

THE EXPRESSIONIST MOMENT: HEYM, TRAKL AND THE PROBLEM OF THE MODERN

JAMES ROLLESTON

Duke University

I

In a recent discussion of the status of Expressionist poetry the late Edgar Lohner concludes that all critical attempts to deal with it have been so befogged by the theoretical rhetoric of the Expressionists themselves that we essentially have to start over, beginning with the adoption of a less parochial perspective.¹ He suggests the famous book by Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*,² as a vehicle for linking our reading of the Expressionists with the experience of modern poetry in general. With much of Lohner's diagnosis one must agree: the various group manifesti from the war years are almost completely useless in advancing our understanding of the great period of Expressionist poetry, which basically ended in 1914. Moreover, to read much of the cult literature that has grown up around Trakl can be a claustrophobic experience: whether, as in the fifties, a critic sets out to demonstrate that Trakl's work constitutes a total and meaningful view of the world, or whether, as in recent years, equally thorough linguistic studies are done to demonstrate the absence of such meaning, the basic question is often evaded: why? Why is Trakl's hermetic enterprise important? At the same time Lohner is too negative about the critical tradition as a whole. Specifically on Trakl several essays existed at the time Lohner was writing (in the late sixties) which grapple with the question of his European significance, notably those by Reinhold Grimm³ and Wolfgang Preisendanz.⁴

Furthermore, Lohner's prescription for a new start, Hugo Friedrich's book, was coming under serious challenge at the very time

Lohner's article appeared. Friedrich establishes a continuum of modern poetry beginning with the French masters of the mid-nineteenth century, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, within the framework of which the self-definitions of all the major poets of this century can be situated: the continuum is described through an accumulation of negative categories such as depersonalization, dehumanization, deconstruction of the empirical world, distortion of perception, emphasis on the ugly. The positive which modern poets fashion out of all these negatives is contained wholly within language, it is a kind of absolute art forged from fragments of public wasteland and private dream, a self-reflective beauty suspended over the void;⁵ the conception is close to that of Gottfried Benn's famous lecture "Probleme der Lyrik" (1951), which Friedrich cites approvingly. Now there are three major problems with this version of the modern. First, it implies a prior empiricist harmony, a one-to-one relationship between private and public verbal meaning. But where is this paradise of naive referentiality to be found? As early as 1795, August Wilhelm Schlegel is talking of the problem of language's tendency towards autonomy;⁶ and if realism did establish itself as the dominant convention of the nineteenth century, the major realistic writers nevertheless remained intensely aware that it was indeed a convention, not a medium of revealed truth. We are thus compelled to extend Friedrich's continuum backward, at the very least to the beginnings of what Friedrich Schlegel called the age of self-consciousness about language. But if we do this, then we have to deal with major writers like Goethe, Schiller and Hölderlin, to name only the Germans, who by no means derive their inspiration from the negation of the world.

If there is a problem of origins in Friedrich's theory, there is equally a problem of ends. Can there be such a thing as absolute poetry? The fact that poets as eminent as Paul Valéry and Gottfried Benn have advocated it, does not necessarily bring it into existence; indeed Paul Celan, in his speech "Der Meridian," called it an impossibility. What does it mean to speak of self-reflective language? This conception is the *telos*, the final resting place of the modern in Friedrich's version of it, and he has rather a comfortable picture of modern poets coolly fashioning their verbal icons. Yet the greatest poetry, in this as in past centuries, invariably accepts the challenge of language's referentiality, augmenting its

resonances rather than purifying it into sound or patterning. It has been noted that Trakl often builds his poems out of quotations from other poets. The poem to be discussed ("De Profundis") is one of the most striking examples of this technique. But this does not mean he is not referring to anything outside literature; on the contrary, he is engaging precisely the problem of literature itself, the overwhelming presence of the literary tradition. When Preisendanz demonstrates what he terms the "concretization" ("Verdinglichung") of language by Trakl, the transformation of words into things, he is closing out the argument at the penultimate stage, very much in the spirit of Hugo Friedrich. For words cannot become things; such a paradox is only comprehensible within the framework of absolute poetry as an ideal concept. The central question persists: what is Trakl communicating by this "Verdinglichung" of language? Probably the question cannot be answered in terms of a single "meaning"; Trakl is compressing many expressive dimensions into the narrowest possible space. But why should this surprise us? We accept without a murmur the truism that Shakespeare's sonnets are not reducible to a single interpretation; and enough time has now passed for us to perceive that Trakl's procedures differ in degree but not in kind from those of Shakespeare.

The third major difficulty with Hugo Friedrich's stylization of the modern is its genealogical assumption that Baudelaire begot Mallarmé who begot Valéry and all the twentieth century grandchildren. This has been subjected to a cogent attack by Paul De Man in *Blindness and Insight*; and De Man points out that the chief source of this version of the modern is the poets themselves, particularly Mallarmé and Valéry, who liked to align themselves with the stream of literary history; ⁷ all artists, of course, tend to do this, but Mallarmé we have believed, both because of his prestigious obscurity and because we also have a deep need to make sense of the recent past. And yet recent criticism has raised the fundamental question whether literary history is even possible in the modern period; since Kant's "Copernican revolution," man has been both saddled with the burden of his past and endowed with the opportunity to remake that past in his own mind, without being compelled to refer to any higher sanctions. As Michel Foucault puts it, the metalanguage centered on the divine purpose to

which man in the eighteenth century referred all the diverse realms of discourse in daily living — this metalanguage has vanished and instead we have, and have had since around 1800, a variety of languages each with its own history, a continuum of infinitely fragmented experience into which man has had to insert himself.⁸ For modern man, or as Foucault has it, for Man as such, that strange entity that has been compelled to occupy center stage since 1800, history is the fundamental problem. Man is the giver of history, history is identical with the progression of his “Geist”; yet he is also engulfed by history, he can perceive his own personal origin as totally arbitrary and as immediately overshadowed by the certainty of his coming death. This situation is essentially static. With the disappearance of the metalanguage no version of history can possibly remain satisfying for very long, since history has become a function of a particular temporal perspective. Each of us “invents” his own history, in the sense that we structure our lives according to norms we have internalized; but we are also uncomfortably aware that these norms are handed to us by our environment, that they are indifferent to our individuality and, what is worst, that they will not themselves survive very long, let alone impose themselves successfully and permanently on the flux of history. What literature presents since 1800 is a perpetual circling around this central abyss into which individuals are emblematically flung at the very moment when they are proclaiming their historical destiny. Literary history is an illusion connived at by the writers themselves, implying a structure of human time where none is possible.

