

The Early Theatre of Ernst Toller and the Enactment of Nation

“The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently”
(Pëtr Alekseyevich Kropotkin in Buber, 46)

On September 30, 1919, *Die Wandlung* by Ernst Toller premiered at the newly opened Berlin theatre, *Die Tribüne*. *Die Tribüne*, founded as a platform for Expressionism, intended to revolutionize theater, uniting both audience member and performer into a community through the unmediated experience of art. *Die Wandlung*, on a bill with Walter Hasenclever’s *Der Retter* and *Die Entscheidung*, was the first production given by *Die Tribüne*; while the Hasenclever pieces were generally dismissed as “awkward things...long drawn-out Bombast” (Hermann-Neiss, 353), the production of *Die Wandlung* was greeted, for the most part, with ecstatic acclaim as a harbinger of the new art and new world to come: “Art transforms itself...what a holy and beautiful sign for the approaching transformation of the world” (Nadel, 2).¹ At the moment of *Die Wandlung*’s premiere, the playwright, Ernst Toller, was in prison, incarcerated for his revolutionary activities in the short-lived Council or Soviet Republic in Bavaria. Four months before the premiere, Ernst Toller’s mentor, anarcho-socialist Gustav Landauer, was beaten and, finally, shot to death for his participation in that Republic. Both men were quite actively fighting to transform the socio-political world of post-WWI Germany; however, for both Landauer and Toller, socio-political *transformation* must first occur in the immaterial interiority of the individual, a reanimation of *Geist* within the self that would, in turn, demand the creation of new socio-political *formations*, as Toller writes: “Only out of an interior, human transformation can the community, toward which we strive, grow” (Toller, “Leitsätze” 31).² Gustav Landauer identified that community as socialism, a socialism that “must be built, must be erected, must be

¹ “fatale Sachen...langgedehnte Bombastik” (Hermann-Neiss). “Die Kunst verwandelt sich -- welch ein heiliges und schönes Zeichen für die herannahende Verwandlung der Welt!” (Nadel). I have translated all material unless noted.

² “Nur aus innerlicher Mensch-Wandlung kann die Gemeinschaft, die wir erstreben, erwachsen” (Toller).

organized out of a new *Geist*" (Landauer, *Aufruf* 49-50).³ The aesthetic transformation occurring on the stage was, I argue, not only revolutionary for theatre, but, indeed, a means to enact this socialist nation. Theatre functions here not as a place from which to solidify and propound a "national" identity, but rather as a site in which community is reanimated. Theatre offered the possibility for a performance not of a static "German" identity, but of a re/membering of the relationships amongst a community, a re/awakening of *Geist*, in which the socio-political practice of nation would emerge.

Geist, in the discourse of German Expressionism, is often written as a nebulous spirituality invoked to combat the increasingly reified, commodified society of early-twentieth-century Germany. *Geist*, anti-rational and de-reified, was that which resolutely refused to be inserted into the value system of the bourgeois. Expressionist artists, through their demand that the experience of art be immediate, seemingly required the individual to become subsumed into an irrational, untenable moment of aesthetic "now," a moment in which *Geist* could finally be accessed and known, free from the dictates of a society focused on matter as that by which, through which, life was to be led and defined. However, for Landauer, *Geist* was hardly a dissolution of the individual, rather, for him, *Geist* was itself a "community of *associating individuals*" (Landauer in Maurer, 72). Landauer goes further to equate *Geist* with nation, "Nation, as the natural force of the born community, is an originally beautiful and indestructible *Geist*" (Landauer, *Aufruf*, 72-73). Both *Geist* and nation, for Landauer, were in movement, were forces which could never be converted into static, identifiable things; within this movement the individual her/himself is never dissolved, rather a different mode-of-relating within the community is re/un/covers, "Now it is clear enough, what is meant by the word nation: nation is not the absolute, but a diverse relation" (Landauer quoted in Mattenklott, 9).⁴ This different

³ "Der Sozialismus muß gebaut, muß errichtet, muß aus neuem Geist heraus organisiert werden. (Landauer).

