” art are breaking down in the academy.

Erwin Piscator, for instance, failed in his attempts to inject American theater with the experimental spirit over which he had presided at the Volksbühne in Berlin. His Dramatic Workshop at the New School in New York, however, almost single-handedly produced an entire generation of Hollywood stars, including Marlon Brando, Tony Curtis, and Shelley Winters. Along the same vein, none of Kurt Weill’s American compositions may have risen to the same level of genius as his score for *The Threepenny Opera*, but they nevertheless shaped musical theater on Broadway, helping to usher in a golden age for what has become one of America’s most distinctive art forms. Arnold Schoenberg, who taught John Cage at the University of Southern California, Josef Albers, who mentored Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, and Eva Hesse, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose students at the Illinois Institute of Technology included Gene Summers and Helmut Jahn, formed vital institutional links between modernism and postmodernism in the United States.

There is an inherent irony here, in that the restrictive understanding of the modernist legacy that prevailed for many decades is, in part, the product of a certain kind of exile experience. With works like *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) and *The Philosophy of Modern Music* (1949), the Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno laid the foundation for later accounts of an unbridgeable rift between modernist art and the popular “culture industry.” Their pessimistic outlook was undoubtedly reinforced by their distance from American society: their failure to understand how cultural formations that to them seemed crudely reductive

actually possessed deep roots in collective experience. In a kind of vicious circle, this understanding of modernism then led to cultural histories that inevitably cast the American years as a time of crisis and compromise. The almost inevitable association of German modernism with political catastrophe has come about in a similarly circular fashion, in that it was largely created by German émigré historians during the 1960s, at a time when there was much fearful talk in intellectual circles about possible parallels between Weimar and Vietnam-era America. Fifty years later, in an era when globalization has emerged as the leading socio-political challenge of the day, the time is ripe for a new understanding of German modernism as an internationally connected phenomenon of astonishing inclusiveness and diversity.

NOTES

1. The canonical shape of this narrative largely derives from Peter Gay's *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Norton, 1968).
2. I quote from the condensed version of the lecture that Wolff published anonymously in the *Allgemeine deutsche Universitätszeitung* the following year. See *Die literarische Moderne: Dokumente zum Selbstverständnis der Literatur um die Jahrhundertwende*, ed. Gotthard Wunberg (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1971), pp. 1–2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
3. Hermann Conradi, "Unser Credo," in *Die Berliner Moderne, 1885–1914*, eds. Jürgen Schütte and Peter Sprengel (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987), p. 184.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 62.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), p. 46.
8. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," in *Selected Prose*, trans. Mary Hottinger (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952), pp. 133–34. Translation modified.
9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 20. George's poem was later reprinted in *The Seventh Ring* (1907).
10. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 61.
11. At least this was true for most of Germany. In Mann's provincial hometown of Lübeck, *Buddenbrooks* was rightly recognized as a *roman-à-clef*, and did cause a good deal of outrage.
12. Gottfried Benn, "Erinnerungen an Else Lasker-Schüler," in *Essays und Reden in der Fassung der Erstdrucke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1989), p. 542.
13. "Der Sumpf von Berlin: Spezialbericht 'Café Größenwahn'" ("The Jungles of Berlin: Special Report on the Café Megalomania") in *Der Sturm*, no. 2 (October 1911): 651–52. Reprinted in Schütte and Sprengel, eds., *Die Berliner Moderne*,

- pp. 662–70. “Café Größenwahn” was a popular nickname for the bohemian Café des Westens on the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin.
14. On this episode, see Nell Walden, *Herwarth Walden: Ein Lebensbild* (Mainz: Kupferberg, 1963), p. 127.
 15. Adolf Behne, “German Expressionists, Lecture for the Opening of the New Sturm Exhibition,” in *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, ed. Rose-Carol Wash-ton Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 60. The original appeared in *Der Sturm*, nos. 17–18 (December 1914): 114–15.
 16. From Gottfried Benn’s introductory remarks to *Die Lyrik des expressionistischen Jahrzehnts* (Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1955), p. 11.
 17. Alfred Döblin, “Futuristische Worttechnik: Offener Brief an F. T. Marinetti,” in *Schriften zu Ästhetik, Poetik und Literatur*, ed. Erich Kleinschmidt (Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1989), pp. 113–19.
 18. Kurt Pinthus, ed., *The Dawn of Humanity – A Document of Expressionism*, trans. Joanna M. Ratych, Ralph Ley, and Robert C. Conard (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1994), p. 221.
 19. Hindemith related the details of this episode in a letter he sent to his publisher, Willy Strecker, the following day. The letter is signed, “Paul Hindemith, Bespoke Tailor.” See Geoffrey Skelton, ed. and trans., *Selected Letters of Paul Hindemith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 91.
 20. Bertolt Brecht, *Manual of Piety*, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 123.
 21. I derive these figures, as well as the ones pertaining to the Russian diaspora more generally, from Karl Schlögel, *Das russische Berlin: Ostbahnhof Europas* (Munich: Pantheon, 2007).
 22. John Willett, Ralph Manheim, and Erich Fried, eds., *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913–1956* (New York: Methuen, 1976), p. 382.

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