It is at this point, however, that one has to concede the sophistication of Friedrich’s argument. For it would appear undeniable that around 1860-1870 a group of major writers from totally different environments more or less simultaneously drew the unpalatable conclusions about the relationship between man and history which Foucault has articulated as a system: in this group one would include Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Baudelaire and Rimbaud. In their various ways these men resolved upon the creation of an art that foregoes the support of all existing aesthetics, regarding any and all traditions with curiosity but without allegiance, an art that sets out not to remember but to forget. Now, since the relationship between texts, quite apart from any

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temporal-historical relationship, is a prime source of all literary creation, the decision by Mallarmé to generate a kind of tradition of the modern by declaring his allegiance to Baudelaire and systematically extending the linguistic area occupied by Baudelaire — this decision is an aesthetic fact. And because it is widely conceded that Mallarmé succeeded in his endeavor, Friedrich's location of the nexus of the modern in these French poets and their aesthetic seems justifiable. However, the genealogical fallacy creeps in when the Baudelaire — Mallarmé relationship is projected forward into the twentieth century, and when Mallarmé's goal of the absolute poem is named as the model for all poetry since his time. A self-contained tradition is superimposed on the flux and immediacy of the world in which poets must make their verbal choices.

II

To take issue with Hugo Friedrich is to incur the obligation to offer one's own version of the time-scale of the modern. Helmut Kreuzer⁹ charges Friedrich with being ahistorical and sketches instead a periodization tied to specific historical events, with the major shift — from bourgeois "autonomous art" to a "functional aesthetic" ("die Kunst wird Waffe") — taking place in the 1920's. But the strict alignment of German poetry with German political history seems to me rather less fruitful than Friedrich's conception of a "Weltsprache der modernen Poesie," as Enzensberger called it. There must be some middle ground between the transcending of history and the dictatorship of history. My own view has already been suggested in my discussion of Michel Foucault. History is not so much the unseen hand guiding the writers' pens as a foreground theme, an obsessive rhythm at the very centre of consciousness. It is, in Foucault's sense, a static phenomenon, in that since the sea-change in human consciousness around 1800 all men are locked in the same terrifying relationship with time, confronted simultaneously with their absolute power of origination and their individual irrelevance. But this very immobility at the heart of things impels man to create a dynamic model out of the contingencies of life, to translate the tangible cycles of the empirical world, whether organic, political or cultural, into a "higher"

realm of meaning. Generally speaking, writers focus on one or another of these cycles as the “true” source of meaning in the world; in the nineteenth century a wide range of powerful fictions, from rural idyll to scientific sociology, from *l’art pour l’art* to revolution, were generated in response to the burden of history-making.

The special quality of the Expressionist moment was that virtually all these fictions were perceived as simultaneous possibilities, with idyll and revolution, decadence and futurism jostling one another. And yet this multiplicity was at once transformed, with seeming inexorability, into a monotony, a kind of inventory of a dead culture, as styles and ideas revealed themselves as devoid of functionality, formulae powerless against the weight of time. Far from being a temptation, a structured refuge from the abyss, history became an almost tangible presence, an uncontrollable coalescing of every image of the world into a single overwhelming sensation: what Frank Kermode has called the sense of an ending. Collapsing cities, rotting humanity, decaying nature — these rapidly became the commonplaces of the Expressionist style; but in the language of Heym and Trakl such images convey a very specific poetic intention which it will be the task of this paper to explore. I shall argue that, while Heym and Trakl are in many important respects diametrically opposed, they are united in the urgency of their trust towards a poetics, adequate to the new situation, which I will call a poetics of truth-telling. Even in the few surviving personal documents of Trakl, the idea of the true retains a teleological flavour in the very dissimilar contexts:

Please believe me, that I do not and never shall find it easy to submit myself unconditionally to the subject to be portrayed and I will constantly be having to correct myself in order to render unto truth that which is truth's. (Letter to Erhard Buschbeck, late autumn 1911).¹⁰ The misery is indescribable when one's world is shattered into two. O my God, what a fearful judgment has burst in upon me. Tell me that I must have the strength to go on living and do what is true. (Letter to Ludwig Ficker, late November 1913).¹¹

In a vivid stylistic contrast one of Heym's last diary-entries shows his approaching the goal of truth-telling through explicitly “philosophical” preoccupations:

Greatness unthinkable without badness. To be sure. But what is badness. Probably there is absolutely no general criterion apart from the aesthetic. And even this is incomplete, since it is accustomed to seeing man always as a whole. Only when one has become accustomed to doing without external criteria altogether will one achieve a proper point of view for judging the human entity. Only when one declares that everything that happens must happen, that every action is absolutely necessary, that there is no such thing as responsibility, that even "responsibility" before the forum of the aesthetic is an injustice and an atavistic prejudice — only then will one have gained a certain serenity of outlook. (Dec. 20, 1911).¹²

Heym's sentences recall, both in tone and substance, Nietzsche's formulations.¹³ The rejection of all transcendent perspectives and systems of causation that would connect past and future leaves Heym enclosed in the ineluctable "truth" of the present. Indeed the aesthetic, a key element in Nietzsche's new value structure, is of little use to Heym; the passage suggests, in fact, two major points on which the Expressionists found themselves driven beyond Nietzsche's positions. First, Heym eschews the apocalyptic rhythm in Nietzsche's thought, embodied in Zarathustra's three "transformations," from camel to lion to child. This vision, in conjunction with the image of the hero, had already enjoyed a considerable vogue (one thinks of Ernst Stadler's earliest poems, written at the turn of the century) — yet the bourgeois social and literary world, diagnosed by Nietzsche as spiritually exhausted, persisted in a swollen and, to the Expressionists, grotesque form; indeed the "compromisers" denounced by Heym — George and Rilke — seemed to give new and somehow illegitimate life to the structure as a whole. The Expressionists wrote, then, in a world where apocalypse had already *failed*, where the literary tradition had performed the impossible by absorbing the motif of its own destruction. The apocalyptic tonality is unmistakable in everything written by Heym and Trakl, yet it is an apocalypse shorn of the third stage, the renewal of the child, and frozen in an oscillation between sickness and destruction.¹⁴ The Expressionist moment involves not merely the collapse of stable categories but also the premature exhaustion of the "new man" who was to reinvent values. In such a situation the only possibility is a truth-telling emancipated from

all false objectivity, an unrepeatable fusion of intensity and hopelessness.