⁴ "Nun ist wohl klar genug, was mit dem Wort gemeint ist: Nation ist nichts Absolutes, sondern eine vielfaeltige Relation" (Gustav Landauer).

mode-of-relating required a different-mode-of-thinking. In this paper, I would like to look at how “nation” was not only enacted within the theatre but required the theatrical event in order to think differently, a fluidity of thought that could only occur within the seemingly untenable moment of the aesthetic “now.” Not only did the immediate experience of art prompt an epistemological shift, it also provided the material conditions to rehearse a different-mode-of-being. For the community of “nation” to be rehearsed within the theatre, the theatrical experience itself changed from one of separation (in which audience and actor remain apart, the audience watching the theatrical event as they would observe a picture) to one of communion (in which the performance operates as a bridge, re/connecting performer and audience members as a community). Theatre became the necessary site of socio-political transformation, in which the citizens of the state could become the brothers and sisters of socialism.

What Landauer was attacking was the very idea of “state,” of government as central, concretized authority regulating the behavior of its citizens in a rational society -- a *Gesellschaft*. Landauer’s goal was, through a revolution of *Geist*, to establish a socialist mode-of-being in the world, it was a call to return to the communal, agrarian lifestyle where a multiplicity of communities could be established with no central authority, a *Gemeinschaft*.⁵ This lack of a central authority, a “state” regulating the social formation, required that the members of the community be able to creatively, fluidly, organically relate to one another as the community moved and changed within the organic processes of life. Landauer refused to provide a rule/law book to his followers on how to attain or maintain such a community, to provide a program would be to once again erect the “One,” the State as monolithic force, the very problem that had caused the dehumanization and alienation that Landauer wished to combat through his concept of *Nation as Geist*.⁶ Rather Landauer and Toller argued, and fought for, a socio-political formation

⁵ The division of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* I take from Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies opposed the interpersonal, fluid relations of *Gemeinschaft* (community) to those of *Gesellschaft* (society), in which the only relations possible were based on calculations of use and value.

⁶ “Landauer aims above all at transforming humankind’s mode-of-thinking and awakening the good intentions of each individual, but he offers his followers no rationally ascertainable program. It’s no accident that Landauer emphasized on several occasions: “*We are poets*” (my italics). “Landauer

of *Gemeinschaft*, a communal formation which demanded that each member be able to think fluidly without reference to a central authority.

This fluidity of thought was experienced in the moment of aesthetic “now,” and would then extend from the artistic event to enable a different mode of behaving, or relating in the socio-political world. Immanuel Kant’s separation of the aesthetic idea (which is non-conceptual and hence, incommunicable) from the rational idea (conceptual and communicable) had successfully sequestered art from life; as the aesthetic idea cannot be learned or communicated forward into the future, it provides no praxis for learning or for living within society.⁷ The Kantian citizen can only function in society within the parameters of the rules of the state, the citizen to be part of society cannot transgress law. The citizen can, in the public use of reason, critique those laws, but that critique is not conducted through the language of aesthetics, it is conducted in the communicable language of conceptual reason. Art operates outside of life, its logic is a different logic from that required by the “reality” of day-to-day life in society; its logic cannot effectively function outside of its own limited aesthetic field. Landauer, however, quite in opposition to Kant, believed that non-conceptual, aesthetic thought could indeed provide a praxis for learning and for living within a nation. No longer would the individual be contained in the “state,” the dutiful citizen adhering to the rules of thought, rather the member of “nation” was a poet, creatively thinking and moving within an associating community.

The theatre was the site in which “nation,” as an associating community, could be initially realized, performed and extended into society. Toller wrote of this awakening of

bezweckt vor allem, die Gesinnung der Menschen zu verwandeln und den guten Willen jedes einzelnen zu erwecken, aber er bietet seinen Anhängern kein rational erfaßbares Programm. Nicht von ungefähr betonte Landauer verschiedentlich: ‘*Wir sind Dichter*’” (Kalz, 100).

⁷ “by an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible. -- It is easily seen, that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart (pendant) of a rational idea, which, conversely, is a concept, to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate” (Kant, *Critique* 230-231). See also Kant’s essay, “What is Enlightenment?” (Kant, 265).

community within the theatre, “What we dream of is the great community between the stage and the audience, the community of life-feeling, of world-feeling, the common ground of the idea, the pregnant with-each-other relation of hearer and player, the glowing unity of all active workers (and workers are the players as well as the listeners)” (Toller, “Zur Revolution,” 113-114).⁸ *Die Tribüne* was specifically founded for this return of community, advocating the transformation of the spatial relationships between people in the theater not simply to revolutionize theatrical

practice but also to revolutionize the practice of living:

