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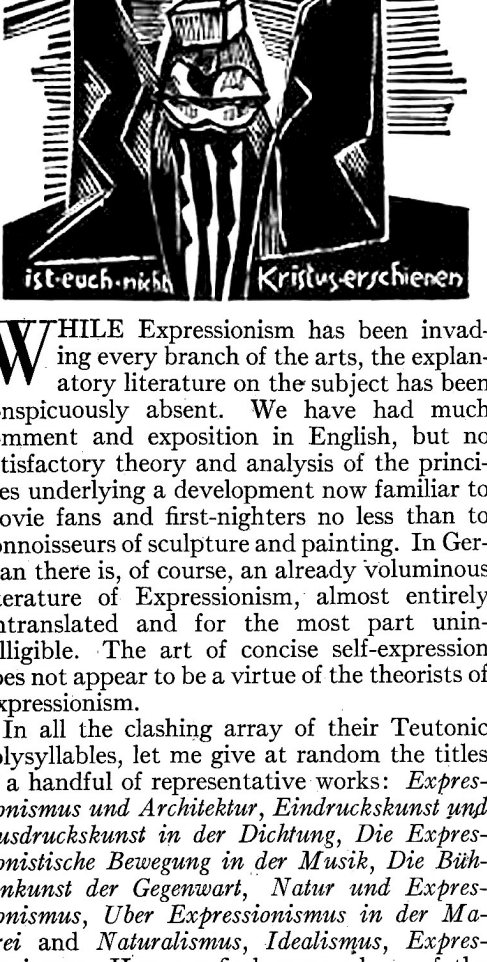
Herman Bahr's Elucidation of the Aesthetic Theory Behind Modern German Art

Expressionism Without Tears

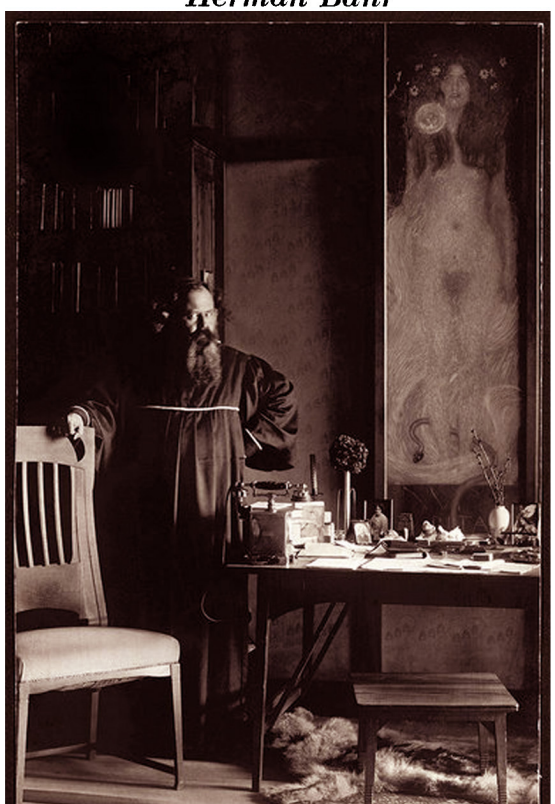
By ERNEST BOYD



WHILE Expressionism has been invading every branch of the arts, the explanatory literature on the subject has been conspicuously absent. We have had much comment and exposition in English, but no satisfactory theory and analysis of the principles underlying a development now familiar to movie fans and first-nighters no less than to connoisseurs of sculpture and painting. In German there is, of course, an already voluminous literature of Expressionism, almost entirely untranslated and for the most part unintelligible. The art of concise self-expression does not appear to be a virtue of the theorists of Expressionism.