The second point of divergence from Nietzsche lies precisely in the relationship between art and truth. Nietzsche frequently declared art, "the last metaphysical activity," to be of greater value than truth; for him, art offers man the only way of both surviving the present, through apollonian illusion, and generating a healthy future, through its insistence on seeing things as other than they are.¹⁵ But, as with the vision of apocalyptic change, the actual range of possibilities for art and literature bore little resemblance to Nietzsche's hopes; yet his metaphysical framework remained in place, leaving the poets of 1910 the single option of restoring truth to its primacy over art. But again, such a "truth" now involved not only the facts of industrial society but the entire recent history of a literature struggling to absorb those facts into the tradition of romantic individualism. To the Expressionist generation, the Nietzsche who sought to overcome that tradition could only appear as its last dominant exemplar.

III

If we tend to think of Heym and Trakl as perhaps the greatest of the Expressionist poets it is because they, more than all the others, focussed on the specific quality of their experience as perceivers of the end of a tradition. It was above all a negative perception and they did not try to escape its negativity. In certain technical respects we can speak of both poets together, for they drew at least three negative conclusions from their situation about the basis for a future poetry. First, the romantic ideal of the "Ich," the single human voice as the sole guarantor of authenticity, must be overturned. In the age of Freud the humanistic premises of this ideal had to be called into question: the possibility of a relationship between self and world was precisely at issue in the new poetry and nothing could be taken for granted in probing the situation, let alone anything as question-begging as the integrity of the "Ich." In this the Expressionists went much further than Rilke, whose conception of the "Dinggedicht" was ultimately a means of solidifying the role of the "Ich" in the interpretation of the world. At the time of Expressionism, to be sure, Rilke was undergoing

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a renewed crisis on this score, but it is clear even from such a desolate poem as “Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens” that his aims are antithetical to those of the Expressionists, to whiten the rescue of both the “Ich” and the image of an intact, valid external world from the farthest limits of negation. Second, the symbolist notion of the poem as generating a private network of interconnecting meanings, a late corollary of the centrality of the “Ich,” must be abandoned. Much misinterpretation of Trakl, it seems to me, derives from the critics’ falling back, in their puzzlement, on the theory of a private meaning. Yet Trakl’s enterprise is fundamentally anti-symbolist, a systematic assault on the degraded “Stimmungslыrik” that was the last gasp of the dying tradition: his aim, as Heidegger has vividly argued,¹⁶ is to regain the public dimension of poetry by deploying the only language available to him, one overlaid with connotations of intimacy and refinement, in such a way as to strip its privacy from it. And finally the teleological structure of poetry, the notion derived from Goethe that a poem should enter in its very shape into the organic realm by moving through heightening (“Steigerung”) towards final flowering — this image of the poem is clearly rejected by both Heym and Trakl. Instead a paratactic style is sought, in which the totality of the poem is not more than the sum of its parts: not only should the individual stanza possess its own dynamic, the idea of isolated energy should be applied to single lines, even single words. In this way the sense of universal continuity which enveloped the tradition in its late stages and found an extreme exemplification in Hofmannsthal’s poems was violently disrupted; and in this way, too, the Expressionist poem embodied the goal of its creators which was precisely to realize the moment as truth, with all the supports of traditional categories kicked away. If that last sentence sounds Imagist in tone, I would reiterate that the problem inherent in the poetics of the Expressionist moment is that it cannot achieve fulfillment in this way. These poets cannot, as the Imagists did, focus on an arbitrary experience in order to exhaust it as a self-contained epiphany; for them no experience is arbitrary, the felt presence of social and literary tradition infuses every aspect of their life, nothing is free from the burden and opportunity of the historical moment. This is why Heym’s imagery is so repetitive, why the formula that Trakl only wrote one poem has

received such wide acceptance; each poem is a renewal of the effort to realize in its isolated existence, or existences (as the logic of the paratactic structure would have it), the impossible historical task of thrusting the tradition into the past and embodying a new origin for human self-understanding.

IV

Nothing we have said so far offers a guide to the content of an Expressionist poem, to what the writer in this extreme situation is actually able to say. To repeat, the special quality of Heym's and Trakl's poetry is that they confront the tradition whose totality they so vividly perceive and derive their own language from the very process of confrontation. And it is at this point that they diverge radically the one from the other. What we witness in their work is a renewal of the old dichotomy between the Ancients and the Moderns. For Trakl, whom we may call by analogy the partisan of the Ancients, the only valid response to the majestic, inclusive tradition of nineteenth century poetry was to study it, absorb it and finally attempt to reformulate it in the void of the post-historical moment. To guard against misunderstanding: Trakl is not "continuing" the tradition, which indeed in his eyes cannot be continued, but is reinterpreting it from the vantage point of its negative last stage. The words he uses are very largely the words of the poetic past, but in isolating them from their context and imbuing them with the atmosphere of the "last days" Trakl is endeavouring to regain their functionality as vehicles of truth, a functionality which has been dissipated during the long years of the gestation and decadence of symbolism. Wolfgang Preisendanz has pointed out that, in addition to his special favorites Hölderlin, Novalis and Rimbaud, Trakl pressed even further back into the sources of the tradition, exploiting words like "purpurn" and "Hain" that had not been current since the time of the Anacreontics and the Göttinger Hain. The governing impulse towards the origin is strongly at work here, but it is not the idea of origin discussed by the Romantics themselves, in which language is traced back to its sources in the song, the prayer and the primitive cry; on the contrary, the origin sought by Trakl is precisely the stylized poetic language of the eighteenth century, before the destruction