The unpostponeable, necessary revolution of the theatre must begin with a rearrangement of the stage space. Out of the unnatural division of stage and audience, the living union of an artistic space and of creators must emerge. We don't want an audience but, rather, a community in this unified space.⁹ (*Die Tribüne* mission statement in Bab, *Das Theater* 178)

Indeed, Gustav Landauer found in theatre the ideal artform to transform society in that in theatre one is immediately situated in a communal event, “the stage has, in the coming times, a wonderful task; ... we want to build with the people an artwork of the good life; and the bridge between the picture of humanity that art builds and swarming humanity...is the stage, which offers simultaneously art and the direct intercourse with people” (quoted in Kalz, 69-70).¹⁰

Landauer's use of the stage as bridge, *Brücke*, rather than as picture, *Bild*, contrasts with Friedrich Schiller's conception of how the stage should function, this difference of “*Brücke*” and “*Bild*” is instructive in that it illuminates quite forcefully the shift from the stage as a site of an overt

⁸ “Was wir träumen, ist die große Gemeinschaft zwischen Bühne und Publikum, die Gemeinschaft des Lebensgefühls, des Weltgefühls, die Gemeinsamkeit der Idee, das beziehungsreiche Mit-einander von Hörern und Spielern, die glühende Einheit aller Wirkenden (und Wirkende sind die Spieler ebenso wie die Hörer)” (Toller)

⁹ “Die unaufschieblich notwendige Revolution des Theaters muß mit einer Umgestaltung des Bühnenraumes beginnen. Aus der unnatürlichen Zweiheit von Bühne und Zuschauerraum muß die lebendige Vereinigung eines künstlerischen Raumes zur Vereinigung Schaffender entstehen. Wir wollen kein Publikum, sondern im einheitlichen Raume eine Gemeinde” (*Die Tribüne* mission statement)

¹⁰ “die Bühne hat in den Zeiten, die kommen, eine wundervolle Aufgabe:...wir wollen mit Menschen das Kunstwerk des guten Lebens aufbauen; und die Brücke zwischen dem Bild der Menschheit, wie es die Kunst aufbaut, und den wimmelnden Menschheit,...ist die Bühne, die zugleich Kunst und zugleich unmittelbaren Verkehr mit Menschen bietet” (Landauer in Kalz)

visuality, where spectator is separated from performer, to a the stage as a site of immaterial experience, a community of performer and spectator -- a shift that has much to do with political formations. In "The Stage as a Moral Institution," Schiller writes that the stage can be a means to educate the audience, to provide examples of how the audience should behave in order to become citizens of the state, "to agree in opinions and inclinations." The stage functions as "a guide for civil life," because "Sight is always more powerful to man than description; hence the stage acts more powerfully than morality or law." Schiller concludes his essay with a seemingly expressionistic outburst that in the theatre, "the individual shares in the general ecstasy, and his breast has now only space for an emotion: he is a man" (Schiller in Dukore, 440-445). However, "man" here signifies a *civilized* man, instructed in, and following the strictures of an Enlightened society as performed on stage; this "man" is made by *seeing* what he should be on the stage, by performing a performance. The production of *Die Wandlung* did not wish to provide a visual example, a "*Bild*" of what a citizen should be in society, rather, through art as a revelation of *Geist*, the performance would seize the audience and actor alike in an experience of the new community of humankind. While the individual may have entered the theatre unconscious of those connections which linked her/him to the community of associating individuals, the theatrical experience would make conscious those connections and thereby re/establish a mode of being in the world conditioned by and composed of *Geist*, an enactment, in other words, of "nation."

The turn from "*Bild*" to "*Brücke*," became, in the production of *Die Wandlung*, a sensual appeal not to the eye but to the ear, prompting reviewer Max Herrmann-Neisse to label *Die Tribüne* a "Hörbühne," a "hearing-stage" (Herrmann-Neisse, 353). The aurality of the production allowed for no distance between the spectator and performance; sound, unlike vision, penetrated the very body of the audience member. The audience could not approach the performance as a neatly unfolding linear narrative, comfortably seen from a distance; rather the narrative had been fractured and exposed not only through the form of the play (a Stationendrama) but through the actors' cries, "Words clenched themselves together rhythmically and broke apart. Screams

emerged and sank...Here is not psychology and development but concentration and moment. Not drawing but, instead, punctuation” (Ihering, 158).¹¹ This was not simply a new theatrical technique, it was a demand for the audience to think differently, to move beyond a visual, empirical understanding of the event toward an immediate experience of *Geist*, as that which was always, invisibly, within what was seen. This shift in the mode-of-thinking would then demand a different socio-political mode-of-being from the audience.