In all the clashing array of their Teutonic polysyllables, let me give at random the titles of a handful of representative works: *Expressionismus und Architektur*, *Eindruckskunst und Ausdruckskunst in der Dichtung*, *Die Expressionistische Bewegung in der Musik*, *Die Bühnenkunst der Gegenwart*, *Natur und Expressionismus*, *Uber Expressionismus in der Malerei* and *Naturalismus*, *Idealismus*, *Expressionismus*. Here we find every phase of the movement with its learned exegesis, whether it be in painting, sculpture, drama, architecture, music or literature. In this mass of commentators is there one who has provided the layman with a clue to guide him through a maze whose lines include phenomena apparently as far apart as Kandinsky and Schoenberg, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Masse Mensch?* There is one little book, scarcely a hundred and fifty pages of text, which deserves, at this point, to be introduced.

Herman Bahr



Hermann Bahr

The Philistine

THE work in question is concisely entitled *Expressionismus*, and the author is Hermann Bahr, novelist and dramatist, whose charming comedy, *The Concert*, may still be remembered by those who saw it in the somewhat denatured version played by Leo Ditrichstein. This is, within its limits, which do not include literature and the theatre, the clearest analysis of a movement usually obscured by the metaphysical dissertations of its friends.

Bahr began his career in the late Eighties as a Naturalist, and his attitude towards the subsequent evolution from Impressionism and Symbolism to Expressionism is one of rational understanding. He is neither the high-priest of a cult nor the outraged philistine of culture. He begins, indeed, with an amusing picture of the aforesaid Philistine, who is determined not to be as foolish as his predecessors. The latter belonged to the type of "I don't know anything about art but I know what I like." The modern Philistine remembers how Wagner was hissed, how Napoleon III indignantly turned his back on Manet's first publicly exhibited picture, how even Mahler and Strauss were denounced as mad. He does not want to appear as foolish, but instead of acquiring taste he has merely acquired fear. His relation to art rests upon fear, fear of being wrong.

"Whatever pleases him, he regards as inartistic, precisely because he likes it. . . . If he must admit that something pleases him, then it must certainly be something he does not like. He knows it is a work of art, if he dislikes it. Art is what disturbs him, offends him, and seems hideous. Then he says to himself: that has exactly the same effect on me as Wagner, Ibsen and Manet had on my parents, so in thirty years it will be recognized, and I do not want then to look like a fool!"

The "Programmatic Artist"

SUCH, in Bahr's view, is the basis of our modern desire for whatever is new. But the

Expressionists have succeeded in upsetting this ingenious equilibrium of the up-to-date Philistine. At last there are works of art which arouse his indignation, but this indignation is moral, not artistic, since fear has long since taken the place of taste. It is not the taste of the spectator which revolts at pictures by Kadinsky or Marc Chagal, but his moral sense. He objects to swindlers! One does not perhaps mind being told by an expert that what looks like the picture of city roofs in a fog is a portrait of a lady with a mandoline, but one does resent the programmes and manifestoes which announce, not merely a new art, but a new religion and a new philosophy. Bahr agrees that "a programmatic artist" is a dangerous fellow, but it is not the business of artists to theorise but to create.

He calls the new painters all Expressionists, though they themselves would repudiate the term, consisting as they do, "of innumerable little sects which execrate each other." He does so for the reason that they have certain fundamental ideas in common. They turn away from Impressionism and against it. If there is any trace of realism in an Impressionistic work, they repudiate it. They unite in strenuously opposing everything that we expect of a picture if we are to accept it as a picture at all. Here the Expressionists and their opponents agree, for the latter assert that the former have done violence to truth, reality and perception, and the former cheerfully admit their denial of everything that has hitherto been generally regarded as the essence of painting.

"The history of all painting is the history of seeing. Technique changes when vision changes, and only because it has changed. Technique changes in order to catch up with the changed manner of seeing. But man's vision is determined by his relation to the universe . . . so the history of all painting is the history of philosophy." "As soon as we learn to distinguish between the interior and exterior world, we have to choose between certain alternatives."

We may either take flight from the world within ourselves, or from ourselves out into the world, or we may hover on the border-line between the two: these are the three attitudes which man may assume towards phenomena. In primitive times the first of these three was man's choice. He fled from nature and created an art that was unreal and unnatural. The Greeks brought mankind back to nature, and found divinity not in the depths of the human soul but in the heart of nature. They created the classic man who felt himself to be an integral part of all nature. In the Impressionist Bahr finds the perfection of the classic type, for he goes a step further and omits man's share in the appearance of things lest that appearance be thereby distorted.