of the metalanguage focussed on the principle of divinity, before the installation of the Romantic ideal of originality. To guard against another possible misunderstanding, Trakl is not seeking to roll back the tradition any more than he is continuing it. Rather, he is attempting to emulate the inclusiveness and self-reflectiveness of the tradition by establishing a new set of equivalences that transcend historical relationships, by connecting nominally unrelated myths, stories and images within the language of a single poem. The coherence comes only from the language of the poem which, through the simple fact of its linearity, aims to set in motion a complicated atemporal web of associations and propel it forward into the new time-scale propounded by the poem itself. In Trakl's poems Höltz speaks to Rimbaud, Mallarmé addresses Hölderlin, Greek myth jostles Christian sacrament. If we sense here an echo of the Romantics' own experimentation, we are not mistaken; the Romantic moment, the hopeful moment of Hölderlin and Schlegel's *Fragmente*, was itself constituted by the dream of a regenerated language in which poetry would bridge the gaps between philosopher and scientist, between dream and quotidian reality. In emphasizing the Romantic fascination with the simultaneity of different worlds and traditions I am thinking not merely of the fusion of Greek and Christian myths in Hölderlin, but also of the ubiquitous potentiality of magic realms, worlds at the bottom of mines or behind locked doors. For the Romantics, of course, the richness of coexistent worlds was held together by at least three powerful articles of faith: the belief in the creative scope of the individual, the belief in the organic rhythm of history and the belief in the power of art. For the Expressionist, the first two of these had become precisely the prime targets of his demythologizing enterprise. Left only with the third, Trakl received new support from two other sources: first, a profound respect for language as such, a respect nourished by its devaluation in the course of the nineteenth century; second, a clarity about the consequences of the modern scepticism concerning past myths. What the work of Nietzsche and others had made clear was that the removal of the aura of truth from the myths of mankind did not eliminate these myths from human consciousness. As Walter Benjamin put it, ancient Greece was not so much a historical fact as a perpetual possibility. Trakl's enterprise was to recover and set in resonance a

careful selection of these possibilities, counterpointing the one with the other and preventing the invocation of any given cluster of meanings from achieving clear priority. The fatal tendency of the tradition of organicism and progress was, as it were, to consume its own past, to pick up myths as if they were playthings only to drop them again, jaded, and to bemoan the fact that modern man was lonely in an empty world. As the Expressionists saw it, man had degraded himself by the very process of asserting his centrality in the world. One of the reasons Trakl is still uncomfortable reading, in a world that has not yet caught up with the generation of World War I, is the uncompromising expression in his poetry of the importance of man's ancient rituals and images combined with the radical reduction of man as an individual.

Another problem, one which leads people to call Trakl's poems inaccessible, is precisely the marvellous congruence between Trakl's goals and the essence, the "Gestalt" of a lyrical poem. I have already suggested that the unfolding of a poem in temporal sequence provides an emblem of the origination of a new dimension of time as it unfolds into the void of an exhausted history. But a poem does much more than that for Trakl: it provides a shape in which the ritualistic transitions present in any myth can be evoked, the movement from evening into night, from autumn to winter, from one station of the church year to another. In a long poem like "Sebastian im Traum," Trakl may evoke a whole series of transitions amounting to the consummation of a natural year. This never means that the reader is to seize on such motifs as if they were "real," or part of a deep structure such as the symbolists devised. Organic sequences are part of any human mythology, but the primary status allotted them by Goethe no longer holds. A stylized version of nature is of tremendous importance to Trakl, but no single natural image resounds beyond the phrase or the line in which it is contained. One of the most valuable insights of Wolfgang Preisendanz is that Trakl's vocabulary is deliberately stripped of its symbolist resonances; his scenes and gestures draw overtones of ancient rituals and stories into the poem, but never themselves offer the reader any aperture through which he might escape into a world outside the poem. They breathe in, as it were, without ever breathing out.

Another feature of lyrical structure exploited by Trakl is its fictional potentiality, the suggestion of a narrative sequence in the movement from one group of images to another. As with the sequences of nature, the reader will be frustrated who tries to read such structuring in the traditional way, finding a Hegelian forward movement in the clash of opposites. It is through the disappointment of such expectations that Trakl forces us to hold our gaze on the particular poetic moment instead of slipping past it, forces us to confront the fundamentally static truth of the human condition. And finally, a deep source of Trakl's power is that one of the stories he is incorporating into his poems is his own. This by no means involves an inconsistency with his basic project of displacing the individual from the centre of poetic speech. Rather, it expresses the culminating logic of the confrontation with tradition. For Trakl himself, in an early prose piece such as "Traumland," stands at the end of that tradition and the baroque elaborateness of his language does not conceal a passionate commitment to the ideals of innocence, immediacy and intensity that were at the heart of the earliest Romantic moment. One reads: "I absorbed the ferment of the fruitful, sultry earth, this secret murmur of life perpetually creating,"¹⁷ and thinks immediately of Werther's original ecstatic discoveries. Obviously such prose is mere apprentice-work; but equally obviously, Trakl never lost this yearning for immediacy, for the very origins of feeling, and the project of his maturity for the generation of a new origin through the recovery of a usable poetic language is of a piece with his youthful trust back into the literary past. Moreover he became entitled to see his own compressed development as prototypical of the experience of the poet *inside* the last stages of the tradition *outside* which he now stood. It is, significantly, in his later poems that the motifs of drugs and incest and so forth begin to resound; this suggests that such things are by no means confessional. They are, rather, the incorporation of the poet's own self-destruction, as one story among many, into the human repertory of usable myths. Trakl has created his own double, the type of the "poète maudit," in order to achieve the ultimate dimension of immediacy in his articulation of a tradition at its end point.