For one reviewer, Arno Nadel in *Freiheit*, Toller succeeded in his mission, not only by virtue of the language used, but also by virtue of the structure of the play, a Stationendrama, in which the title character, Friedrich, was transformed into/played the parts of various “other” characters in the separated scenes or stations of the drama. For Nadel, the release from this realistic structuring of the play, from a Freytagian climax and resolution, allowed for life to occur on stage, for not only a more organic structure to emerge but also for the “new proletariat” to emerge within this re-formation of drama. This performance of a “new proletariat” was not a performance that was observed and emulated, but rather a performance that “seized us,” that seems to have functioned not as a performance of actor with attendant audience, but as a performance of a new modality of being-in-the-world by performer and audience alike (Nadel, 2).¹²

Toller’s next play, *Masse Mensch* (written while Toller was in jail) provides a clear illustration of how state and nation are produced and sustained through two different modes-of-thinking and of relating within a mass. Toller pits “The Nameless One” against “Sonja Irene L.” in a struggle to organize a strike for the workers. “The Nameless One” demands the rejection of

¹¹ “Worte ballten sich rhythmisch und brachen auseinander. Schreie gingen auf und versanken...Man gab nicht Psychologie und Entwicklung, sondern Ballung und Moment. Nicht Zeichnung, sondern Punktierung” (Ihering).

¹² “the epic context was not available any more, the symbol became alive, in an organic sequence, it seized us...here men screamed, lived, transformed themselves --the new proletariat (say: man; say: new, finally true man) admonished and redeemed” “der epische Zusammenhang war nicht mehr vorhanden, das Symbol wurde lebendig, in organischer Folge, ergriff uns...hier schrien, lebten, verwandelten sich -- Menschen -- der neue Proletarier (sage: Mensch, sage: neuer, endlich wahrer Mensch) mahnte und erlöste” (Nadel, 2)

the individual and the triumph of the mass, “What does the individual count?/His feelings,/His conscience?/The masses count” (Toller, *Masse Mensch*, 156).¹³ The denial of individual responsibility and the concretization of mass as entity creates then an easy division between “them” and “us,” as “The Nameless One” states, “Those not with us are against us” (169). “The Nameless One’s” revolution remains firmly ensconced within the mentality of “state,” a molar mass of uniformity and conformity in which no mode-of-relating is possible as all relationships have been fixed into a lockstep of obedience.¹⁴ “Sonja Irene L.” answers “The Nameless One” with the cry that “Only Man counts,” and that “the man” is constantly in relation to other men within a community (163). “Man,” for Sonja Irene L., is not a static identity but an endless movement of transference, in which “self” and “other” are not separated but are instead re-membered within the organism of nation. “Them” and “us” become related within a nation of brothers and sisters; this nation has nothing to do with the static entity of “state,” of “them” and “us,” but, rather, returns the individual to the fluid, immaterial relationships of *Geist*.

“Nation” here has no defined borders, it cannot be represented or founded, it becomes, instead, an experiential site of transference and transmogrification. Rather than approach this enactment of “nation” nostalgically and mourn the loss of the socialist nation that never was, I wonder, instead, how we might reconsider this interaction of aesthetic thought and socio-political practice. Can a mode-of-thinking which has been attached to artistic creation (a mode-of-thinking which has been invalidated outside of the field of aesthetics) be extended into socio-political practices? Can theatre re/member “nation” not as a static entity but as a movement, as a “diverse relation” that refuses to be frozen into the identity of “state?”

¹³ Translation by Alan Raphael Pearlman in Ernst Toller, *Plays One*.

¹⁴ In *A Thousand Plateaus* (specifically these sections: “1914: One or Several Wolves?,” “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” and “1933: Micropolitics and Segmentarity”) Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between a molecular mass of decentralization and movement and a molar mass of centralization and solidity, positing that “Every society, and every individual, are thus plied by both segmentarities simultaneously: one molar, the other molecular...In short, everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics” (213).

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