A sharp distinction is drawn by Bahr between the physical and the mental vision. "The eye of the body is passive towards everything; it receives, and whatever is impressed upon it by external charm is more powerful than the activity of the eye itself, more powerful than what it grasps of that outward charm. On the other hand, the eye of the mind is active and merely uses as the material of its own power the reflections of reality." In the rising generation, Bahr continues, "the mind is strongly asserting itself. It is turning away from exterior to interior life, and listening to the voices of its own

secrets; it again believes that man is not merely an echo of the world, but its creator, that he is as strong, at least, as it is. Such a generation will repudiate Impressionism and demand an art which sees with the eyes of the mind. Expressionism is the natural successor of Impressionism, again one-sided, again denying one side of human nature: again half-truth."

Active Vision

BAHR compares the Expressionist painter with the musician of whom we do not ask that he shall reproduce sounds heard in the outside world, but that he shall produce out of himself what he hears within himself. Expressionist painting is "eye-music". In order to have such vision one has merely to conceive of an object so powerfully that it impresses itself upon the eye. "As soon as the waves of our inner life beat upon the eye, we *see* our inner life, as we *hear* it when its waves strike the ear." Impressionism made our vision purely passive and receptive, an ear, so to speak, while Expressionism has made of it a mouth. "The ear is silent; the Impressionist did not allow the soul to speak. The mouth is deaf; the Expressionist cannot hear the world." Both Expressionism and Impressionism are alike in that they lack "the ever-living tie that unites the eyes of the body with those of the mind". That ideal combination has existed "in individual great masters, in isolated works, which have always been misunderstood, but it has never been achieved by a whole epoch".

The attitude of the general public towards Expressionism in all its forms becomes more easily comprehensible in the light of this theory of mental and physical vision. "When painters in whom the eyes of the mind are dominant present their work to a public that is accustomed to rely upon the eyes of the body, or vice versa, there results an inevitable confusion. Those who have never observed their own vision are inclined to regard the eyes as windows through which the world penetrates. Furthermore, we have been educated in classic art, an art which is turned outwards and draws into itself the exterior world. Impressionism is simply the last word in classic art, perfecting and completing it by increasing to the maximum our power of external vision while suppressing as much as possible the faculty of interior vision."

The Expressionist describes what he sees within himself, and it is no criticism of that vision to say that it represents nothing that the spectator has seen in the real world. The Ninth Symphony is not a conglomeration of sounds heard in actual life, but the notation of harmonies in the soul of Beethoven and audible only to his ear.

Like all critics and commentators who have shown any real comprehension of Expressionistic art, Hermann Bahr sees in it the inescapable expression of this age of transition. Man is again in search of his own soul; he is in revolt against the passivity which has made him a mere tool of his own work, an instrument of the machine age. "Never was there a period shaken with such horrors, such mortal terrors. Never was the world filled with so deathly a silence. Never was man so small, never so terrified. Never was joy so elusive, and freedom so near unto

death. Now our need cries out. Man cries out for his soul. The age is one vast cry of need, and art has joined in the cry, shouting into the darkness for help, for the soul. That is Expressionism."

The circumstances explain the drastic methods of Expressionism. The conditions approximate to those of primitive man. "People hardly realise how close to the truth they are when they make fun of pictures and say they look as if they had been 'painted by savages.' The industrial era has driven us back to barbarism . . . and we must be barbarous if the future of humanity is to be saved from our fate. As primitive man crawled into himself out of fear of nature, so we are in flight from a 'civilization' which destroys the human soul." Primitive man discovered in his own courage a weapon of defence against the dangers and terrors that beset him. Similarly, "we have found within ourselves an ultimate power that cannot be destroyed, and in our fear we have drawn upon it, and set it against 'civilization', holding it tremblingly before us. It is the sign of the unknown within us, on which we rely to save us; it is the sign of the imprisoned spirit trying to break its fetters; it is the cry of alarm of all terrified souls—such is Expressionism."