V

If Trakl, then, is a powerful and persuasive partisan of the Ancients, Heym is a Modern. In his confrontation with tradition his response is uncompromising. It must be destroyed. Since total originality is impossible, one immediately asks whence Heym obtains his poetic tools for the enterprise of destruction. In fact his diaries reveal that he has quite a pantheon of heroes, a veritable counter-tradition including Kleist, Büchner and Grabbe; and yet one cannot call these men a direct influence on his work, except insofar as they reinforce his general destructive intensity. Kurt Mautz has shown, convincingly to my mind, that many of Heym's motifs, especially the apocalyptic ones like "Der Gott der Stadt," are in fact deformations of Jugendstil figures.¹⁸ Deformation is perhaps the best word to evoke Heym's relationship to tradition: he is like a medieval image breaker, taking a club to the marble statues. Rimbaud, for example is important to both Trakl and Heym, yet their treatment of him is antithetical. Trakl ritualizes Rimbaud, incorporating his uglier images into a textual continuity with the high style of, say, Hölderlin. Heym, on the other hand, radicalizes Rimbaud in the sense that he strips Rimbaud's images of all their aesthetic aura. Heym's Ophelia floats through an industrial city and decomposes at inordinate length: there is no trace of "le poète" who utters his benediction at the end of Rimbaud's version. One can certainly argue that Heym is acting in the spirit of Rimbaud himself, a Modern if ever there was one. But the Ophelia poem brings us up against the familiar problem of Heym's poetry, that of thematic monotony, a problem Heym's late sketches show him to be aware of himself. It may seem paradoxical that Heym, with his vast expansion of the verbal material of poetry, should be faced with this difficulty, whereas Trakl, with his strictly controlled range of subjects, is free of it. The paradox is rooted in the exigencies of the Expressionist moment and the antithetical goals of the two poets.

If Heym's revisions of Rimbaud, far from expanding the French visionary's chaotic freedom (perhaps that is hardly possible), instead drive his motifs into a cul-de-sac of ugliness and decay, then this particular deformation expresses the will to reverse all modern

tendencies towards a narcissistic poetic autonomy. Heym is obsessed with the fact that forty years have passed since the normative moderns like Rimbaud and Nietzsche rendered their verdict on European society — yet that society obscenely persists, even expanding its pretensions and ritualizing its bourgeois habits. Enmeshed in the sheer weight of this temporality, Heym can only hammer away at the obvious need for the entire self-perpetuating structure to be torn down. This experience of time's meaningless linearity became a constitutive element of Heym's poetics; in his diaries he frequently wishes he were a painter, and Ronald Salter¹⁹ has demonstrated that Heym's poems display structural analogies with painting, particularly the visionary painting of Van Gogh. The key passage in the diaries from July 21, 1910, to which all interpretations of Heym refer, runs as follows: "I believe that my greatness lies in my recognition of the fact that life is hardly ever ordered in temporal sequence. Most things exist in a horizontal plane. All relationships are spatial."²⁰ Critics tend to take this at face value; a recent interpreter, Jürgen Ziegler, even derives the idea of a neutral perspective from it, arguing that Heym's first collection *Der ewige Tag* displays a systematic objectivity in relation to its subjects, spreading them out on a canvas from which the author has withdrawn.²¹ Apart from the question whether such so-called neutrality is even conceivable, it is hard to imagine a more inappropriate word for the violent intensity of Heym. Rather, Heym's famous and revealing remark, for all its seeming objectivity, is rooted in the very same "Zerrissenheit" we find everywhere in his diaries. I see at least four major problems with the statement, problems that lead us into the very centre of Heym's creative activity. The first difficulty is that what Heym says is so is simply not so: existence in time is man's most fundamental experience and to deny the presence of time is by no means to escape from it. Heym is here displaying a Sisyphean defiance of the very conditions of human existence in order to force the truth of the paralyzed apocalypse into the open.

The second problem is closely related: poetry in its formal being takes place in time, as Heym's verbal echo of Lessing ("Nacheinander" versus "Nebeneinander") shows him to have known very well. He is consciously setting out to do what poetry cannot do; it is precisely his impossible defiance of the "tempo-

ral" ("Nacheinander"), his will to do violence to the very medium of his self-expression, that provided him with an image of what the destructive enterprise of the modern had to be. Third, the actual theme of Heym's poetry, the centre from which everything derives, is constituted by the temporal dimension. He is an allegorist in the baroque sense of the word; an allegory is an emblematic rephrasing of a pre-existent story — and almost all Heym's poems tell a story, the same story, namely the movement of all human existence from life into death. This contradiction moves Heym to develop various techniques to mask his allegorical centre, techniques which contribute greatly to his poetic achievement, such as the multiplication of the symbolic figures on their way to death (thereby preventing the reader from focussing on any one of them), or the shifting of the process of dying further and further back into life, so that the transition is hardly noticeable. Finally, the tone of Heym's diary-entry, the bizarre assertion of his greatness, suggests yet another creative contradiction: for the essence of the Expressionist moment is the utter rejection of the individualist posturing of the now exhausted tradition. Certainly Heym did not regard himself as a great man in the lineage of Goethe; rather, he seems to have seen himself as a reversal of that image, a Lucifer summoned from the depths for the final dethronement of the Olympian. Heym resembles in his own mind the apocalyptic figures of his most often anthologized poems, great without being human in the traditional sense, a libidinal force pouring itself into poetry in order to end the reign of the tattered, nerveless ego.

We noted earlier that Heym and Trakl share the goal of systematic discontinuity in their poetic language, isolating words and phrases in order to disrupt the traditional teleology of a poem's structure. But their use of this technique is radically different. Trakl isolates words in order to bind them into a new set of associations from which their conventional aura is excluded. Heym, on the other hand, as Salter points out, isolates words in order to draw the reader to what lies behind them, to the void in which they are embedded. The analogy, again, is with painting, in which every inch of the canvas, even and perhaps especially the area where there are no objects, is imbued with its own dynamism, its function within the whole. And once again Heym is attempting the impossible in taking this analogy literally in his works: for

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words cannot be made to function in this way, the space between them is purely conventional and not comparable to the background of a painting. Of course punctuation and the use of strategic pauses are part and parcel of the poet's traditional equipment, but Heym wants to go far beyond that. He wants, basically, to replace the existing conception of a poem with something new. He is an anti-poet. In his verbal and imagistic premises Heym is, as Mautz says, a deformer of tradition, but in his ultimate goals he seeks nothing less than the inversion of tradition. This, I think, is the deepest meaning of his seemingly strange insistence on maintaining the basic conventions of poetry, iambic meter, rhyme and so forth. Whereas the experimenters around Herwarth Walden used their freedom to disrupt these conventions, in so doing they can very easily appear as a mere extension of the tradition's last stage. The truly radical act, as Heym saw it, was to confront the tradition unyieldingly and as a whole, to dynamite its buildings and to fill their empty shells with the vision of the new. And this vision is constituted at all levels by a systematic inversion of the old: in Heym's poems time becomes space, people become objects and vice versa, above all life becomes death and death becomes life — Gunter Martens has set out at length Heym's use of anti-vitalist vocabulary to evoke the living while releasing the full panoply of vital images upon the world of the dead.²² So in the end it is perhaps true after all that Heym opens up a space between words — but the aperture leads not into the void but into the conventional language which the poem is inverting. Thus a final contrast with Trakl suggests itself: Trakl, the consummate poet, deploys the technique of antithesis to incorporate both the life of tradition and the death of history within the world of his poem; Heym, the anti-poet, uses the medium of poetry to establish a relationship of aggression and assault between the world of the poem and the world outside it. One does not have to quibble about whether a linguistic construct can actually engage reality or not — to Heym it could, for the cliché-ridden language of his time was to him a totally adequate emblem of all that needed destroying. Trakl saw the tradition as a whole and sought to modulate its conflicts into a new potentiality of meaning; Heym saw tradition as nothing but an insider's racket, perpetually excluding a whole series of outsiders of whom he himself was the final representative, the one destined to be victorious at last.

VI

Let us conclude by looking briefly at poems by the two authors.

DE PROFUNDIS

Georg Trakl

Es ist ein Stoppelfeld, in das ein schwarzer Regen fällt.
Es ist ein brauner Baum, der einsam dasteht.
Es ist ein Zischelwind, der leere Hütten umkreist—
Wie traurig dieser Abend.

Am Weiler vorbei
Sammelt die sanfte Waise noch spärliche Ähren ein.
Ihre Augen weiden rund und goldig in der Dämmerung
Und ihr Schoss harrt des himmlischen Bräutigams.

Bei der Heimkehr
Fanden die Hirten den süßen Leib
Verwest im Dornenbusch.

Ein Schatten bin ich ferne finsternen Dörfern.
Gottes Schweigen
Trank ich aus dem Brunnen des Hains.

Auf meine Stirne tritt kaltes Metall.
Spinnen suchen mein Herz.
Es ist ein Licht, das in meinem Mund erlöscht.

Nachts fand ich mich auf einer Heide,
Starrend von Unrat und Staub der Sterne.
Im Haselgebüsch
Klangen wieder kristallne Engel.

Sept./Oct. 1912, *Dichtungen und Briefe I*, 46

There is a field of stubble, drenched by a black rain.
There is a brown tree, standing alone.
There is a hissing wind, encircling empty huts.
How sad this evening is.

Beyond the hamlet
The gentle orphan still gathers meagre ears of corn.
Her eyes feast, round and golden in the twilight
And her womb awaits the heavenly bridegroom.

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Returning home
The shepherds found the sweet body
Decayed in the thorn-bush.

I am a shadow far from dark villages.
I drank God's silence from the spring in the grove.

My forehead feels the imprint of cold metal.
Spiders seek out my heart.
There is a light that is extinguished in my mouth.

In the night I found myself on a heath,
Numb from the refuse and dust of the stars.
In the hazel-bush
There resounded again angels of crystal.

Trakl's poem is unusual in two ways: it contains an unusual number of direct references to Rimbaud, specifically to the poem "L'Enfance" from "Les Illuminations"; I shall be referring to the famous translation by K. L. Ammer, through which Trakl came to know and absorb Rimbaud's texts.²³ But also the word "ich" occurs prominently in the second half, something very rare in Trakl. In themselves these two features of the poem suggest the total assimilation and renewal of the poetic voice within the re-invented tradition. The title, important as always in Trakl, evokes the psalms: "Out of the depths, Lord, I cry unto thee," and the ritualistic scene-setting of the first section confirms this resonance. However the reference is also to Rimbaud, whose surrealist lines run, in Ammer's version: "Es ist eine Uhr, die nicht schlägt. / Es ist ein Schneeloch mit einem Nest von weissen Tieren. / Es ist eine Kathedrale, die versinkt, und ein See, der überschwillt." (There is a clock that does not strike. There is a white hollow with a nest of white animals. There is a cathedral that sinks and a lake that overflows). The very fact that Trakl's lines are *not* free associating in this way, illustrates the use to which he is putting Rimbaud. He wants to evoke a landscape, a stylized one to be sure, as the "Schwarzer Regen" underlines, but nevertheless a landscape in which events may occur. The fourth line, the Latin vocative beloved of Trakl, is also an echo of Rimbaud — "O wie traurig, diese Stunden!" — but the subtle change he makes, from "Stunden" to "Abend," serves to generalize the invocation: the word "Abend," with its powerful mythic overtones, complements the

desolate landscape and the specificity of “dieser” generates the expectation of a story. A speaker is also evoked: the poet, the reader, some absolute consciousness? It hardly matters. The second section both fulfills the expectation of a story and temporarily dissolves the landscape. The child conjures up many images. The reference to the heavenly bridegroom renews the liturgical connotations. And again she is in Rimbaud, where one can even find an explanation of her orphaned state, if such is needed: “Da liegt die kleine Tote hinter Rosenstöcken! Die junge verstorbene Mutter steigt die Treppe hinab.” (There the little dead girl lies behind rosebushes! The young deceased mother descends the steps). The resonance of the mother, and the girl’s pastoral activity, also suggest what is perhaps the main story-component in the poem. Persephone, daughter of Demeter the goddess of the land’s fertility, was out picking flowers and went to pick a particularly enticing narcissus when the ground opened and Hades abducted her down to the underworld. Most of the stories surrounding the incident involve Demeter’s attempts to recover her daughter. The conclusion of the myth, whereby Demeter was allowed to keep Persephone for two-thirds of the year while returning her to Hades for one-third, also seems relevant here; for the one-third of the year Persephone is absent is winter and the poem suggests vividly the coming of a physical and metaphysical winter. Certainly the original loss of Persephone seems evoked by the third stanza, which both demystifies the story by making it appear that she has died and surrounds it with new resonances. On the one hand the shepherds, emblems of comfort in many traditions, add a sacramental aura to the scene; on the other hand the word “verwest” stresses the immediacy of the physical. Yet, as has been often remarked, Trakl uses words with etymological precision and the word “ver-wesen” implies a kind of disintegration into an original essence. Jost Hermand, discussing the Elis poems, notes the proximity of Trakl’s child-figures to the plant-world and refers to the original Greek child Hyacinthos as a “zeitlos-vegetative Gestalt.”²⁴ So the apparent violence of the third section is modulated into a suggestion of primal unity.

This does not mean that the violence does not persist as a resonance; one student, during class-discussion, produced the firmly held theory that the “ich” of the second part had murdered

the child. Obviously such a tying together of the story elements does injustice to Trakl's texture. At the same time his purpose is to set in motion all the overtones of ritual murder and sacrifice of the innocent that the reader may have in his mind. Moreover the two central stanzas are connected by the shift of the tense to the past, never accidental in Trakl. The link between the child and the "ich" seems to me one of both parallelism and contrast. The child, barely having entered life, is yet assured, by virtue of her mythical destiny, that she will never be expunged from it; the "ich," on the other hand, is hardly able to bring himself into existence at all. He is a shadow, compelled to perpetual distance, to exile from God and from all the traditional phenomena of comfort: stanzas four and five are full of connective, sacramental words like "Trank," "Suchen," "Herz," "Licht," "Mund," all of which echo in the emptiness of the "ich" 's experience. That experience parallels the child's to the extent that the "ich" literally endures his own decomposition, but the experience is propelled into ever greater antithesis to the myth-structure. Indeed the subjective reduction of the "ich" is intensified by the fact that the myths continue, as it were, to resound through him, imperviously. The extinction of the light in the mouth²⁵ evokes Persephone once again, whose name is thought to mean "destroyer of light," doubtless because of her status as Hades' wife. The hardening of the world into winter is associated in the last stanza with the term "Unrat," not possible in poetry until Rimbaud; the desolate mythical landscape blends with the desolation of the modern. And yet this very emptiness engenders the total antithesis of the poem's conclusion. The word "wieder" reminds us that the poem has established its own temporality, a series of relationships in which, to echo Eliot, time before and time after are both contained. In this largest realm of the human imagination, the recurrence of the angels is as certain as the desolation of the heath.

This decisive term "wieder" in Trakl's last line was instrumental in my choice of the Heym poem for comparison, a little known but to my mind fine example of his style at the very end of his short life.

HALBDUNKEL SCHON . . .

Georg Heym

Halbdunkel schon, das in die Strassen fliehet.
Und Abend, der mit vielen Wolken kommt
In dünner Häuser ausgeleerte Fenster,
Wo Wind und Zeit die Blumen fortgenommen,

Die Dunkles spiegeln in den blinden Scheiben,
Und graue Hände heben drin voll Trauer.
Und jemand kommt, die Lichter anzuzünden
Mit langen Schritten an der hohen Mauer.

Die Kranken aber wachsen in den Betten,
Und auseinander zerren die Gesichte.
Wie Pflanzen weiss in ihren hohen Kissen
Die immer starren nach dem Flackerlichte.

December 1911, *Dichtungen und Schriften I*, 485

Semi-darkness already, that rushes into the streets. And evening which penetrates with many clouds into emptied windows of thin houses, where wind and time have swept away the flowers.

Dark shapes are mirrored in the blind window-panes, and grey hands within are raised full of sorrow. And someone comes to light the lamps, with long strides along the high wall.

But the sick grow in the beds, and the visions writhe upwards, like plants, white amid their high pillows, staring endlessly at the flickering light.

For in Heym's last line we find the word "immer," a word which similarly epitomizes for him the time zone of his poetry. Whereas Trakl's poems often open with a static image that gradually sets in motion resonances that persist and multiply, Heym just as often begins with a series of agitated movements that seem to turn in on themselves and become paralysed until the culminating stasis of death-in-life is reached. Thus does Heym invert the expected rhythm of the poem and destroy the significance of temporal movement. Again, whereas Trakl suggests perspectives and viewpoints only to dissolve them and introduce new ones, Heym, with-

out ever using the word “ich,” is urgently present in his poem, conjuring up his intensely visual images and pursuing them with tenacity until he has in effect destroyed them. And whereas Trakl is sparing indeed in his use of conjunctions and relative pronouns, reducing explicit causality to near zero, Heym’s poem abounds with them. The first six lines parody the traditional use of forward-rushing imagery, as Heym draws more and more details into his connective network only to let them languish in the line “Und graue Hände heben drin voll Trauer.” In this world everything is connected by the associative meanings of tradition reaching back into the depths of time and including the obsessive anthropomorphisations of the recent past, the symbolic nexus of nature and dream. Yet these meanings are fundamentally empty. The fourth line of stanza one seems to echo the famous lines of Hölderlin’s “Hälfte des Lebens”: “Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn / Es Winter ist, die Blumen,” but Heym’s use of the imagery strips it of all resonance, using the regular iambic rhythm to transform it into a matter-of-fact statement. The parody of tradition continues in the second stanza, as Heym dutifully moves from outside to inside at the poem’s precise centre. But the metonymy of “graue Hände” vividly dehumanizes the house’s occupants; moreover it is a house picked at random anyway, the poet’s questing gaze cannot rest there. There follows another point of contrast with Trakl: in Trakl’s poem the light is extinguished, here one is lit. Yet however dark the overtones in Trakl, such as the association with the extinction of the torch in death, the word “Licht” itself acquires its own resonance, finally fulfilled in the “kristallne Engel”; in Heym, by contrast, the process of lighting is entirely without aura, it is merely the occasion for the poet’s fascinated contemplation of the anonymity, repetitiveness, even grotesquerie of the empty action.

The grotesque reigns unchallenged in the writhing stasis of the last stanza. Heym’s deformation of the key organic term “wachsen” has been noticed by many critics: its association with the vegetative sick is particularly effective. In a final contrast with Trakl, one notices Trakl’s cautious renewal of plant imagery in relation to that primal innocence which retains its power over our minds no matter how complete the desecration of it by the modern world. Heym, however, blatantly aligns the imagery with the last stages of the dying culture: this growth is like the spreading of the plague

in Thomas Mann's Venice; the difference is that it is "immer," it will never stop until the boil of modern decay is lanced. If Trakl's mythopoeic music has gained wider recognition than Heym's paralysed explosion, it is worth reminding ourselves that these anti-thetical visions remain rooted in the same confrontation with tradition and the same passionate demand for a poetics of truth-telling that could only be articulated at the Expressionist moment.²⁶ For at this moment history could be "invented" in its entirety, not as being near its end (the fin-de-siècle perspective) but as having ended; and the "truth" of this moment could thus become identical with the twin truths of the human story, the monumental pattern-making of civilization and the empty repetition of individual existence.

NOTES

¹ Edgar Lohner, "Die Lyrik des Expressionismus," in *Expressionismus als Literatur*, edited by Wolfgang Rothe (Bern, Munich: Francke, 1969), pp. 107-126, especially pp. 111-112.

² Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956, erweiterte Neuausgabe 1967. Now available as *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

³ Reinhold Grimm, "Georg Trakls Verhältnis zu Rimbaud," *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, N. F. 9 (1959), 288-315.

⁴ Wolfgang Preisendanz, "Auflösung und Verdinglichung in den Gedichten Georg Trakls," in *Immanente Ästhetik: Ästhetische Reflexion*, edited by Wolfgang Iser (Munich: Fink, 1966), pp. 227-261.

⁵ Cf. Friedrich's famous conclusion: "The poets are alone with language. Yet it is language alone that saves them." *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, p. 169.

⁶ *Briefe über Poesie, Silbenmass und Sprache*, cited by Preisendanz, op. cit., p. 251. Cf. also Michael Hamburger, who discusses Friedrich's position in terms similar to mine: "(Friedrich) seems to assume that the confessional 'I' of Romantic poetry was always identical with the poet's 'empirical self,' and that this identity is a norm from which later poets deviated, whereas it has always been the exception..." *The Truth of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p. 59.

⁷ Paul DeMan, "Lyric and Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 182 ff.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 303-307 and passim.

⁹ Helmut Kreuzer, "Zur Periodisierung der 'modernen' deutschen Literatur," *Basis* 2 (1971), 7-32.

¹⁰ Georg Trakl, *Dichtungen und Briefe*, critical edition by Walther Killy and Hans Szklener (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1969), vol. I, p. 486.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 530.

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¹² Georg Heym, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, edited by Karl Ludwig Schneider (Hamburg: Ellermann, 1960), vol. III, p. 176.

¹³ For example: "The absolute necessity of similar events occurring in the course of one world, as in all others, is in eternity *not* a determinism ruling events, but merely the expression of the fact that the impossible is not possible; that a certain force cannot be anything other than this certain force; that it can react to a quantum of resisting force only according to the measure of its strength; — event and necessary event is a *tautology*." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 341.

¹⁴ This experience has subsequently become a central fiction of the modern: "the stage of transition, like the whole of time in an earlier revolution, has become *endless*." Frank Kermode, "The Modern Apocalypse," in *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 101.

¹⁵ "Artists should see nothing as it is, but fuller, simpler, stronger: to that end, their lives must contain a kind of youth and spring, a kind of habitual intoxication." *The Will to Power*, p. 421. And the other side of this coin: "there is only *one* world, and this is false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning — A world thus constituted is the real world. *We have need of lies* in order to conquer this reality, this "truth," that is, in order to live." *The Will to Power*, p. 451. But the question for the Expressionists is whether "life" itself can still be claimed as a source of value. Many of them (Stadler, Werfel et al.) set out to do so, but their enterprise is pervaded by an almost hysterical desperation.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Language," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 189-210.

¹⁷ Georg Trakl, *Dichtungen und Briefe*, vol. I, p. 191.

¹⁸ Kurt Mautz, *Mythologie und Gesellschaft im Expressionismus: Die Dichtung Georg Heyms* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1961), p. 88 and passim.

¹⁹ Ronald Salter, *Georg Heyms Lyrik. Ein Vergleich von Wortkunst und Bildkunst* (Munich: Fink, 1972).

²⁰ Georg Heym, *Dichtungen und Schriften*, vol. 3, p. 140.

²¹ Jürgen Ziegler, *Form und Subjektivität: Zur Gedichtstruktur im frühen Expressionismus* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1972), pp. 43-81.

²² Günter Martens, *Vitalismus und Expressionismus* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), pp. 204-238.

²³ Arthur Rimbaud, *Leben und Dichtung*, übertragen von K. L. Amer, second edition (Leipzig: Insel, 1921), pp. 229-232.

²⁴ Jost Hermand, "Der Knabe Elis: Zum Problem der Existenzstufen bei Georg Trakl," in *Der Schein des schönen Lebens: Studien zur Jahrhundertwende* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1972), p. 272.

²⁵ Emil Staiger writes of this line that it is "in no way surrealistic. The poet sees himself standing, his mouth wide open with horror. All around there is light. Yet the light does not penetrate into the opening of the mouth. There is a darkness dwelling within that even God's sun cannot illuminate." "Zu einem Gedicht Georg Trakls," in Staiger, *Spätzeit* (Zürich: Artemis, 1973), p. 280. Such an interpretation reintroduces continuities on all levels, metaphysical, psychological and mimetic, which constrict instead of enhancing the poem's resonances.

²⁶ The sense of confrontation with a monolithic tradition, so characteristic of the Expressionist moment, was quickly replaced by a pluralistic, relativized image of tradition: not so much a temple or a government

building as a series of tents, to be erected or torn down by the individual at will. Cf. the 1960 formulation by Hans Magnus Enzensberger: "the obverse of every act of literary destruction is the erection of a new poetics." "Weltsprache der modernen Poesie," in Enzensberger, *Einzelheiten* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962), p. 260.